

Weird Tales

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*Strange Power Had This Belt
of Human Skin*

The Girdle

By JOSEPH McCORD

THE pool of mottled light on the table-top had drifted over to where Sir John's clawlike fingers, emerging from the silk sleeve of his dressing robe, drummed slowly on the black oak.

Carson, erect on the hearth rug, had ignored the chair indicated by the fingers and was filled with a sudden resentment as he sensed the indifferent weariness of their tapping. And this old man was Pelham's father! It was all so different than he had pictured. There was no fathoming the expression of that mask-like face with its impenetrable stare, settled in the cushioned depths of the wheel chair.

The heels of Carson's boots came together with a suggestion of military stiffness, and he spoke curtly: "I confess I don't understand."

And his host replied, in a curiously dry voice: "Perhaps it is not altogether necessary that you should."

The words carried a studied courtesy, but their veiled irony was not lost on the officer.

"Granted. But Pelham was my friend—if he was your son—and I am here only because he asked——"

"Of course," interrupted Sir John. "Spare me the formula, if you will. He's dead. It was arranged you should come and tell me how well he died. He was to perform the same service for you, no doubt, had the circumstances been reversed. The Pelhams always die well. It's in the breed. If you insist, however——"

Carson choked back his resentment.

"There were circumstances that make it seem necessary — and yet——"

"Pray get on."

"Then I'll make it short." Carson advanced a little nearer the table. "It was in a little hut I last saw him—alive. Enemy ground, newly occupied it was, and here was this hut in a small clearing. It might have been a woodcutter's and it was empty, save for some heavier furniture.

"Several of us were poking about its one room, then Pel started up a crazy ladder at one end leading to a small loft. I heard him moving around and scratching matches, then he was quiet. I walked over near the ladder and hailed him.

"'Nothing up here but an old chest,' he came back, 'and empty at that.' Then I heard him laugh. 'Somebody left me a Dutch Sam Browne—thought the cursed thing was a snake—felt cold!'

"I heard the lid of the chest fall, then Pel started down into the room. Part-way, he turned and faced me. He had the end of a belt in each hand, holding it behind him as if he were going to wear it. I didn't notice that, though. All I saw was his face—the way he looked."

"The way he looked," prompted Sir John, as the younger man stared at him soberly. "And, pray how did he look?"

Carson seemed to pull himself together with an effort. "That's exactly what I have to tell you. I'll try to." He seated himself on the edge of the table, one booted foot swinging nervously. "Why, it was his eyes, I think—yes, that's what it was. There was something in them that shouldn't ever be in a man's eyes. You've seen a dog that was vicious and a coward—all at the same time. He wants to go at your throat and something holds him for the moment." He drew a long breath. "It was like that," he decided.

Sir John was watching one of his visitor's hands; it had gripped the edge of the table and the knuckles were white. The boot was motionless, tense.

"As you say, like a dog. Well?"

At the quiet words, the younger man relaxed. "Yes, sir," he agreed gratefully. Then: "I spoke to him, and he never answered. He came on down the ladder, slowly—still facing us. The others were drawing up behind me—I could feel them. We all watched Pel. It wasn't that he just moved slowly either—it was something different. Slinking! I think that's the way to say it. And he watched us—never blinked. No one said a word.

"When Pel's feet hit the floor, he began moving toward the door—it had come shut. He backed to it and began feeling for the latch with one hand, holding the belt all the time. He kicked the door open with his heel.

"Then I knew we were losing him—if you can understand what I mean—knew he'd got to be saved—from something!"

Carson's voice was curiously strained.

"I wanted to stop him—I tell you I did want to! I tried. I started for him."

"And the belt?" interposed Sir John quietly.

"The belt," echoed the other man

dually. "Oh, yes. He held it all the while—I just told you that."

"But he escaped."

"He did. I had scarcely moved. He gave a dreadful sort of cry and leaped out of the doorway—backward. We rushed it then. But he had made the trees and we could hear him crashing through the undergrowth, as though there hadn't been a boche within a hundred miles of us. That's how he went."

THE heavy silence that followed was broken only by a coal falling in the grate. With a long sigh, Carson raised his head. He fumbled a pack of cigarettes, thrust one between his lips, but made no move to light it.

"I am waiting," came the voice from the chair.

"Waiting?"

"Come, come! You tell me my son is dead. If I recollect, you mentioned gallantry. So far, you have suggested desertion. The details."

"Oh, yes. The details. But you won't believe them. One would have to have seen."

"Have the kindness." Sir John leaned back wearily among his cushions and closed his eyes.

"Well. It was the third evening after that—I think it was the third. There had been an advance, a lot of machine-gun work. It was growing dark, I remember. Harvey, my sergeant, came up and asked if he could speak to me. 'I've seen Lieutenant Pelham,' he whispered queerly.

"'He's dead?' I said. I knew he was dead.

"'Yes, he's dead, sir,' says Harvey, 'but there's something queer about him. Will you have a look?'"

"He led the way and I followed."

Carson's voice was becoming strained again. Sir John leaned forward and stared steadily into his eyes.

"We came to a little open place. There was some light there—enough to see the dreadfulest group God ever bunched in one place!

"First of all, I saw Pel—sitting with his back against a little tree, chin on his knees. He was staring straight to the front—dead. But around him! Five German infantrymen—dead too. Dragged into a sort of semicircle. And they weren't shot and they weren't gassed—nothing like that. Everyone had his throat torn! Torn!"

Carson leaned close to the old man; his voice shrilled as he demanded, almost piteously, "You hear me, can't you?"

"They would be—torn," said Sir John Pelham very quietly. "Finish your story."

The officer pulled himself together with an effort. "It makes it easier, having you understand. I've seen men——"

He thrust the fingers of one hand into the collar of his tunic, as though it choked him. "I've seen men, sir, meet death in a thousand ways—but not, not that way! And Pel wasn't marked at all—I looked."

The father leaned forward in his chair, but the gesture of interest was not reflected in his impassive face.

"What of the belt?"

"He wasn't wearing it, but the thing was there—lying at his feet. And it was coiled!"

"Show it to me."

"Why I—yes, I took it. I don't know why. I dropped it in my kit bag—next day I got mine. I'm just out of the hospital by a month. Otherwise I'd have been here sooner."

With an unexpected clutch at the wheels of his chair, Sir John was close to the table, one white hand extended.

"Give it me."

An instant's hesitation, then Carson slowly pulled a paper-wrapped

object from his pocket, laid it easily on the table.

"It's in there," he muttered. "I don't like the damned thing."

With deft fingers, the baronet loosened the paper, shook the contents on the table.

There lay the leathern belt, coiled compactly. In the waning light it was of a pale brown color, thin and very flexible. On the other end was a metal clasp, its surface cut with marks that might or might not have been characters. There was a reading lens lying near and Sir John used it to study the coiled strap. He examined it grimly, from many angles, without once touching it. Finished, he leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully tapped the palm of his hand with the lens.

"Captain Carson."

"Sir."

"Attend most carefully to what I say—follow my instructions exactly. Take that belt in one hand only. Carry it to the hearth—lay it directly on the coals. When it is burned, quite burned, you may tell me."

Carson got slowly to his feet. With a hand that hesitated and was none too steady, he reached for the coiled belt, lifted it a few inches from the table. At his touch, seemingly, the coil loosened; it started to unroll. He caught at it with both hands.

For a fraction of a second his body seemed caught in a strained tension. Then he began backing away from the table, noiselessly, furtively. With an end of the belt in each hand, he shifted his eyes to Sir John and they glowed with a strange, sinister light. From his sagging jaw came his tongue, licking.

Screaming an oath, Sir John Pelham flung the reading lens with all his frail strength full into that distorted face.

"Drop it!" he bawled savagely. "Jarvis!"

At the call an elderly man-servant came hurrying. He saw his master supporting himself on the arms of the chair, trembling with the exertion, and staring curiously at the uniformed visitor. Carson was swaying unsteadily, one hand pressed against his face, blood trickling from between his fingers. At his feet lay the belt and the shattered lens. Jarvis saw all this and took his post near Sir John, waiting his orders.

"Jarvis."

"Yes, sir," said the man-servant evenly.

Sir John sank back wearily.

"The tongs, Jarvis. Fetch the tongs. Pick up that strap. Only the tongs, mind you—don't touch it with your hands. So. Now lay it on the coals—hold it down hard."

The three watched the burning in deep silence, watched the belt writhe and twist in the heat, scorch with flame, fall in charred fragments.

"Jarvis."

"Yes, sir."

"Lights, then brandy for our guest. You may bring things and patch that cut for him." To Carson: "Sit down, man, and pull yourself together. I regret I was obliged to strike you, but, under the circumstances, you will agree it was quite necessary, I think."

"I don't understand," muttered Carson dully. He slumped weakly into a near-by chair. "I'm—I felt—I don't know." His voice trailed off; his chin sagged on his breast.

"You don't wish to eat, by any chance?"

"What made you ask that? God, no! I couldn't eat—I only——"

But Jarvis was offering him the brandy.

"None for me," said Sir John shortly. "But you may help me over to the far case—I am looking for a book."

IN A few moments, Jarvis had wheeled him back to the table and he was leafing the pages of a small book he had found. It was bound in parchment and bore evidence of great age. Carson shiveringly helped himself to another drink, as his host turned the crackling pages until he found what he sought. Tracing the lines with a lean forefinger, he read silently for a moment, then looked shrewdly at his guest.

"This may interest you, Captain. Read here," and he indicated the place.

Carson slowly deciphered the strange script of the hand-printed page:

Another means wherethrough men have become werewolves is that they in som mannere getten a belt or girdel maked of human skin. By an autentyke cronicle a yoman hadde such a girdel which he kept locken in a cheste secrely. It so felle on a day that he let the cheste unlocken and his lftel sone getteth the girdel and girteth his midel with it. In a minute the childe was transmewed into a mervilously wilde beste but the yoman fortunod to enter the house and with spede he remewed the girdel and so cured his sone who sayde he remembered naught save a ravissing apepetyt.

The book slipped from Carson's nerveless fingers. Wide-eyed he stared into Sir John's impassive face.

When he could find the words: "God! You never mean—you couldn't mean——"

"I was in hopes," mused the old man, "you know I was quite in hopes you would feel hungry."

