



# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 24

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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REGISTERED IN GREAT BRITAIN

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Suddenly a heavy weight came down on his body and sharp teeth bit into his aching wound."



## The Graveyard Duchess

By JOHN FLANDERS

*The tale of a ghastly horror that stalked at night through the cemetery—a blood-chilling story of the Undead*

**Y**OU want to know why I took the job at the cemetery, Judge? I took it for two reasons: I was hungry, and I was cold.

Picture a man with a summer suit on, a man who had walked sixty kilometers, from a town where he had been unable to find any sort of work, to a town that was his last hope. Imagine him living on frozen carrots smelling of manure and hard green apples picked up off the

ground in an abandoned orchard. Imagine him soaked in an October rain, numb from the gusts of north wind, and you will have an idea of the sort of fellow I was when I got into the suburbs of that horrible town.

I sneaked into the first building I came to. It happened to be the Tavern of the Two Plovers. The kind-hearted innkeeper gave me a cup of hot coffee, a slice of bread and a pickled herring, and

when I spoke about the shape I was in, he told me that one of the cemetery keepers at Saint-Guilton had just left and that they were looking for somebody to take his place.

I saw no reason why I should be afraid of the corpses. It was the living that had made my life a burden for me. So I was perfectly happy when the two keepers in charge, who seemed to have entire control of the cemetery, accepted me.

They fitted me out with a suit of warm clothes, and they gave me a feed. Ah, what a feed that was! Great slices of red roast, a meat-pie dripping juice, a stack of golden pancakes. . . .

The cemetery of Saint-Guilton is an immense necropolis where no one has been buried for twenty years. The headstones are dilapidated and the inscriptions on them are eaten by lichens and rain. There are monuments that have fallen in ruins. There are others that have sunk into the ground and are half out of sight. There is a sort of faded brush growing all over the paths, and the burial lots themselves are a jungle.

The city is poor, and when they opened the new Western Cemetery they conceived a plan for cutting the old one up into building-sites for factories and that sort of thing.

But the manufacturers were not interested. They had no doubt heard some of the stories that the people who live out that way tell each other when they sit in front of their coke fires and listen to the wind as it whines in the yew-trees over in Saint-Guilton—stories that would make your hair stand on end.

Eight years ago, something happened.

The wealthy Duchess Opoltschenska—Russian or Bulgarian, she was—made an offer to the city to buy the abandoned cemetery for a fantastic price, on condition that she could build a mausoleum for

herself there and that she should be the last person who should ever be buried there. She explained her plan for having the cemetery guarded night and day by three keepers. Two of them were to be two of her old servants; the third would be employed and supervised by these two.

The city was poor, as I said, and the officials jumped at the chance. A little army of workmen were put on the job at once, and built in the farthest corner from the road a great tomb that looked like a palace. The cemetery wall was built up to three times its former height, and was topped with iron spikes.

THE mausoleum was scarcely more than finished in time to receive the body of the Duchess. Nobody thought of the arrangement as anything but the harmless fancy of an old woman with money. It was reported that she had jewelry of enormous value buried with her, and it all looked like a careful plan to keep the grave-robbers away.

Now for my part in it all:

The two keepers were very good to me. They were two big fellows, built like two bulldogs. But they must have had good hearts, for I could see how delighted they were at my robust appetite, and surely a couple of men who grin when a poor hobo takes his food well must be a good-natured sort.

When I went to work, I had to take an oath to keep certain rules strictly. I was never to leave the cemetery during the year of service I had signed up for; I was to have no dealings with the outside; and I was never to go near the Duchess's mausoleum.

Velitcho, whose special business was to guard that corner of the cemetery, informed me that his instructions were to shoot at anybody who came in the neighborhood of the tomb. When he told me

that, he pointed his gun carelessly at a poplar branch in the distance, on which a tiny hopping shadow was just visible. When he pulled the trigger a blue-jay tumbled to the ground.

Velitcho was a good shot. He had plenty of practise. The cemetery was swarming with wild rabbits, with great opalescent pigeons, and even with pheasants in the densest thickets.

Ossip, the other keeper, was the only one of us who ever left the cemetery. He looked after the commissary department, and he was extremely good at cooking savory dishes of game. I shall never forget a galantine of fowl he used to concoct, caked in a golden jelly. Ah, it would melt in your mouth! . . .

I had nothing particular to do but eat and stroll about the melancholy place.

Velitcho had lent me a gun, but I was a poor marksman, and my marksmanship usually accomplished nothing but awaken an echo which would wander for a few seconds like a melancholy lament among the forgotten tombs.

In the evening we came together in a little lodge, where we sat and watched the malicious twinkling of our stove's one mica eye. Outside, there was only wind and darkness.

Ossip and Velitcho rarely spoke. They would sit with their eyes fixed on the one tall black window. They seemed to be constantly listening, and their great canine faces always showed a trace of uneasiness.

I wondered at them. I was inclined to smile at the superstitious turn of their childish minds, and I looked at them with a touch of condescension. What was there to be afraid of? There was nothing outside but the darkness of a winter night and the dreary complaining of the wind. Sometimes, away up in the sky, we could hear the cry of some nocturnal bird of prey, and when the moon was visible,

small and bright, in the corner of the highest window-pane, I could catch the cracking of the stones in the bitter cold.

Along toward midnight, Ossip always brewed for us a hot drink which he called "chur" or "skur". It was a blackish liquor with an aroma of strange plants, and I drank it with the keenest pleasure. By the time I had swallowed the last drop, an exquisite feeling of warmth ran all over my body. I was perfectly happy. I wanted to laugh and prattle, to call for a second cup, but I was never able to get that far; for all at once a wheel of many colors would begin to turn before my eyes, and I would have just time to tumble over on my cot and fall sound asleep.

There was nothing to be afraid of at night in the cemetery. The one thing that bothered me was the monotony of the days, and that is why I began keeping a diary, or more strictly a book of impressions. I kept no record of day or date.

If you will allow me, Your Honor, I will read some pages from this note-book of mine.

• • • • •

**O**SSIP and Velitcho are spoiling me. I never had such meals in my life. A day or two ago, for some reason or other, I didn't seem to have much appetite, and the two poor fellows were so anxious about me that it was almost ridiculous.

Velitcho accused Ossip of not having cooked the food properly, and he abused the poor giant till I felt ashamed of myself. Since then Ossip is constantly consulting me about what I like best. Poor, big-hearted fellows!

With all this fine eating, I ought to be getting as fat as a quail. But I certainly am not. Now and then it strikes me that I am strangely thin and weak.

**Y**ESTERDAY, for the first time since I have been here, a thing happened that frightened me. And I am sure it would have alarmed anybody.

I was strolling about in the twilight, when all of a sudden a frightful scream burst out from somewhere. I thought I saw Velitcho run out of the lodge and dash into the thicket.

When I reached the lodge, I saw Ossip standing with his eyes on the darkening jungle. When I asked him what had happened, he said that Velitcho had been in pursuit of a curlew. The next day Velitcho brought me one that he had killed.

It was a strange little creature with an immense beak as long as a dagger. But why had they made such a fuss over this poor little bird?

I laughed as I felt of its ash-colored plumage, but I knew my laugh rang false, and I haven't recovered from the shock yet.

**I** CERTAINLY am not as well as I ought to be, although I am eating like a wolf and Ossip is outdoing himself. In the morning, there is still a strange sort of torpor over me, and I can hardly drag myself out of bed, even when the sun beats on the window and I can hear the cracking of Velitcho's gun and the rattling of Ossip's pots and pans.

I have begun to notice a dull pain behind my left ear. When I look closely in the mirror, I can see a little wound back there, and the flesh is red all around it. It is scarcely more than a scratch, but it hurts me a good deal. . . .

Today, as I was beating the bush in the hope of scaring up a pigeon or a woodcock, I saw something move in the branches near me. It was a splendid cock pheasant, thrusting his delicate head out between two twigs. It was a wonderful

chance. I fired, and the wounded bird struggled away with one wing drooping.

I rushed excitedly after him, and a long pursuit began. All of a sudden I stopped and let my prey escape me. I had heard someone. It was a hoarse, plaintive voice, speaking in a foreign tongue, words that sounded infinitely sad and almost like an entreaty.

I looked out from my bushes, and behind a massive wall of cypress and spruce I saw the outlines of a gloomy building. It was the tomb of the Duchess.

I was on forbidden ground.

Velitcho had given me a warning I was not likely to forget. I got out of there in a hurry, just in time to see this same Velitcho emerge from the wood, bare-headed and pale as death.

When I glanced at him in the evening, I noticed a long livid scar across his right cheek. It seemed that he was trying hard to keep me from seeing it.

**I**T IS nearly midnight. My two companions are throwing dice. All of a sudden my heart stops beating. Right beside the house, only a few steps away, I hear a curlew cry.

What a frightful noise the thing makes! It sounds as if the whole Saint-Guitton cemetery screamed in terror.

Velitcho has frozen into a statue, the leather dice-box in his fingers. Ossip, with a muffled cry, runs to the dish in which the chur is heating. He fairly pushes the cup into my hands, and I can see that his hands are trembling.

**O**H, HOW terrible I feel this morning! The red swollen wound behind my ear is larger. In the center, it is bleeding a little.

I'm sick—I'm sick.

**Y**ESTERDAY I explored the inside of the wall on the east side of the cemetery. It is an uncanny region, and I had never ventured that far before.

I discovered a tall hedge of holly bushes cutting across from the east wall to the north wall, and shutting in a triangular space which the hedge concealed from my sight.

What strange presentiment was it that drove me to examine this mysterious enclosure? It was not easy to get into it, for the hedge was thick and every holly leaf was a little clawing hand that lacerated my skin. There was nothing in the enclosure; that is, nothing but eight crosses which seemed to be standing in the order of their age, so that the first one was rotted and discolored by the rain, while the last one was fresh and bright. . . . These certainly were not old graves. . . .

Last night my sleep was haunted by nightmares. I felt as if an enormous weight were crushing my chest, and the wound behind my ear hurt atrociously.

I'm afraid. . . .

There is something wrong. How does it happen that I didn't notice it before?

Neither Ossip nor Velitcho touches the chur. This morning they forgot to put away the three cups. The three stood on the table together, but only mine had had the liquid in it. The others were perfectly clean.

**T**HIS evening I tried to keep awake and see if I could learn anything. I drank the chur. I lay down on my cot, I struggled against the drowsiness, I resisted it with all my strength and all my brain. Ah, it was terrible!

I saw Ossip and Velitcho watch me. They thought I had lost consciousness. With a mighty effort I kept my senses for a second. And I heard the frightful curlew shriek by the window.

Then something horrible happened. I caught a glimpse of a face against the window. It had glassy eyes, like a corpse's, white hair that stood on end like quills, and a grimacing mouth with black teeth, a mouth like fire or fresh blood. Then the fiery wheel turned in my head and I lost consciousness. And the nightmare came.

**I** DRANK the chur. I drank it every evening. They watch me like tigers and I know that something ghastly happens every night. What? I can't tell, I can't think any more. All I can do is suffer. . . .

What mysterious force is it that draws me back to look at the crosses again?

When I was just starting to come away, my eye fell on a scrap of wood just visible above the earth beside the eighth cross. I drew the little board out of the ground. I could see that something had been painfully written on it.

It was difficult to decipher, but I figured it out. It ran:

Friend, if you can't get out of here, this is where you will be buried. They have killed seven already. I shall be the eighth, for I have no strength left. I don't know what is going on; it is a horrible mystery. Get out!

PIERRE BRUNEN.

Pierre Brunen! I remember having heard that that was the name of my predecessor. The eight crosses marked the tombs of the keepers' helpers for the past eight years. . . .

I tried to escape. I climbed the north wall at a place where I had found some rough places that I could get my feet into.

I had almost reached the spikes at the top, when a stone broke loose two inches from my hand, then another, then a third. At the foot of the wall I saw Velitcho coldly pointing his gun at me, and his eyes had the icy glint of metal—of the metal they cast into bells to toll when men die.

I HAVE been back at the triangular enclosure where the tombs are. Beside Brunen's they have dug a fresh grave.

Oh, I must get away! Cold and hunger along the cruel highway—anything rather than this mystery and this horror.

But they have me in their grip; they watch me day and night. . . .

I have made a discovery. Perhaps it will save me. Ossip pours something into the chur from a black bottle.

Where does he keep the bottle?

I HAVE found the bottle. There is a colorless liquid in it, with a sweet odor.

I will do something this evening. . . .

I have done it. I have poured the stuff into their tea. . . .

Will they notice it? Oh, how my heart beats!

They are drinking it! There is hope. . . .

Ossip fell asleep first. Velitcho turned and looked at me in astonishment; then a ferocious light came into his eyes and he reached for his revolver. But he never got his hand on it. He fell forward on the table, sound asleep.

I found Ossip's keys, but as I was opening the heavy gate of the cemetery the thought came to me that my task was not finished. I still had an enigma to solve and eight deaths to avenge. And as long as those fellows were alive, I should have them on my trail.

I went back. I took Velitcho's revolver, set the muzzle against one head after the other, at the place where I have the little red wound that pains me. I pulled the trigger twice. . . .

Neither one of them moved. No, Ossip did quiver once. And alone with

the two corpses, I awaited the mystery of midnight.

I had put the three cups on the table, just as Ossip set them there every evening. I put the keepers' caps on their heads so as to cover the red marks. If you had looked in at the window, you would have supposed that the two were asleep.

Then I sat and waited. Oh, how slowly the hands of the clock crawled around toward midnight, the hour for Ossip's chur! The blood of the dead men dripped to the floor, drop after drop. It made a gentle little sound like the dripping of the rain from the leaves of the trees in the springtime.

All at once the curlew cried. . . .

I lay down on my cot, and held myself perfectly still, as if I were asleep. The curlew cried again, nearer than the first time. Something was scratching against the window-pane.

Silence.

The door opened, very softly. Someone or something had entered the room. A sickening odor, like the smell of a corpse.

I could hear stealthy steps approaching my cot. Then suddenly a heavy weight came down on my body. Sharp teeth bit into my aching wound, and disgusting icy lips sucked gluttonously at my blood.

I cried out and struggled to my feet. And a hideous cry answered mine.

What I saw was so frightful that it took all my strength to keep my feet. Two paces away from me, the same nightmare face that I had seen once at the window fixes me with its eyes of flame, and from its lips trickles a stream of red blood, *my blood!*

The Duchess Opoltchenska, fiendish vampire, has prolonged her foul life by

sucking the young blood of the eight wretched keepers.

Her stupor lasted only a second. With a bound she was on me, and her claws sank into my neck.

I had clung to my revolver. I fired, and with one great belching hiccup, which spattered the walls with black

blood, the vampire sank to the floor. . . .

• • • • •

AND that, Your Honor, is why you will find beside the bodies of Velitcho and Ossip the body of the Duchess Opolchenska, officially deceased eight years ago and buried at that time in the cemetery of Saint-Guitton.

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