

# WEIRD TALES



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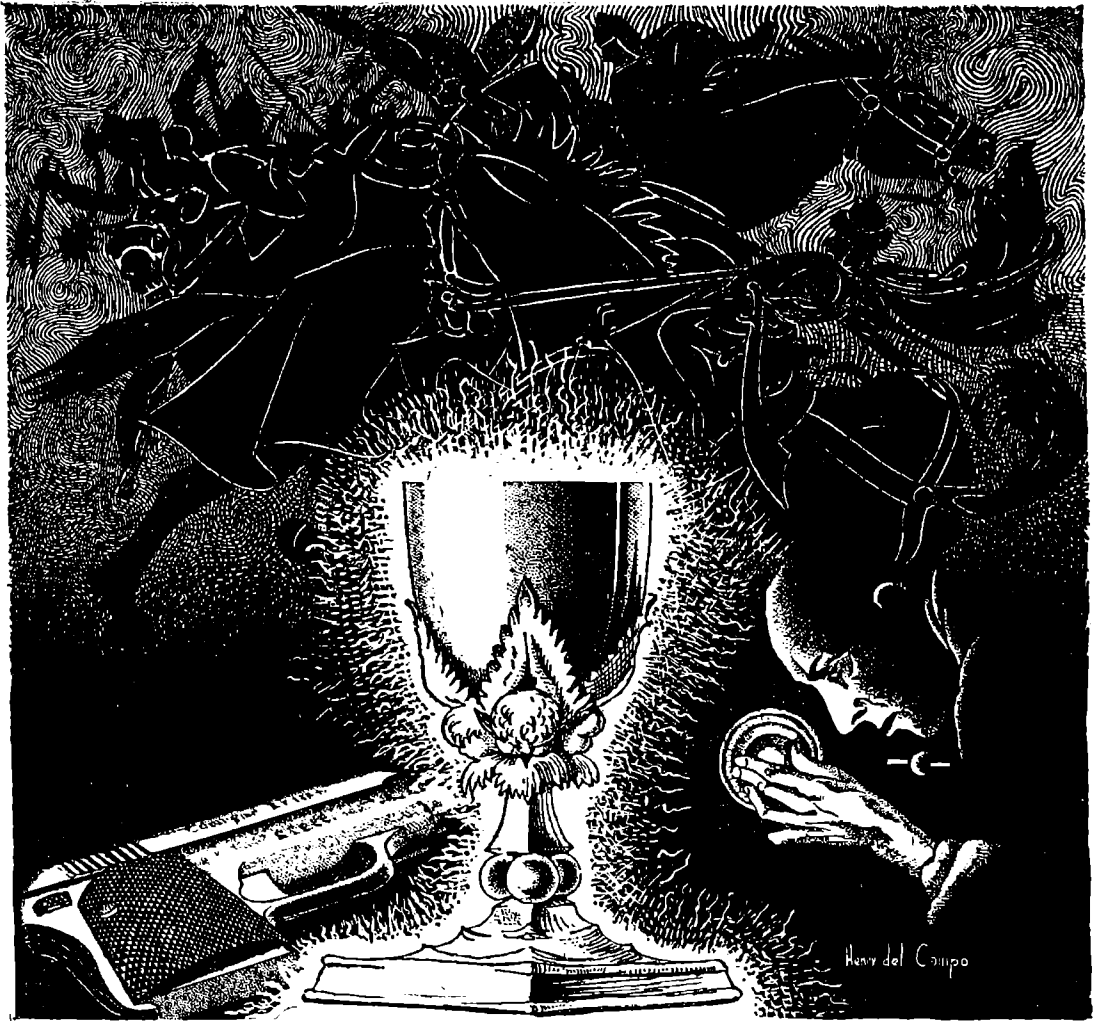
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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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Thieves came in the night, and stole the Golden Chalice.

# Golden Chalice

By FRANK GRUBER

*Two thieves had stolen the Golden Cup. And it was old—  
very old. And some said . . .*

**T**HE cup was made of gold, no question about that. It was about four inches tall and weighed pretty close to a pound. I didn't know of any other metal that would have made the cup weigh as much, even though the thing

didn't look like gold. But I guess that was because it was so old.

It looked like it had been buried in the ground for a long time and was pretty battered and dented. It wasn't a big haul. We'd be lucky to get three hundred for it

from Opdyke. He'd make maybe two hundred profit on it, by melting it down and selling it to the government as old gold, at thirty-five dollars an ounce.

We'd turned in pretty late the night before and it was almost noon before we got up. I dug the cup out from under the bed and was looking it over and thinking that I was a damn fool for taking such chances for a lousy hundred and fifty—my share of the split.

Benny, on the other hand, was pretty chipper. He wasn't used to big money and all he'd done to earn his share was keep a lookout outside the place, while I went in and did the dirty work.

"Not bad, Jim," he cackled. "It couldda been more, but this ain't bad at all."

I looked around the room I was sharing with Benny. It was about eight feet by ten and contained a bed with springs that sagged almost to the floor, two chairs, a cheap dresser and a row of nails in the wall that served as a clothes closet. Benny paid four dollars a week for the room. The one I'd had up the river—with bars on the door and window—had been just as cheerful.

I said to Benny: "We'll get some clothes and some good food and have a couple of parties. We'll be broke in a week. Then what?"

"Then we'll crack another safe," he replied promptly. "There're some swell joints on Long Island and . . ."

**T**HAT was when the knock came on the door. I never saw a man change his color as quickly as Benny did. One minute he'd been cocky as a Jungle Shawl fighting rooster, the next his face looked like sour dough and he was shivering like a man who's just been pulled out of the river.

I took a couple of quick steps toward Benny. "Thought you said no one knew where you lived?" I hissed at him.

Benny's teeth chattered as he shook his

head. "They—they don't! That's why . . . you s'pose it's—the cops?"

Well, it could be. But I didn't think so. We'd made a clean getaway the night before. I said to Benny: "Maybe it's your landlady?"

The knock on the door was repeated, two quick knocks, then three spaced further apart. I jerked my head at the door and moved toward it.

Benny called out: "Who is it?"

A quiet sort of voice answered. A man's voice. "Open up, I want to talk to you."

Benny wasn't shivering, now; he was shaking like a young sapling in a Kansas twister. For my own part I took a quick look out of the window. I saw that it opened on a dead air shaft. There was no retreat that way, and I cursed Benny for being such a fool as to rent a room without a hole by which he could escape.

Well, there was nothing to do but open the door. I slipped back the bolt and jerked open the door. I expected a cop. Maybe he was a cop. But he didn't look like one.

He was tall, about six feet, well built, but still looked kind of lean. He was in his early thirties and rather dark complexioned.

I hardly took in his features though, because of his eyes. They were large and dark and there was an expression in them that I can't describe—except that when I looked into them I was . . . scared! I admit it and I don't scare easy.

He was smiling.

"May I come in?" It wasn't the tone a cop usually uses.

I moved back into the room and shot a quick look toward the bed. Benny had had sense enough to throw a blanket over the gold cup. But when I looked back at the stranger his eyes were on the bed. He'd closed the door behind him.

He said: "You'll have to take it back."

He *couldn't* see the gold cup; for that

matter he couldn't have known that Benny and me were the ones who stole it.

I began edging around him, so that he was partly between Benny and myself. I said: "What're you talking about? Take what back?"

He shook his head and smiled. "The golden chalice—I guess you'd call it a cup. You'll have to take it back to Alfred Hal-leck."

Benny chirped up, then. He said: "Sure," and went to the bed. He stooped over, put his hand under a pillow and came up with a .32 caliber automatic. I blinked. I hadn't known that Benny had a rod.

He pointed it at the stranger and snapped: "Up with 'em, Copper! You're not pinching us—not today!"

I was looking at the stranger. He didn't seem worried. He was still smiling, only . . . the smile was a kind of sad one. I had a funny feeling down around where my stomach's supposed to be.

"I'm sorry," the stranger said, "you'll have to take it back."

Benny sneered. "There's some rope in the top drawer, Jim. Tie his hands. My room rent's up today, anyway. We'll just leave him here."

I got the rope, but I wasn't feeling so good. The gun in Benny's hand—I've done a lot of things in my time; I've been up the river, but I never carried a gun. I didn't believe in guns. Sure, I'm a safe-cracker—a burglar. But I take my chances. I try not to get caught, but if I am—that's my hard luck. I take the rap. But I don't ever want any murder rap. All the fellows I ever knew who carried guns wound up with murder raps.

The stranger put his hands behind his back. I wound the rope around his wrists, then he stretched out on the bed and I finished up by tying his feet. I did a good job of it. I wanted enough time to take the cup to Opdyke, get my split and leave. I wanted no more of Benny.

Benny got the cup from under the blanket, wrapped it in a towel, then rolled the whole thing inside an old newspaper and tied a piece of string around it.

We were ready to leave the room when the stranger spoke again. He said: "Take it back. Take it back, Benny Potter and Jim Vedder."

I DIDN'T think about that until we were outside of Benny's rooming house. Then it struck me. *No one*, aside from Benny, knew my name. I'd only got out two days ago. I'd come straight to Benny's room and had been out of it only once, the night before when we took the trip up to Fox Meadow in Scarsdale and cracked the safe.

Benny lived on Christopher Street. We walked east to Sixth Avenue, then turned north. After a block or two, Benny said, "Let's stop in here and get a glass of beer."

I was willing. My throat was kind of dry. The saloon didn't look like much, but beer's beer no matter where you get it. We went in. It was the middle of the morning and the place was deserted except for the bartender and one customer who stood in front of the bar, with his back toward us.

"Two beers," Benny said, before we even got to the bar.

Then the man at the bar turned around. It was The Stranger. The man we'd left in Benny's room, tied hand and foot.

He looked right at me and this time he wasn't smiling. The temperature of the cafe seemed suddenly to get ten degrees colder and I know that the short hairs stood straight up on the back of my neck.

He said: "You'll have to take it back."

I was pretty shocked by the sight of him, but Benny looked like he was going to faint. His mouth was opening and closing like that of a fish taken out of the water.

I backed to the door and that broke the spell on Benny. He gave a hoarse yell,

whipped out the .32 automatic and rushed backwards, like a prize-fighter backing away. He was in such a hurry he missed the door and banged against the wall.

He made it the second time and I was only one jump behind him. Out on Sixth Avenue we rushed to the next corner, which was 11th Street, turned right and didn't stop until we were almost up to Fifth. We stopped then just because we were out of breath. We both looked back, but The Stranger wasn't in sight.

"Gawd!" panted Benny Potter. "How did he get loose from those ropes and beat us to that saloon?"

"He couldn't have done it," I told Benny. "We went there straight from your room, by the shortest way. And, anyway . . . how did he know we were going to turn into that very saloon? We didn't know it ourselves until we saw the sign."

Benny's eyes almost popped out of his head. "That's right!" he gasped. "He couldn't have known we'd go in there—unless he guessed!"

I didn't say a word. I was still feeling cold, despite the long run I'd just had and I don't think the short hairs on my hackle had gone down. Up the street a little ways was a delicatessen shop, with a newspaper stand in front of it. I plunked down two cents and picked up a morning newspaper.

It was on the front page, a picture with the caption: "Holy Grail Stolen." Below the head were three lines, reading: "Burglars last night blew the safe in the home of Alfred D. Halleck, noted archaeologist and took the famous golden chalice which has been the subject of much controversy since Halleck brought it to America three years ago. Page 3, for further details."

I turned to Page 3. The story went on:

"Burglars last night dynamited the safe of Alfred D. Halleck's Fox Meadow estate and stole the golden chalice that was the sensation of the New York

World's Fair. Professor Halleck returned from Asia Minor three years ago with the golden cup that has since been called the Holy Grail. Professor Halleck claimed to have found the cup while excavating near Antioch. Scientists, religious leaders and archaeologists have become divided in two camps as to the authenticity of the cup. Professor Halleck's group claim the cup is undoubtedly of first century manufacture and from its description and the location where it was found believe it is the original chalice used by Christ and his disciples during the Last Supper. . . ."

There was more, but that was as far as I read. I couldn't see more of the print. All I could see was the face of The Stranger. Swarthy, tall, in his early thirties. . . . Once, when I was broke and it was snowing outside I spent an entire afternoon in the Public Library. I was looking through an encyclopedia and came across a number of pictures supposed to be of old religious paintings found in the Catacombs near Rome. One of the pictures was supposed to go back to the first century. It showed a tall, well-built man in his early thirties, a swarthy man, with a prominent nose and a beard.

**T**HE STRANGER didn't have a beard . . . but I knew now why he looked familiar.

I gave the paper to Benny and let him read it. He snorted: "Imagine those suckers paying money to see this thing at the World's Fair. Well, Grover Whalen's going to be disappointed this season, because this cup won't be there. It'll be melted down and . . ."

"No," I said, "it won't be melted down. We're taking it back."

Benny stared at me. "Are you crazy? After the trouble we went to get it? Hey—snap out of it. Opdyke lives over here

on Fourth Avenue. He'll haggle around a little, but he'll come across with three hundred. Two-fifty at the least."

"The cup goes back to Fox Meadow," I told Benny. "It's—an antique. It's worth a lot more than three hundred."

"All the more reason then!" Benny cried. "We'll show this to Opdyke—kick the price up on him."

All of a sudden I got mad. I grabbed Benny's arm and twisted him around. "You fool, don't you see? Halleck values this cup. It's worth a lot to him—a lot more than three hundred. All right, we'll sell it back to him."

Benny's eyes lit up. "Say, that's an idea. Maybe he'll go a grand for it. It says here he thinks it's a religious piece. Well, if he thinks so much of it he ought to go a grand. He's got the dough. That place of his cost a lot. We'll hold him up for a grand. Come on—we'll grab a train out to Scarsdale and get it over with. We'll break in on him and make him come across with the dough, before we turn over the cup. Otherwise he might call the cops. . . ."

We took a bus on Fifth Avenue and rode up to Forty-second, then walked across to the Grand Central. Inside we bought two one-way tickets to Scarsdale and looked up the train schedule. One was listed to leave in twelve minutes. I didn't like the idea of waiting around the waiting room, so gave Benny the high-sign and headed for the washroom, on the lower level.

To kill time we got up on a couple of high seats to get our shoes shined. Benny got his shined first, then the bootblack got on mine. It was timing things pretty close. When he finished with me, it was two minutes to train time. I paid for the shines and headed for the door. It opened before I got to it and—The Stranger came in!

Benny let go altogether this time. He yelled to high heaven and he got so scared

he dropped the cup that was wrapped in the towel and newspaper.

Me, I just stood and stared at The Stranger. I guess I'd still be standing there looking at him, if he hadn't stooped and picked up the package. He held it out to me, smiled and said:

"Take it back, Jim Vedder."

He left me holding it, turned and then walked out. Benny recovered then. "What—what do you make of that, Jim?" he cried.

I said: "We're taking it back, Benny. Come on!"

The gateman was just about to close the gate when we got to it. I grabbed a newspaper from a stand next to the door, threw down a nickel and scooted inside. We ran to catch the last car of the train, just as it was starting.

We got seats in the rear and I spread out the newspaper. It was the noon edition of an evening paper. The story was still on the front page. But there were some new angles to it. First of all, Alfred D. Halleck was offering a reward of \$1,500 for the safe return of the Golden Chalice, as he called it. And *No Questions Asked*.

In an adjoining column was an interview of Halleck, made by one of the paper's reporters. Halleck was pretty worked up by the thing. He was offering a reward, he said, but he didn't really expect to get the Golden Chalice back. That was because he didn't think that ordinary burglars had blown his safe. He suspected the job had been done, or hired done, by a certain wealthy collector of *objets d'art*, who'd been bothering him for the last three years, trying to make Halleck sell the Golden Chalice. The collector, Halleck said, had offered him \$50,000 for the cup and when he'd still refused to sell it, had threatened to steal it from him.

Halleck wouldn't tell the reporter the collector's name, but the reporter was a smart lad. He'd checked up back in the

office and had gone to ask a Mr. August Messerschmidt, who lived on Park Avenue in New York, if he had any comment to make. Mr. Messerschmidt was a well-known collector of *objets d'art*. The reporter didn't come right out and say that Messerschmidt was the man who'd made the offer and threat to Halleck, but any kid could figure out the answer. Anyway, Messerschmidt had thrown the reporter out on his ear.

Benny was reading over my shoulder. When I put down the paper he took it from me and ripped out the page. He began folding it up.

I said: "What're you going to do with that?"

He didn't answer right away. The conductor had come along, collected our tickets and put a couple of slips in the slot on the back of the seat ahead of us. When he had gone away, Benny said:

"This Messerschmidt's a crook. He wants that cup any way he can get it. I've heard of guys like him. There's a fella in Philadelphia, collects pictures. He's got a million dollars worth of them and no one ever sees them but himself, because half of them have been swiped. This Messerschmidt'll go twenty-five g's. We'll get off at the 125th Street Station."

I WONDERED why I'd ever tied up with Benny Potter. With what had happened to us in the last hour. . . . I said to him: "No, we're going to Scarsdale. The cup goes back to Halleck. We take whatever reward he gives us and we let it go at that."

"Are you crazy?" Benny yelled. "The most he'd give is fifteen hundred and the chances are four in five he won't give us anything but a houseful of cops. We're not going anywhere near Fox Meadow. We're getting off at the first stop and taking this to Park Avenue. That guy Messerschmidt's a bigger crook than we are.

That's why he'll come across. . . . Gimme the cup!"

He reached for it and I shifted it to my left arm, against the window. With my right hand I slapped down his reaching paw.

He gave me a dirty look, then slumped down in his seat. He didn't say a word until the train pulled into the 125th Street Station. Then he suddenly got up. "All right, Jim, if that's the way you want it—"

His hand went to his hip and came back with the .32 automatic. I'd forgot all about him having it. There'd been too much on my mind.

I looked into his eyes and knew that he was going to take the cup from me if he had to shoot to get it. But I knew, too, that I wasn't going to give it to him.

I shook my head. "You can't, Benny. You . . ." I broke off and made a sudden dive for him. Even as I moved I knew I couldn't make it. Benny's finger was going to tighten on that automatic.

It thundered. But I didn't feel any shock or pain. I landed in the aisle on my hands and knees, twisted around and looked up at—The Stranger!

Benny was looking at him, too. And all of a sudden he yelled and headed for the door.

The train was already moving, the door was closed, but Benny tore it open. I climbed to my feet, started back for Benny and then I heard a yell that I'll hear to my dying day. It was Benny.

There was a lot of commotion, then. People yelled, the conductor pulled the cord and the train stopped and backed to the station.

Benny . . . Benny was dead.

The 125th Street Station is in the heart of Harlem, it's up in the air, like an elevated and the station platform is about three feet above the tracks. When Benny jumped the train was already beyond the platform. Benny had landed on the ties,

fell forward on to the next track . . . just as another train pulled in on that track.

I didn't wait around. There were a half dozen policemen around and questions were going to be asked—questions I didn't want to answer. I took a subway train back to the Grand Central, I bought another ticket for Scarsdale and took the first train.

In Scarsdale I took a taxi to Alfred Halleck's house in Fox Meadow. I went to the front door of the house.

I didn't ring the bell. I didn't have to, because the door opened before I got to it. It was opened by—The Stranger. I wasn't surprised. Not by then. In fact, I would have been surprised if the door had been opened by anyone *but* The Stranger.

He smiled at me, in a pleased sort of way and said: "I'm glad you brought it back. Will you come in, please?"

He led the way to a library, opened the door for me and said: "Mr. Halleck!"

Halleck sitting behind a teakwood desk, looked up at me, said: "Yes?"

I walked across the room and put the package on the desk in front of him. "I brought back the Golden Chalice."

His eyes popped wide open and he grabbed the package and tore the newspaper from about it. When he stripped off the towel and saw the cup, perspiration came to his forehead. He said: "Thank God!"

Then he looked at me. "Do you mind telling me . . . I know, I said no questions asked and this is not going to go any further . . . did you steal it, or are you returning this for someone?"

I told him. "I stole it. I'm sorry. You can call the police."

He looked at me in a funny sort of a way. "The police?" he repeated. "I'm not going to call them. I'm too glad to get this back. And here . . ." He opened a drawer and pulled out a thick stack of bills. "And here's the reward—fifteen hundred dollars."

I shook my head at him. "No, I don't want any reward. Not money. But you can do something. Tell me . . . who is the man who brought me into this room?"

He blinked. No one brought you into this room. You came in yourself."

"But there was a man with me. He—he opened the door and brought me to the room. He announced your name."

"You said my name," Halleck replied. "And you came in by yourself. There isn't another man in my house. Besides ourselves only the cook in the kitchen . . . a middle-aged woman."

I stole it and returned the Golden Chalice six months ago. Alfred Halleck gave me a job. I'm working for him, now. I'm a sort of handy-man around his place and I'm going with Mr. Halleck on his next trip to Asia. He knows all about me.

All except what I did, the day after I returned the Golden Chalice. I wanted to get some things off my mind and I took the train back to Grand Central. In the washroom on the lower level, I went up to the bootblack. Before I could say anything he grabbed up a couple of big brushes and backed away.

"Don't you bother me, Mister, I'll call the police!" he yelled.

I shook my head at him and put a dollar bill on one of the seats. Then I took three steps away from it. "That dollar's yours," I told him, "if you tell me exactly what you saw here yesterday when I had my shoes shined."

The bootblack looked at the dollar and then at me. He shook his head, mumbled in his throat, then said: "Well, sir, you and the gent'man with you had a couple drinks too many I guess. You started for the door, then all of a sudden you got to talking and yelling and then you bust out of the door like you'd seen a ghost."

I nodded. "You're sure there wasn't another man here at the time—a man who'd just come in the door?"



The bootblack took another step back. "No, sir, there was only the two of you. And myself. That's all there was in here . . . no more."

I went out, took the Fifth Avenue bus and rode down to the Village, then walked to the cafe on Sixth Avenue where Benny and I had gone for a glass of beer and encountered The Stranger.

The bartender recognized me right away and reached for a bung-starter. "Get out of here!" he snarled at me. "I don't want no hop-heads in my place."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but would you mind telling me exactly what happened here yesterday?"

His eyes rolled, but he said, "I'll tell you. You and some other dope came in here, yelled for a drink, then started cutting up, pretending there was someone else here, that you were afraid of. That partner of yours had it particularly bad. . . ."

"I guess he did. But you're *sure* there wasn't anybody else in here at the time—a tall, dark complexioned man?"

"There wasn't no one else in here," the bartender said, grimly. "There hadn't been anyone in for a half hour until you dopes came along. . . ."

There was a lot of stuff in the papers for awhile about the Golden Chalice. Mr. Halleck gave it out, that it had been sent back to him, anonymously. The papers wouldn't believe that; they claimed it hadn't been stolen in the first place, that it was a publicity stunt on Halleck's part.

That started up another bunch who claimed that the Golden Chalice was a fake. All of them admitted that it was old and that Halleck might even have dug it up in Asia Minor, but the chances of it's being the Golden Chalice were about one in eighteen billion. They're still arguing about it. I don't say anything. Because I *know*.