

# WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*Here's An Extraordinary Yarn—*

# The Ghoul and the Corpse

By G. A. WELLS

**T**HIS is Chris Bonner's tale, not mine. Please remember that. I positively will not stand sponsor for it. I used to have a deal of faith in Chris Bonner's veracity, but that is a thing of the past. He is a liar; a liar without conscience. I as good as told him so to his face. I wonder what kind of fool he thinks I am!

Attend, now, and you shall hear that remarkable tale he told me. It was, and is, a lie. I shall always think so.

He came marching into my igloo up there at Aurora Bay. That is in Alaska, you know, on the Arctic sea. I had been in the back-country trading for pelts for a New York concern, and due to bad luck I didn't reach the coast until the third day after the last steamer out had gone. And there I was marooned for the winter, without chance of getting out until spring, with a few dozen ignorant Indians for companions. Thank heaven I had plenty of white man's grub in time!

As I said, here came Chris Bonner marching in on me the same as you

would go down the block a few doors to call on a neighbor.

"And where the devil did you drop in from?" I demanded, helping him off with his stiff parka.

"Down there," he answered, jerking an elbow toward the south. "Let's have something to eat, MacNeal. I'm hungry as hell. Look at the pack, will you!"

I had already looked at the pack he had cast off his shoulders to the fur-covered floor of the igloo. It was as lean as a starved hound. I heated a can of beef bouillon and some beans, and made a pot of coffee over the blubber-fat fire that served for both heat and light, and put these and some crackers before my guest. He tore into his meal wolfishly.

"Now a pipe and some tobac, MacNeal," he ordered, pushing the empty dishes aside.

I gave him one of my pipes and my tobacco-pouch. He filled and lighted up. He seemed to relish the smoke; I imagined he hadn't had one for some

time. He sat silent for a while staring into the flickering flame.

"Say, MacNeal," he spoke at length; "what do you know about a theory that says once on a time this old world of ours revolved on its axis in a different plane? I've heard it said the earth tipped up about seventy degrees. What d'you know about it?"

That was a queer thing for Chris Bonner to ask. He was simon-pure prospector and I had never known him to get far away from the subject of mining and prospecting. He had been hunting gold from Panama to the Arctic Circle for the past thirty years.

"No more than you do, probably," I answered his question. "I've heard of that theory, too. I'd say it is any man's guess."

"This theory holds that the North Pole used to be where the Equator is now," he said. "Do you believe that?"

"I don't know anything about it, Chris," I replied. "But I do know that they have found things up this way that are now generally recognized as being peculiarly tropical in nature."

"What, for instance?"

"Palms and ferns, a species of parrot, saber-tooth tigers; and also mastodons, members of the elephant family. All fossils and parts of skeletons, you understand."

"No human beings, MacNeal? Any skeletons or fossils of those up this way?"

"Never heard of it. Prehistoric people are being found in England and France, however."

"Huh," he said.

He pondered, puffing at his pipe, his eyes on the fire. He looked perplexed about something.

"Look here, MacNeal," he said suddenly. "Say a man dies. He's dead, ain't he?"

"No doubt of it," I laughed, wondering.

"Couldn't come to life again, eh?"

"Hardly. Not if he were really dead. I've heard of cases of suspended animation. The heart, apparently, quits beating for one, two or possibly ten minutes. It doesn't in fact, though; it's simply

that its beating can't be detected. When a man's heart stops beating he's dead."

Bonner nodded.

"'Suspended animation,'" he muttered, more to himself than to me. "That must be it. That's the only thing that'll explain it; nothing else will. If it could cover a period of ten minutes, why not a period of twenty or even a hundred thousand years—"

"If you'd like to turn in and get some rest, Chris, I'll fix you up," I broke in.

He caught the significance of my tone and grinned.

"You think I'm crazy, eh?" he said. "I'm not. It's a wonder, though, considering what I've seen and what I— here, let me show you something!"

HE THRUST a hand into his lean pack and brought forth an object that at first glance I thought to be a butcher's knife.

He handed it to me and I at once saw that it was not a butcher's knife as I knew such knives. It was a curious sort of knife, and one for which a collector of the antique would have paid good money.

It was a very dark color, almost black; corroded, it seemed to me, as if it had lain for a long time in a damp cellar. It was in one piece, the handle about five inches long and the blade perhaps ten inches. Both edges of the blade were sharp and the end was pointed like a dagger. And it certainly wasn't steel. I scratched one side of the blade with my thumb nail and exposed a creamy yellow under the veneer of black.

"Part of that's blood you scraped away, MacNeal," Bonner said. "Now what's that knife made of?"

I examined the yellow spot closely. The knife was made of ivory. Not the kind of ivory I was acquainted with, however; it was a very much coarser grain than any ivory I had ever seen.

"That came out of a mastodon's tusk, MacNeal," Bonner said.

I looked at him. He was nodding seriously. He apparently believed what he said, at any rate.

"Nice curio, Chris," I commented,

handing the thing back to him. "Heirloom, no doubt. Picked it up in one of the Indian villages, eh?"

He did not speak at once. He sat puffing, looking at the fire. Once he puckered his brows in a deep frown. I waited.

"I've been prospecting, as usual," he said at length. "Down there around the headquarters of the Tukupuk. It's an awful place; nobody ever goes there. The Indians tell me the spirits of the dead live there. I can believe it; it's an ideal place for imps and devils. And I was right through the heart of it. I believe I'm the first. No matter how I got there; I came up from the south last summer. You see, I had an idea there was gold in that country.

"The place where I finally settled down was in a little valley on one of the branches of the Tukupuk between two ranges of hills running from five hundred to maybe three thousand feet high. Messy-looking place, it was; all littered up, as if the Lord had a few sizable chunks of stuff left over and just threw 'em down there to be out of the way.

"But the gold was there; I could almost smell it. I'd been getting some mighty nice color in my pan; that's what made me decide to stay there. I got there about the middle of July, and I spent the rest of the summer sinking holes in the edge of the creek and along the benches above. What I found indicated that there was a mighty rich vein of the yellow metal thereabouts, with one end of it laying in a pocket of the stuff. If I could locate that pocket, I thought, I'd have the United States treasury backed off the map. But I wasn't able to run the pocket down by taking bearings from my holes, because the holes didn't line up in any particular direction.

"What with my interest in trying to get a line on that pocket, I didn't notice that the season was getting late. But I'd brought in enough grub to last the winter through, so that didn't matter. Just the same it was up to me to get some sort of shelter over my head, so I hustled up a one-room shack about

twelve by twelve I cut from the timber on the slopes with my hand-ax. Nothing fancy, but tight enough. I put in a fireplace and cut and stacked a lot of wood outside.

"That done, winter was on me; I simply couldn't resist the temptation to have one more try at finding the pocket that spewed the yellow metal all around there. As I said, I got no information from the holes sunk, and it was pure guesswork. I guessed I'd find my pocket on the side of a certain hill, about two hundred feet above creek level. A glacier flowed down the side of that hill through a little gully, and my idea was that the ice ground away at the pocket and brought the metal down to the creek, and the creek scattered it. This theory was borne out to some extent by the fact that my best showings of color always came from a point a little below the conjunction of the creek and glacier.

"It was snowing the morning I took my pan and shovel and started up the side of the hill, keeping to the edge of the glacier. It wasn't much of a glacier for size; say, about fifteen feet wide. I could see it winding up the side of the hill until it went out of sight through a cleft about a thousand feet up. Fed by a lake up there, probably.

"I had climbed the hill maybe a hundred feet, following the edge of the glacier, when I caught sight of a dark blotch in the edge of the ice. It was about two feet under the surface. I brushed away the film of snow to have a look. The ice was as clear as a crystal, of a blue color. And what d'you think, MacNeal? It was a man's body!"

He paused and gave me a quick glance. He wanted to see how I took that, I presume.

"The body of a man," he went on. "And the queerest-looking man I ever saw in my life. He was lying on his belly and I didn't get a look at the front of him just then, but I knew it was a man all right. He was covered all over with long hair like a—well, like a bear, say. Not a stitch of clothes."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Why. I was that surprised I let my

pan and shovel drop and started at the damn thing with the eyes near popping out of my head. What would anybody do, finding a hair-covered thing like that frozen in a glacier? I won't deny I was a bit scared, MacNeal.

"Well, I stood there staring at the thing for I don't know how long. It didn't occur to me, then, to ask myself how the thing got there. Certainly the idea of fossils or prehistoric men didn't enter my head. I didn't think much about anything; I just stood there gaping.

"You know me, MacNeal; I guess I'm pretty soft-hearted in some respects. I'd stop to bury a dead dog I found in the road. I knew I wouldn't rest easy until I'd cut that thing out of the glacier and given it decent burial. Moreover, I didn't want it where I'd be seeing it when I went to work on that hillside in the spring; and it would surely be there in the spring, because I imagine that glacier didn't move an inch a year.

"So I went back to the shack and got my ax, and with none too good a heart for the job turned to and made the chips fly. It took me about three hours to get the thing out of the glacier. You see, as I came down to it I went slow; I don't care to hack even a dead man.

"Say, MacNeal, can you imagine what it meant to me, digging a corpse out of a glacier down there on the side of a hill in that devil-ridden country? No, you can't, and that's the truth. You'd have to go through it to know. It was hell. I don't want any more of it in mine. Nor what followed, either."

"What was that?" I asked when he deliberated.

"You'll hear," he answered, and went on: "I got the thing out at last, little chunks of ice clinging to it, and dragged it ashore, if a glacier has a shore. It froze me to look at the thing with those little chunks of ice sticking to the long hair. Once, at Dawson, I'd seen a man pulled out of the Yukon, ice clinging to him. That was different, though; at Dawson there was a crowd to sort of buck a man up. I turned the thing over on its back to see what it looked like in front."

"Well?" said I.

"You've seen apes, MacNeal?"

"This thing looked like that?" I countered, beginning to connect up his first queer questions with what he was telling me. "You don't mean it, Chris?"

"I'm telling you," he nodded solemnly. "An ape man, that's what it was. More man than ape, if you ask me. For instance, the face was flatter than an ape's, and the forehead and chin were more pronounced. The nose was flat, but it wasn't an ape's nose. And the hands and feet were like those of a man. Oh, it was a man, all right. The thing that convinced me, I think, was the knife gripped in its hand."

"The knife you have there?" I inquired.

"This very knife," he answered.

"What then, Chris?" I urged him to go on.

"I had a good look at that thing and started for my shack. Yes, MacNeal, I ran, and I'm not ashamed to say so. It scared me. Ugliest thing I ever saw. Eyes wide open, glaring and glinting, and the thick lips parted to show the nastiest set of fangs I ever saw in the mouth of man or beast. Why, I tell you the damned thing looked alive! No wonder I scooted. You would have done the same. Anybody would.

"Back in the shack, I sat down on my bunk to think it over. And it was while I sat there trying to puzzle it out that I remembered that theory about the earth tipping over. That gave me a hint of what I had run up against. Of course, I'd heard about fossils and parts of the skeletons of prehistoric men being found. Had I found, not a fossil or part of a skeleton, but the prehistoric man himself? That knocked the wind out of me. If that were the case my name would go down in history and I would be asked to give lectures before scientific societies and such. Consider it, MacNeal.

"I tell you, I couldn't quite grasp the thing. It was incredible. There I was in this year of our Lord, with the intact corpse of a man who had lived God only knows how many centuries ago. That body, understand, could well

be the key to the mystery of the origin of mankind. It might possibly settle the Darwinian theory forever, one way or the other. It was a pretty serious business for me, don't you see?

"Well, I decided to preserve the thing until I could get out and make a report of the find. But how to preserve it? Of course if I had left it in the glacier it would have kept indefinitely, like a side of beef in cold storage. I was afraid to put it back in the hole in the glacier and freeze it in again with water I carried from the creek; the creek water might exert some chemical action that would ruin the thing. And if I let it lay where it was the snow would cover it, form a warm blanket, and probably cause it to decompose, then I'd have nothing left but the skeleton. I wanted to save the thing just as I'd found it; maybe the scientists would find a way to embalm it.

"I finally hit on the plan of keeping it in an ice pack. That would turn the trick until the weather took on the job. It hadn't turned bitter cold yet. I tell you, it was a nasty job keeping that thing iced with chunks I chopped from the glacier, and to make it worse the weather stayed moderate for a couple of weeks. Then, suddenly, the mercury in my little thermometer went down with a rush and it got stinging cold. I carried the thing to the shack and stood it up against the wall outside where it couldn't be covered with snow, and lashed it there.

"Can you imagine me going to sleep in my bunk in the shack every night after that, with that thing standing against the wall outside not two feet away? Of course you can't. It frazzled my nerves, and more than once I was tempted to cut a hole in the ice on the creek and chuck the damn thing in where I'd never see it agin. But no, I had to save it for the scientists and get my name in history; that idea got to be an obsession with me. I knew well enough that if ever I told people the tale I'm telling you now, without some proof of it, I'd get laughed at."

"No doubt of it." I sneered.

"The days went by," he continued,

ignoring my sneer, "and more and more that thing outside kept getting on my nerves. The sun went south, and from one day to another I never saw it. The never-ending night was bad enough, but when you add the northern lights and the howling of the wolves you've got a condition that breaks a man if he's not careful. Furthermore, there was that ugly-looking devil outside to think about.

"I was thinking about that thing constantly, and got so I couldn't sleep. If I shut my eyes I'd see it, anyhow, and if I went to sleep I'd have a nightmare over it. Now and then I'd go out and stand there in the starlight or the aurora looking at it. It fascinated me, yet the sight of the thing gave me the creeps. Finally I began taking a club or my rifle along when I went to look at it; got afraid the thing would come alive and try to murder me with that knife.

"And that's the way of things for maybe three months and more. My thoughts all the time on that thing outside.

"Well, that couldn't go on, you know. One morning I woke up with the worst headache a man ever had. I thought my head would split wide open. My blood was like molten iron flowing through my veins. I knew what it was. *Fever*. I had thought and worried about that thing outside until it got me, and I was in for a brain-storm. I was as weak as a cat, but managed to build up a good fire and pack my bunk with all the blankets and furs I had and crawl in. I only hoped I wouldn't freeze to death when the fire went out.

"I no sooner got all set in the bunk than things let go; I went completely off. I can't say positively what happened for a few days after that. Seems like I remember, though, periods when I was semi-rational. I think once I got up to put more wood on the fire. Another time I saw that thing standing in the doorway grinning at me like the devil it was. I shot at it with my rifle and later found a bullet in the door. My shooting couldn't have been a delusion, at any rate. But the door was still fastened against the wolves and

there were no tracks in the snow outside."

Bonner paused to light his pipe, and then went on:

"I don't know exactly how long I was out of my head. I'd wound my watch before I crawled into the bunk the first time, and I half remember I wound it again when I got up to put wood on the fire, and it was pretty well run down. It goes forty hours without winding, yet when my head cleared it had stopped. I must have been off my nut about four days.

"Well, you can lay your bottom dollar I'd had enough of prehistoric men hanging around the shack by that time. Let the scientists be damned; I was determined to get rid of that thing the quickest way possible. The quickest way, I thought, would be to get the corpse warm so it would decompose rapidly, then I'd put it outside where the wolves and ravens would pick the bones clean. The scientists would have to be satisfied with the skeleton.

"So I made a big fire in the fireplace and got the shack good and hot, then went out and brought in the corpse. I got sick at the stomach on that job, but that was the only way. I didn't have the heart to leave the thing outside and build a fire over it out there. I try to respect the dead, even if the corpse is that of a man who had been dead several thousand years and looked more like an animal than a human being.

"I laid the thing on the floor before the fireplace, then sat down on the bunk to wait. I watched it pretty close, because, being dead so long, I thought when it got warm and started to decompose it would go like butter; I didn't want the shack to be all smelled up with the stink of it. Probably half an hour went by, then all of a sudden I saw the thing quiver—"

"Your brain-storm returning," I interposed.

"Wait," said Bonner sharply. "It quivered; not much, but enough to notice. That sort of got me, then I reasoned that anything thawing out like that would naturally quiver a little. Maybe another fifteen or twenty minutes

passed, then one of the legs moved. Jerked, sort of. It startled me. Remember; there I was down there in those hills alone with that thing. I was pretty susceptible to weird influences, understand. Anyhow, the leg moved, and—"

"It sat up and asked for a drink of water." I could not help putting in. Bonner continued, paying no attention to my sarcasm. He seemed to be talking aloud to himself:

"I watched it like a hawk for some time after that, then as I didn't see it move any more I stepped outside to get some more wood for the fire and to pull a few good breaths of cold air into my lungs. That shack was like the inside of an oven.

"When I went in again I saw that the damned thing had turned over on its back.

"Turned over on its back, I say. And there was a change in the eyes, too; they had a half-awake sort of look in them; a more alive look, understand. And breathing! Yes, sir, *breathing!* Why the thing didn't see me when I came in and shut the door I don't know, but apparently it didn't. And, believe me or not, the hand that had held the knife was open and the knife was lying on the floor apart from the body.

"Crazy? I tell you no! I was as sane as I am now. I tell you I saw these things with my own two eyes; saw them just as plain as I see you now. I see you don't believe me, MacNeal. Oh, well, I don't blame you; I hardly believe it myself sometimes."

He uttered a little laugh.

"But there it was, just as I'm telling you. And I was that gone when I saw that the thing had turned over on its back that I dropped the wood I had in my arm. The crash of it on the floor brought the thing to its feet on the jump. You needn't look at me like that; I tell you it did. I take my oath it did! There it was, crouched like a panther ready for the spring, the eyes of it flashing like fire, its lips pulled back tight across the gums and the yellow fangs showing. Can you see that? No, you can't."

Bonner made an expressive gesture with one hand.

"Remarkable, but the thing hadn't seen me yet. It was looking at the fire; it was half turned toward me so I could see that. Suddenly it screamed in an outlandish gibberish and leaped to the fireplace and tried to gather in an armful of flames. I take it the thing had never seen fire before; didn't know what it was; probably imagined it some kind of wild animal. Naturally the only thing it got out of that play was burned arms and hands, and the long hair sizzled and curled. It leaped back with a snarl, spitting that funny gibberish. Talk, I guess it was; it came from way down in the belly and sounded like pigs grunting.

"I tell you, MacNeal, I was fair dazed. But I had the sense left to try to help myself. My rifle was leaning against the bunk and I made a quick dive for it. Then, apparently, the thing saw me for the first time. The way it glared at me with those glittering eyes was a caution. I didn't stop to argue; I snatched up the rifle, cocked it and made a snap shot. The bullet caught the thing in the left breast and the blood gushed. Of course you don't believe it. But blood, I tell you, gushed from the breast of a thing that had been frozen in a glacier for thousands of years!

"Well, here it came like a cyclone. I didn't have time to shoot again. Smell? That thing smelled like carrion; almost strangled me. Maybe you know how the cage of a wild animal stinks if it ain't cleaned out for a week or two. This thing smelled like that, only worse. I can smell it yet. Lord!"

Bonner wrinkled his nose and shivered.

"But there we were at grips, the thing making those belly noises and smelling like a thousand garbage piles. It had the strength of ten men; I sensed that. It jerked the rifle from me and bent the barrel of it double with a twist of the wrists. The barrel of a thirty-eight caliber Winchester rifle—bent it as easy as you or I would bend a piece of copper wire.

"Then we were at it, fighting like a couple of wild cats all over the shack. I'm no slouch of a man myself, MacNeal, when it comes to a rough-and-tumble; but that thing handled me like a baby. I could see my finish. We threshed about the floor, me fighting like a devil, it fighting like forty devils. We kicked into the fire and out again and scattered live coals all over the place, and the shack took fire.

"I was just about gone when my hand accidentally fell on the handle of the knife the thing had dropped on the floor. I hung on to it and poked away at that thing for all I was worth, driving the blade clean up to the hilt with every punch."

"That knife?" I broke in.

"This knife," answered Bonner. "There's the dried blood on it yet. But I think it was really the bullet that did the work. It must have cut an artery. Anyhow, the blood kept gushing out of the thing's breast; it got on my hands and made 'em slippery. I knew the thing couldn't pour out blood like that and keep going; that's what put the heart in me to keep on fighting. And, as I say, I think it was the bullet that did the work in the long run. A lucky shot, otherwise I wouldn't be here now.

"I felt the thing sagging and going limp in my hands, and its grip began to relax. I saw my chance and put up a knee and broke the grip and kicked it away. It staggered around a moment or two, clutching its breast with its bloody paws, gnashing its fangs and glaring murder at me; then it crashed down to the floor and fell smack into the flames.

"I saw plain enough there was no chance of saving the shack, so I snatched up what I could lay my hands on in the way of food and clothing and blankets, and tore out. I don't remember putting the knife in my pocket, but that's where I found it later. The shack burned down to nothing, and that thing burned with it; probably not a bone of it left. The scientists were out of luck and the mystery of mankind would remain unsolved.

"I didn't stop to investigate, of course; my job was to make tracks. I knew about this village and came on. How I got here I don't know; this is a terrible country to cross afoot in the winter. I'd turned my ten huskies adrift to shift for themselves when I reached the valley where all this happened; I didn't have the grub to keep them going. I had to walk here.

"And that's all, MacNeal. You can say what you please; I know what I saw with my own eyes and you can't change my mind about it. Suspended animation? Yes, for a period covering many centuries. It would be a mighty fine thing if we could picture what happened away back there when this old earth tipped over.

"Perhaps we'd see a man, a man that was half ape, crossing a creek with a knife in his hand on the way to murder an enemy sleeping on the opposite bank. Then suddenly the earth tipped over—climatic conditions in those days were such as to freeze things up in a flash—things are held in the grip of the ice

just as the dust and lava held 'em in the days of Pompeii, and—

"Well, who's to say what happened? Anything was possible. We don't know the conditions of those days. Anyhow, here I come thousands of years later and dig a man, with a knife in his hand, out of a glacier. I heat his body in order to decompose the flesh. Instead of decomposing; he comes to life and I have to kill him. He's been hibernating in a glacier for centuries. I don't know what to think about it."

Bonner refilled and lighted his pipe, then looked at me questioningly.

"Chris," I said, "I tell you frankly that I don't believe a word you have said. You tell me you were out of your head for a few days. That accounts for it. You had the jim-jams and imagined all that, then try to spring it on me as actual fact.

He looked hurt. He looked at the knife in his hand steadily for several long moments, then thrust it toward me, his eyes boring into mine.

"Then where in hell," he demanded, "did I get this knife?"

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