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A Bizarre Story Is

THE FANTASMAL TERROR

By WILLIS OVERTON

THE fate of that strange book, *Laughter of the Pit*, was a dark and baffling mystery. For almost a year Kaspar Voldune had been writing the story, filling it with the spell of his singular personality. He had discussed it often with his intimate companions and had read to them many passages from its weirdly fascinating pages.

Then, suddenly, he became oddly silent about it. To the questions of his relatives and friends he gave no enlightening answer. "The history of that book is a closed chapter—closed and sealed," he told them, and would say no more on the subject.

Kaspar's cousin, Dwight Prescott, in his judicial manner, voiced his views about the mystery. "You can never tell what Kaspar will do," he said, his rather pale features and thoughtful gray eyes assuming a critical expression. "There's a bit of freakishness, and even of superstition,

in him. Take that ivory Buddha on his mantel-shelf; he half believes that it brings him luck. My cousin seems to be an opportunist; but that, I think, is due to a trace of fatalism. When something unusual happens, he feels, in a vague way, that destiny has provided the situation for his particular benefit. You can't solve the secrets of a mind like his."

Even the author's wife, gay, volatile Mona, could not tell what had befallen *Laughter of the Pit*. "My husband is a riddle," she asserted one day. "That's why I love him so much. I adore mysteries, you know. Kaspar is buried half the time in a cloud of dreams. Sometimes he is brooding and silent; sometimes he talks with a strange, wild eloquence, and has, oh, such queer ideas! Maybe that manuscript is locked in his desk; maybe he threw it in the wastebasket; maybe he is writing it over. Nobody knows, and there isn't any way of finding out."

THE spring night was poignantly alluring. The delicious perfume of lilacs mingled with the fresh, exhilarating odor of newly turned earth. Full moon and a myriad of stars shone in the azure dome of heaven. Nature pervaded even the great cities, carrying to the multitudes the message of her yearning, restless spirit.

But Kaspar Voldune, in his study, was too busy to heed the pulse and stir of the season, save as its magic influence mingled subtly with his thoughts. He was in the throes of creative writing—was nearing the end of his masterpiece, *Laughter of the Pit*.

He had been working on the book all day, with the ease and eager swiftness of one approaching the end of a great achievement. Just a few more hours of writing, and Mollis, the hero of the tale, would be free from the demoniacal Gaffon. But Kaspar, impelled though he was by the mighty urge of his art, was not immune to weariness. His right arm ached from incessant use of the pen; his eyes felt tired and inflamed.

Rising from his seat at the desk, he began to pace the room—from the door to the fireplace, where he cast a glance at the ivory Buddha on the mantel, reposing between two Colonial candlesticks of hammered silver; to the door again; and back once more to the fireplace. There was something striking in his appearance. He moved with a gliding, serpentine grace, and his feet made no sound on the soft, thick rug. He was a tall, slender man, with an air of distinction. His cloudy brown eyes were slightly oblique; but so minute was this Oriental characteristic that few had ever noticed it. His features, though very flexible and delicately molded, were usually set in a fixed expression that masked his changing moods and emotions.

His mind was now on the villain of his story, the fiendish Gaffon. "I'd like to turn the tables on that monster," Kaspar thought. "But I see

no plausible way to manage it. It is all I can do to get Mollis out of his clutches."

He continued to walk back and forth, his imagination dwelling on this idea. "Ah!" he suddenly murmured to himself; "little Braimer! He can do it! A few slight changes in the book, and little Braimer, the pawn, the character seemingly of the least importance, will be in a position to punish Gaffon."

With the zeal of one who loves his work he plunged into the details of his new idea, still pacing rapidly as he planned. A passage must be deleted here; a few words added there; a number of trifling alterations arranged. His thoughts turned to that final dramatic chapter which was still to be written. He would finish the book tonight, he decided, while he was in the heat of inspiration. Tomorrow he could revise.

Having seated himself at the desk, he got a fresh sheet of paper, picked up his pen, and began to write. But black specks danced before his eyes, while the trembling of his hand and the nervous jerking of his arm made legible writing impossible. He must be terribly tired, he thought, to have reached such a condition as this. Peering into a Venetian mirror that hung on the wall beside his desk, he saw that his features were drawn and pale, and that his eyes were blood-shot. And yet, aside from those symptoms which had checked his work, he felt no fatigue. It seemed that he would have strength enough to walk for hours without weariness, and his brain was abnormally active.

To walk! The thought appealed to him. A moment later, he was in the hall, getting his hat. As he put it on, the living-room door was opened, and Mona entered the hall.

"Where are you going, Kaspar?" she inquired.

"For a walk," he said. "I'm too tired to write, and too excited to sleep."

She went to him, and gazed thoughtfully into his face. "You look tired, dear," she remarked.

"A stroll will do me good," he said. "Don't wait up for me, Mona. I may not get back for a good while." He bent down and kissed her.

"Kaspar," she said coaxingly, clinging to him, after they had exchanged kisses, "promise me that you won't do any more writing tonight."

"Why, darling?" he asked.

"You're working too hard," she answered. "You've been writing furiously all day, without a bit of recreation. So promise to forget about your book until morning, that's a dear."

"Maybe I can't forget it," he said, "but I won't write any more this evening."

She went blithely back to the living-room, humming a little tune, and pausing an instant to the doorway to blow a last kiss to her husband.

WHEN Kaspar stepped out of the house, he realized for the first time the full beauty and charm of the night. He gazed up at the large round moon and the vast network of stars that gleamed in the sky. A light breeze fanned his cheek: and faintly, from afar, came the sounds of gay laughter and the riotous music of a dance orchestra.

Kaspar had been walking about ten minutes, and had passed several people on the quiet street, when he came face to face with his cousin, Dwight Prescott.

"Good evening, Kaspar," Dwight said.

"Good evening, Dwight," was the response. "It's a wonderful night, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Dwight. "it's the proper kind of weather for this season." Presently he added, "Where are you going?"

"Just for a walk," Kaspar replied. "And you?" There was a quality in his cousin's voice that always jarred

upon him, and it jarred especially on this night so fraught with the spirit of romance. It was a certain intellectual coldness in Dwight's tone—an indifference toward all things beautiful and poetic.

"Do you mind if I walk along with you?" Dwight asked.

"I'd rather be alone tonight," said Kaspar. "I'm in a mood for silent musing."

"All right," said Prescott, in a tone of tolerant amusement, as he strolled away. "Dream your dreams. I'll go on over and chat with the fellows at Norton's."

Kaspar, too, resumed his walk. But he had taken only a few steps when he felt, by a kind of sixth sense, that his cousin had turned round and was coming up behind him. Facing about, he saw, to his amazement, that Dwight was not there. A glance along the street revealed his cousin in the distance, moving steadily in the direction which he had first taken. Smiling at this trick of his fancy, Kaspar turned again and continued on his way.

He was fitted to enjoy, to a marked degree, the delights of nocturnal roaming, the sense of dreamy detachment, of mystery and vastness and glamorous expectancy. The sounds of the city gradually diminished, until a profound hush filled the streets. Still Kaspar continued his solitary wandering, in rapt communion with the night.

But time and again there came that feeling of being followed, of not being alone. His thoughts wandered to his unfinished book, only to be checked abruptly by the sensation of a presence near by. His mind reverted to the witchery of the night; but once more, in the midst of his musings, he was startled by the consciousness of that other being.

As the moments elapsed, this feeling grew more emphatic, and a vague terror settled upon him. The air was becoming damp; a chilly, depressing

wind arose; and fragments of cloud scurried through the sky.

As Kaspar walked homeward, he was still aware of the silent, invisible entity. He fancied once that the thing was about to touch him, and he thereupon quickened his pace.

On reaching home, he stole quietly into his study, and softly closed its door. Even now, he was not disposed to retire. He hastened to build a fire, for his teeth were chattering.

Soon he was seated in an easy-chair before the fireplace. He had not turned on the lights; for the fire, and the moonlight streaming in through the windows, filled the room with a dim and spectral radiance. Kaspar could hardly believe that this was his own study, so different did it seem in the weird half-light. He glanced about as if to reassure himself, caught a glimpse of his image in the mirror, beheld the manuscript on the desk, and then his gaze came to rest on the ivory Buddha which adorned the mantelpiece.

He had bought the idol years earlier, while traveling in the Orient. And now he prized it as a talisman; for good luck had certainly come to him ever since the date of the purchase. Eastern peoples were absurd, he thought, to worship such inanimate objects. And yet—did not his own experience prove that the little ivory god held some occult power? He wondered if, indeed, these idols might not have a peculiar attribute, quite natural, but too subtle for science to analyze, which could influence human life.

SUDDENLY, as if in agreement with his thought, the Buddha seemed to nod. While Kaspar stared in amazement, the idol's expression and its entire form underwent a gradual change. It was not a Buddha that he gazed at now, but a hideous figure, strangely familiar. He searched his mind, as in a nightmare, to discover

where he had seen it before—and all at once he knew. It was Gaffon!

Swiftly the figure grew larger, and acquired the complexion of a human being—the sallow complexion which Kaspar's imagination had given to Gaffon. The creature began to make definite movements, and queer gurgling sounds issued from its mouth. It stepped to the edge of the mantel, turned slightly to the left, and sprang to the floor.

It stood there at Kaspar's side, grinning fiendishly. The diabolical being had grown in the course of a moment to the size of a man.

"So you are planning to have me punished," Gaffon snarled, thrusting his leering face toward Kaspar.

The author shrank back. "But—but—you—can't be Gaffon!" he said hoarsely. "You—he—is only a character in my story."

"Is that so?" The horrible face drew nearer.

"How—how could Gaffon be real," said Kaspar, "when I invented him?"

"Maybe God, who made you in his own image," said Gaffon, "has given you a little of his miraculous creative power. Or it may be that my existence is the cause, and your story the effect." His tone was harsh and menacing.

"Go away," Kaspar implored. "You frighten me!"

"You are planning to have me punished," Gaffon repeated. "You intend to let Little Braimer crush me."

"That's the way I want my book to end," Kaspar admitted.

A bestial growl came from Gaffon's throat. "You shall not!" he said fiercely. "You won't dare!"

"Why not?" said Kaspar, summoning all his courage. "If I have created you, why can't I destroy you?"

"God may grant the power to produce what has not been," said Gaffon,

"and yet He may withhold the power to annihilate."

"If you are in some way the cause of my story," Kaspar declared, "then I'm not responsible for what I write."

"I may cause the story in a general way," Gaffon said, "without determining all its details. My theory is that I and this book about me act and react upon each other. If you end the tale with my defeat, it will ruin me."

A silence fell between them. At length Kaspar spoke. "Was it you who followed me about this evening?" he asked.

"Yes," Gaffon answered.

"Why did you come forth from the Buddha?" said Kaspar, after another pause. "Until now it has always brought me luck, not horror." He was trying vainly to converse in a casual manner—to make the situation seem natural. And he was sparring for time in which to think of some means of escape from this demon.

"Because you were looking at the Buddha," said Gaffon, in answer to his last question. "But enough of this talk!" He went to the desk, and returned with a paper-knife. "Are you afraid?" he inquired raspily, as he brandished the knife before Kaspar's face.

"Yes," moaned Kaspar, cringing in his chair. He wanted to rise and rush from the room, but he could not stir.

Gaffon tossed the paper-knife back upon the desk. "I have a better weapon than that," was his sinister comment. "I won't hurt your body, Kaspar Voldune. It's your mind that I threaten. Call me a figment of your fancy if you like, but remember that just as surely as you oppose me, I'll drive you mad."

Kaspar called forth his last spark of defiance. "In the morning," he said, "I'll laugh at this delusion, and finish the book I am writing."

"Will you?" Gaffon snarled. "Will

you? Then I will wreck your soul!"

His gorgonlike face came closer, and slowly his hands, like an eagle's talons, reached for Kaspar's throat.

The author shivered and shrank away. He lifted his hands as if to repel the attack, and then let them drop limply at his sides. He was afraid, not so much of personal violence, as of contact with this loathsome creature. He would postpone the touch of those frightful hands to the ultimate fraction of a second. He closed his eyes to shut out the grisly spectacle. And then, for a moment, he waited.

A sudden release of the tension—a feeling that the suspense was broken—caused him to open his eyes. Gaffon was gone! Kaspar drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and tremulously wiped the cold moisture from his forehead. "I couldn't have stood much more of that," he muttered. Shakily he crossed the room and turned on the lights. A look into the mirror revealed a ghastly reflection of himself.

He must find something to occupy his mind—something on which to anchor his turbulent thoughts. Picking up the manuscript on his desk, he took it to his seat by the fireplace, where he could banish the chill that gripped him.

But he could not read it. His mind was still in a whirl. "I couldn't have stood much more of that," he repeated. He laid the story upon his knees, and sat, for a long time, gazing down at it. His glance wandered to the blazing fire, and then returned to the manuscript. He regarded it wistfully for a moment, raised it from his knees, and tossed it, with a swift, impulsive movement, into the devouring flames.

He glanced at the impassive Buddha resting on the mantel-shelf. Did a sardonic smile pass over its features, or was it his imagination? He could never be sure.