

Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

Cover by Jon Arfstrom

HELL'S BELLS	Duncan H. Munroe	8
<i>A lingering relic of a forgotten age whose sciences today would seem as so much priestly magic.</i>		
WHICH'S WITCH?	Harold Lawlor	21
<i>Even a syndicated columnist can't afford to treat witchcraft with flippancy.</i>		
THE EMPEROR'S LETTER	David Eynon	31
<i>One way to record history; each man a frozen page to show the way he died.</i>		
ELMER BITTERSNIFF AND THE THREE BEARS	Harry Botsford	35
<i>One could certainly understand why Elmer was allergic to honey—clover honey especially.</i>		
THERE WAS SOOT ON THE CAT	Suzanne Pickett	47
<i>I was the only one who had read the diary; I, too, had seen the cat with the awful eyes; and I had felt the horror emanating from the house.</i>		
THE GREEN PARROT	Joseph Brennan	52
<i>A pheasant or a woodcock or a hawk might have flapped across the road; but a large green parrot, in New England, late in November. . . !</i>		
THE TEMPLE OF SERPENTS	Paul Ernst	56
<i>"I am about to make a wish, and may the devils that hide in the dark places see to it that my wish comes true. . . ."</i> (Copyright 1928 Popular Fiction Publishing Company)		
THE PLAID	Abrach	64
<i>In some strange way it seemed as if the child completed the glen; without her it could be naught.</i>		
LIVE EVIL	Emil Petaja	69
<i>All sorts of machines are being invented daily, hourly—why not a deghosting machine?</i>		
THE LAKES OF NAI LOODIE	Donald F. Vieweg	77
<i>The story of a strange goddess with red eyes and blue skin who was the incarnate spirit of a glacier—well, that didn't help one to keep things in proper perspective.</i>		
VERSE { ALETHIA PHRIKODES	H. P. Lovecraft	43
{ BLACK CANDLES	Yetza Gillespie	51
THE EYRIE		4
A WEIRDUTATION	Joseph Howard Krucher	55

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 178
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

The Emperor's Letter



by
David Lewis Eynon

Heading by Joseph Eberle

*The dead aren't dead enough; they
live to plague the living.*

THE wind had died and the half empty bottle of brandy, like a flickering lantern between the two old friends, caught the dying rays of the fire and splashed them across the rough table.

"And so you see," Professor Picard squeezed his pince-nez in a yellowed linen mouchoir, "the dead aren't dead enough. They live on, through their mistakes, their lies, their secrets—to plague the living for years after their burial."

"But this one document," complained Lebrun, "surely it can't be that important?"

"Who can say?" Picard smiled at his friend, groping for the words to explain why such importance should be attached to a single letter—contents unknown.

For years—since their student days—the story had been the same. Astride Picard, historian, man of letters (if only dead letters, as Lebrun used to laugh) living in the past, among the musty records of the long deceased. While Lebrun, politician, man of affairs, met the world—the living world—head on and bent it to his desires.

The fact that they vacationed now in the Alps—after Paul dragged the Professor from his book-lined lair out into the sunshine—showed that their friendship far outweighed their difference of interests. But how to make Paul understand that a single missing link—however small, however innocuous—was intolerable to the scholastic mind?

"It is like . . . like a detective story," said Picard after much searching for a comparison. He saddled the metaphor and galloped ahead. "Until each detail is found, each clue documented, how can one be certain that the case is closed?"

"But such a small detail." Lebrun felt for a cigar. "You set out to document Napoleon's relations with the state of Parma. *Alors*, you ticket each letter, each paper—until the whole relationship is clear. And that *one* dispatch, totally without importance in the pattern, escapes you—this should drag you into the wilds of the Ober Bernese?"

"*C'est vrai*," Picard admitted. "A small thing, certainly, but still, you insisted upon a vacation—and is not this a change, *mon ami*?" He waved his hand around the large, warm room of the old inn and then reached for the bottle.

"A change, indeed!" Lebrun tested the brandy against the firelight and drew out a cigar. "Tell me," he punctuated with puffs, "how old is this place? A hundred years? A thousand?"

"Hard to say exactly," said Picard. "The Roman Legions used this pass. The monastery has records back to the 14th century, I understand."

"Ah! The monastery," Lebrun nodded. "How is it you expect to find your lost letter there?"

"Simple enough. It was sent by courier across the Alps from Paris to Parma. It left Paris. It didn't reach Parma." The professor gestured with his hand. "This is the most difficult part of the route. Here, if anywhere, the messenger perished."

"Or perhaps deserted," suggested Lebrun.

"Hardly. A man of good family—a de Laval. He was an *amant* of Josephine, I understand. A favorite at court. Why should he desert?"

"Perhaps he was too favored," Lebrun cocked an eyebrow. "Possibly the Emperor found him out."

"No," said Picard "—though this was the exception, rather than the rule, I admit. The Emperor knew nothing of *this* affair."

"I think," said Lebrun, "that you underestimate Napoleon. I'll wager he knew all along—and had your man dispatched across the Styx, instead of the Alps. But why argue gossip a hundred years old?" He relighted his cigar and poured more brandy. "Tell me, if your officer did perish crossing this pass, how will that permit you to find his message at the monastery?"

"All those who have died crossing here

—from a snowfall, or losing their way and freezing or whatever—all those are still at the monastery."

"You mean they are buried there."

"No," insisted Picard. "They're *there*. Just as they died twenty—or two hundred—years ago. The temperature never goes above 0° at that altitude. It is too cold to dig, so the brothers store the bodies in a crypt of the abbey."

"And they never change?" Lebrun was incredulous.

"Never," said Picard. "They keep them accessible, so that anyone searching for a lost relative or friend can view them, but few are claimed. So the monks have a permanent—ever expanding—collection."

"Incredible!" said Lebrun. "And so you expect to find your courier there, eh?"

"Possibly. If he *is* there, we can recognize him quickly enough by his uniform. If not, we've had our holiday, and there's nothing lost."

"And meanwhile, there is always our host's magnificent brandy," injected Lebrun, reaching for the bottle. He poured two glasses and shoved one towards his companion.

THE men sat in silence, Lebrun relishing his cigar, Picard watching pictures in the fire. Outside the night winds swept down the hooded alpine peaks, past the inn, into the pass thousands of feet below.

Picard could almost hear the trumpets of the Roman legions echo in the night wind's howl. Had Napoleon's courier stopped at this same inn, he wondered? Perhaps rested before this very hearth? The worn planks of the floor had felt the tread of many feet—soldiers, pilgrims, wanderers of every sort.

None had had a more set purpose than the French scholar. None had been hastening towards a stranger meeting—a rendezvous with a courier a hundred years entombed, to receive a message from the hand of a dead Emperor.

Picard snapped back from his dreams of the past and finished his liquor with a quick sip. "*Alors*, Paul, our day starts early—and the guide will be impatient."

"Till tomorrow, then." Lebrun clapped his empty glass on the rough table. To-

gether they left the fire and started up the stone steps towards their rooms.

II

THE sun slanted strong rays across the snow as Picard, Lebrun and the guide reached the plateau between the peaks. They bent forward into the wind which swept down across the flat. Wearily they struggled toward the low stone building ahead.

A weather worn cross threw its warped shadow in their path as they neared the huge wooden doors of the hostel. Picard straightened up and grasped an iron ring set in the studded oak of the entrance. He pounded and the wind flung his knock into the silent building. The three waited, backs to the drifting snow.

They heard the bolts grind open and hastened to enter the shelter of the hallway when the door swung in. A rough robed monk bowed silently.

"Gruss Gott," said Picard. He spoke to the brother in a rude mountain dialect, then motioned to Lebrun and the guide to follow as the monk led them down the hallway. Their boots rang on the flagstones while the barefoot cleric led them down the darkened passage, crossing sombre halls beneath shadow shrouded beams.

The wind whistled through a fissure in the stone, bare feet padded between the cells, giving the only sounds of life in the thin air of the great altitude. They walked softly past the chapel where a murmur of never ending prayer rose to the ceiling and floated off on the wind to be carried out among the barren peaks.

Down a circular staircase they groped, feeling their way in the darkness over stones worn smooth by centuries of barefoot monks. At the foot of the stairs a sputtering candle prayed before the shrine of a mountain saint. Ahead, at the end of a tunnel, a flambeau licked fitfully at the frozen walls.

The torch hung above the door like a fiery spider in a web of shadow, as the brother reached up and withdrew it from the sconce on the wall. A club-like key hanging from his belt opened the lock and he bowed the three inside.

Picard led, as the three plunged into the

darkness, halting a few feet inside the chamber. The monk pulled his key from the lock, lowered the torch beneath the archway and stepped into the cubicle. He walked to the center of the space, then raised his torch to let the light splash out against the walls.

"*Sacre nom de Dieu!*" gasped Lebrun.

The flickering torch of the silent monk threw blotches of light against the mute line of figures propped around the walls. It cut their silhouettes into the rough stone. In the dancing light they seemed to bow and bend and move in rhythm—a sombre saraband of silence.

Each person was caught in his final instant, a frozen pantomime of his last act of life. A hoary peasant in the corner tightened a cloak around his throat with frigid fingers, stooping to avoid a wind that died a hundred years ago.

The merchant just beside him had his goods still packed, and bent under the load with a last effort to follow the path he had died on. A child was clutched in frozen desperation. His mother's shawl, slipping back from her face, uncovered the hopeless eyes searching for rescue.

"You see, my friend," said Picard softly, "there are many ways to record history."

Lebrun was silent. His eyes traveled from a small boy, huddled with his arms around a dog, to a woodsman clutching an axe, then to a mountain climber whose alpenstock clawed at the bare wall.

The professor's searching glance stopped on a tall figure, at rigid attention against the far wall. An officer in the uniform of the Emperor. Picard walked over and peered at the captain, tenderly drawing back the moldy cloak. Beneath, a stiff leather dispatch case hung from the frozen shoulder. The professor struggled with the corroded catch, pried up the stiff flap and drew out a wad of parchment.

FOR a moment he stared up at the officer's face, staring sternly into the torch light as if he stood at a review by his Emperor—or his maker.

The captain's mouth had curled faintly, a chilling smile that belied the hardened eyes. Had death held a grim humor for this man, Picard wondered? Surely he had

seen death before—at Austerlitz or Jena. Did dying in the snow amuse him, then?—when he had expected a pistol ball between the eyes, perhaps?

Picard gently drew the cloak around the captain and turned to his companions. He nodded to the monk and the four backed from the chamber.

The sun was lower, now. The three men stepped out into the snow and the door closed silently behind them. Twilight threw a shadow of the monastery ahead of them as they started down the path. When passed beneath the crooked cross the wind rose up, as night crept on craftily.

III

THE innkeeper brought their after-dinner brandy to the inglenook. It was nearly eleven, and he excused himself—after making sure they had no other wants—locked the windows and carried his candle up the stairs.

Picard sat turning the folded parchment in his hands. Lebrun tapped his friend on the arm to bring his attention to the drink.

"One can't be too careful," he cautioned. "After you've finished your brandy we'll open the dispatch. Not before."

Picard sipped his drink quickly, examining the sealed letter all the while. The firelight etched the cracks in the ancient message and made the three seals stand out blood red against the parchment. They were genuine, these seals. Picard had seen the ring that had impressed them, under a dome of glass in the Invalides.

At last the professor drained his glass and probed at the flap of the packet with trembling fingers.

"Easy, *mon vieux*," warned Lebrun. "Don't tear it in your haste." He got out a pocket knife and handed it to Picard.

"To think," said Picard, accepting the blade and inserting it beneath the fold, "we are about to read a message from Napoleon—a message undelivered for a hundred years!" He drew the blade carefully under the back fold, working slowly to preserve the seals. When the flap curled up he paused for a second.

"Imagine," he said, eyes gleaming be-

hind his lenses, "we are the first to read this since it was written by . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Lebrun impatiently. "Let's get on with it. See what he says!"

Picard raised the flap and carefully unfolded the thick sheet. He laid it out across the table and smoothed the deep creases from the folds. The two bent over the document and scanned the flowing script.

They read to the bottom of the message, where a bold signature was scratched.

"Ha! ha! ha!" roared Lebrun, slapping his friend across the shoulders. "So the Emperor knew nothing, eh?"

"Yes, yes, you were right, Paul," nodded Picard excitedly. "The Emperor was less of a fool than history imagined."

"Much less of a fool, *mon ami*," chuckled Lebrun. "Much, much less." Still smiling, he read the dispatch aloud:

"To his Excellency, the Duke of Parma:
Dear Friend,

You will take utmost pains to see that the bearer of this is not heard from again. I leave the choice means to you.

N. Bonaparte.

"Fantastic!" said Picard. "Almost . . ." he turned his head at a harsh knock on the front door of the inn.

"Yes?" said Lebrun, rising to answer the knock. "A traveler at this hour? Nasty time to be wandering these paths—our visitor is lucky he didn't find himself calling at the monastery—for a longer visit!"

Lebrun strode across the room and shot back the bolt on the door. He lifted the latch and the wind pushed the door in on him, letting a cloud of snowflakes whirl into the hostel. In the doorway a tall figure was silhouetted against the crisp night sky.

"Come in, quickly," said Lebrun, bunching his lapels over his breast. "You could use a bit of brandy, I think, after the cold?"

The figure stood stiffly on the threshold with its cloak billowing behind.

"*Entrez!*" commanded Lebrun, irritated. "Come in, before you freeze to death!"

"Thank you, no," said the man. He spoke with a cold politeness only possible in flawless French. "If you will forgive me the late hour—I have come only to get my dispatch."