

# Strange STORIES

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# The Grip of Death

By ROBERT BLOCH

Author of "Pink Elephants," "The Curse of the House," etc.

*Luke couldn't keep his eyes  
from his uncle's hands*



**L**UKE HOLLAND'S narrow, sal-low face twitched as he slowly mounted the stairs. He carried a tray on which rested a napkin, a decanter of port, and a wineglass filled with poisoned wine.

Luke had acquired the poison by soaking sheets of flypaper in water; he'd read of the trick in a book. The police would have no way of tracing it now. Some people—his uncle, for instance—might think of him as stupid. But no, he was wise and cunning. Yes, Luke Holland was very

*Two Hands—and a  
Throat; Ten White  
Links in a Grim  
Necklace of Death!*

cunning, with the warped brain generations of decadent Puritan stock had given him.

Luke's cunning was not unmingled with superstitious fear. That was

why he meant to kill his Uncle Lionel. He thought he knew of the old man's trafficking in witchcraft; the Bible forbade that, and said a sorcerer deserved to die.

Besides, Luke could use the money he would inherit with his uncle's death, as sole living relative. Then he could get away from this strange, evil house and cease being dependent on the whims and vagaries of an eccentric old man.

How he hated Uncle Lionel!—hated his white, wrinkled face, his sunken, watery eyes, his thin blue lips. He hated, too, the disturbing smile on that withered countenance when old Lionel talked about the money Luke would get when he died. It was almost as though the wretch knew what was in his nephew's mind and was mocking him.

So Luke had thought it all over very carefully for many days, and decided to act. The poisoned wine old Lionel would drink as his regular midday tonic, and the police would say that his death was due to heart failure.

What a joke! All deaths, thought Luke, are due to heart-failure, in the final analysis. Quite a whimsical notion. He laughed now, as he mounted the stairs.

It was good to laugh again. He had found little mirth here in the gloomy house where for the past year he had waited for his invalid uncle to die. For Lionel Holland was an occultist, and dabbled in certain realms of knowledge better left alone. Upon his retirement from the spice business eight years ago, the old man had taken a long sea voyage in the East. His original plan of rest had evidently given way to a less wholesome purpose, for when he returned he brought many crumbling, queerly bound books, and this new gnawing interest in black arts. Slyly, he had adopted the life of a recluse, breaking all social connections and retiring to his family house on the decaying grandeur of the waterfront. His nephew was suddenly offered a secretarial position, and that was all the world ever learned.

Luke Holland had not learned very

much more himself. It was what he suspected that now made him so afraid.

His uncle was a very peculiar man. During his years' stay in the dwelling, Luke had seen his elderly employer infrequently, for the old invalid stayed upstairs in carefully locked chambers. Luke's duties consisted merely of preparing meals, administering his uncle's medicine, and discouraging all callers. The meals were sent up on a dumbwaiter, a speaking-tube served for infrequent communication, and Luke was left with plenty of time on his hands to think—and to listen.

**W**HAT was the old fool doing up there? Why was he so secretive? And what were those noises from the locked chambers? From the second floor, on recent evenings, had come the grating that accompanies the opening of long-sealed windows. After that he had heard a measured chanting, subdued, yet resonant. The low, scarcely audible litany seemed to strike Luke's straining ears like the insistent beating of primordial jungle drums. His uncle was praying—but not to any gods Luke knew. These were older gods, for who but the Ancient Ones demanded sacrifice?

One day, in response to written orders, Luke had procured three fine white roosters and sent them up, still alive, on the dumb-waiter. That night, after endless brooding and a strange ordeal of anticipation, his troubled vigil was disturbed by the shrill screech of a butchered fowl. There was the clatter of a heavy knife, the vibrant beating of blood-dabbled wings, followed by short silence and then the muttering rise of a prayer. The windows groaned open from above.

It was then that Luke became certain his imagination was playing him sorry tricks. For he smelt the reek of heavy incense drifting down into the room, intermingled with the odor of fresh blood and *something else*.

There was an alien scent his nostrils could not name, and which his brain dared not. It was the stench

of a carrion thing, summoned to accept a blood offering—and it was not an olfactory but an atavistic sense which told him what was answering that prayer and sacrifice.

Luke shivered in his bed, as presently the feeble yet immeasurably potent ritual was resumed. Even his shocked and half-dazed mind dared not credit that final dread suspicion—that now there were two voices chanting instead of one.

But when Luke felt the massive timbers of the house shake beneath that lumbering tread, when he heard the whistling wind from the harbor howl through the upstairs rooms in answer to that gargantuan footfall, he knew what must be done. A black tryst, a scarlet sacrifice; those mocking sounds from the ceiling must be stopped. His uncle was practising sorcery. How much longer must he be pent up here in this rotting old house, prisoner and slave of that sorcerous monster?

A monster may be killed. . . .

Luke thought about it the following night before he sank into the noxious nightmares that now lurked in slumber.

A monster should be killed. Witches and wizards must die. . . .

The next night the scent of incense pervaded the house. Luke's sleep was interrupted by the trickling whispers that slithered fearfully down through the ceiling. Then again that lumbering, far-off tread of gigantic feet—or hooves. He remembered the open windows and lay awake until dawn brought the sanity of sunlight.

*I will kill him. I must. . . .*

**T**HAT was when Luke Holland began to plan, and got the fly-paper, and tampered with the dumb-waiter so that now he personally must carry the meals and medicine upstairs. He planned, and acted, and all the time he thought. He thought about how he hated his uncle, and about how he feared the legends of New England childhood that spoke of witchcraft and the nauseous beings that could be summoned from afar. He thought of how he could use his

uncle's money, and he thought of how the pious were enjoined to destroy wizards and warlocks.

So now Luke Holland went up the creaking staircase with his tray. There was a merry little tune humming within his head; a whimsical phrase of catchy music that tinkled gaily to the rhythm of his pounding pulse.

*"Kill him, Kill him, KILL HIM!"*

A surge of confident elation seethed in his veins. Never had he felt more alive, more powerful. He was the Angel of Death. His feet moved in a set cadence; his pulse beat in harmony, his very eyelids blinked to the rhythm of that tinkling tune which beat into his brain.

*"Kill, kill, kill, kill him!"*

For the first time in months Luke Holland's face wore a peaceful and contented smile.

**T**HE big black door swung open, and he was in the room. His uncle was sitting by the table, a faint smile on his withered countenance. It was all Luke could do to prevent himself from answering that smile with a burst of triumphant laughter.

His uncle did not know about the little tune in back of Luke Holland's head; the little tune that was rising to a sure, swift climax.

Luke tried to master his elation. He stared at the huge, old-fashioned chamber, with its oaken panels shooting up toward the ceiling. It was furnished in a fashion popular fifty years ago—filled with great mahogany chairs, cumbersome sofas, and massive tables. The walls were ranged with bookshelves stuffed with tomes of a size and age commensurate with the room's general atmosphere. It looked sane enough, that room, but there were others further on behind the locked doors. Mad things lurked in the sealed chambers, just as the mad tune lurked in the sealed chambers of Luke's brain. And mad things lurked now in the face of old Lionel Holland.

The invalid had changed terribly in that last shadow-shrouded year. His face had become deeply reticu-

lated, so that wrinkles shot from his eyes like the strands of spiderwebs. His mouth was a toothless black slit in corpse-white skin, and his pallid face was framed by the dank locks of silver hair that hung below his brow. Luke, gazing upon that countenance, was reminded of the mummied visage of some long-interred Mongol conqueror.

Old Lionel was dressed in a black robe that hung limply over his dwarfed, stooping shoulders. It was embroidered at the breast with a crescent moon design in leprous silver. That was the only note of life in the figure—that and the old man's eyes.

They were blue and deep like the ice of polar seas, and they seemed tinged with a peculiar and disturbing awareness. Luke, meeting them, felt some of the elation ooze from his veins; the eyes gripped his gaze and held it as if in some way they had the power to drain all secrets from his mind. Two blue magnets, they were. Luke shuddered as he thought of what those eyes must have looked on in past moonless nights.

Abruptly he jerked back to consciousness. No time for fancies now, for he must act. The old man was speaking.

"Thank you, Luke," said Lionel Holland. His voice disconcerted the youth queerly; it seemed to come from far, far away—from some source infinitely behind the shrivelled lips purporting to utter the words.

"No trouble at all," Luke answered, forcing a smile.

"You have been most kind and patient with me of late," continued the aged recluse, quietly. His voice was a droning purr, but those searching eyes never left his nephew's face.

"I shall remember that kindness when I die, which will be very soon now—I am told."

*Told by what?* Luke shuddered at the thought.

"Soon I shall finish my experiments and will be ready to go."

**L**UKE couldn't keep his eyes from his uncle's hands. They were fumbling with the filled glass now. The long, skinny fingers twitched

like the tentacles of two tiny octopi. His uncle was "ready to go," in just a moment, if he would only raise that glass. In just a moment Luke would be free—free of those eyes which still stared ceaselessly into his own.

"You are so impatient, my boy," said the old man. Still that grim mockery lingered in his tones. "Too impatient, I fear. Too hasty. You really should think matters over before taking drastic steps. If you should ever get the idea of hastening my demise, for example, before I have completed my experiments, it would be impossible for you to escape. You realize I have learned many curious things."

He suspected! A pang of icy fear went through Luke. But no, his uncle was raising the glass to his lips. Three inches more and . . .

The hand holding the glass stopped in midair.

"Are you ill?" the old man demanded, staring at Luke. "You look like a corpse. What's the matter?"

"It's nothing," Luke muttered. Would the old fool never drink?

"Here!" Lionel reached out a slender, blue-veined hand to a nearby table and picked up a small glass tumbler. "Take some port with me before you faint, you ninny. Go on go on, pour it out," he commanded, as Luke hesitated. Was this some trap?

Apparently not, for although Luke watched carefully his uncle made no attempt to switch glasses. Instead he waited impatiently for Luke to finish pouring the red wine from the decanter. Together the two raised glasses to their lips. Only after Luke had drained the tumbler did he realize that his uncle's glass was still filled.

Instantly fear lanced through him. He put down the tumbler quickly, staring at his uncle with bloodshot eyes. The old man deliberately tilted his glass and poured his wine to the floor.

"Why did you cut the rope on the dumbwaiter?" he asked very gently. "Did you think you could murder me, Luke?"

A wizard. The old man was a wizard! He had stared into Luke's eyes with his own ice-blue orbs and read the secrets of the mind behind them. Lionel Holland was a wizard and this was proof. Something he had read swam into Luke's mind. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. . . ."

He tried to speak, but only a low, choking gasp came from his lips. Little flecks of foam appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"You fool, Luke." The old man's voice was mocking. "You're a superstitious, wicked fool, like the rest of your breed. Only I, the black sheep of the family—have had the strength to throw off the weakness in our blood. There's genius, but there's decadence, too. Your righteous ancestors were white sheep, bleating in their pulpits. I am a black sheep, and I have had the courage to learn that a black sheep can be sacrificed in return for certain boons. And now you, the last little superstitious, decadent white sheep, come seeking to slay me."

HE LAUGHED gently, and Luke knew he was quite mad. Luke was mad, too—he felt that something had happened to his body, numbing it to ice that bit like needles at his throat. He gasped: "Have you—poisoned me?"

"I took precautions. Poison? No, nothing as crude as that; not your stupid trick here. I've dealt with you in a manner I learned from my experiments. Experiments with life and death, Luke, and with that strange trace of life that remains after a body is dead. D'you know what tetanus is, Luke?"

The younger man did not answer. He was staring horrified at his uncle, his eyes all whites.

"I suppose you don't. It's a contraction of the muscles, like *rigor mortis*, only that comes after you're dead. That is—it usually does." Lionel Holland smiled, tapping the arm of his chair with withered fingers. "I wonder what poison you put in my glass, Luke? Strychnine? That causes tetanus, you know; tonic te-

tanus, in which all the muscles of the body are rigid. By experiment I found a drug much more effective than strychnine. It causes *rigor vitae*—the rigor of life rather than the rigor of death. Slowly your muscles become rigid, and your body becomes paralyzed. But not your brain, Luke. You'll be able to see and hear quite clearly—when they put you in your coffin."

A strangled cry burst from Luke's throat. For a moment he was no longer Luke Holland, product of the twentieth century—he was a fanatical Puritan, stamping out the black and evil foulness of witchcraft; the sin that the Scriptures cursed.

"You devil—you had powder at the bottom of the glass you gave me," he panted.

He lunged at Lionel Holland, his hands rising swiftly.

A mad rhythm jangled in his brain. As his fingers closed around the neck of the startled old man the rhythm screamed louder, into words.

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

Everything dissolved into a red haze, and nothing seemed to exist but his hands, closing very slowly around his uncle's throat. It was oddly difficult to move them, and they seemed strangely cold. He threw all his strength into the effort of sinking stiff fingers into the wrinkled flesh. It was queer his hands were so cold and stiff—very queer. He was surprised to hear himself laughing gently and quite insanelly. He forced himself to stop thinking and listen to the tune in his head as he choked and choked. . . .

Then it was very still. The only sound was the faint creaking of the chair as Luke shook his uncle's body back and forth. He did not see the blue pallor on the wrinkled face, nor the bulging, agonized eyes. He was trying to remember something. It was very important that he remember. Oh yes—he had it now. Something to do with a drug; with paralysis. What had Lionel said? "Slowly your muscles become rigid, and your body becomes paralyzed." His feet were cold, lifeless. And

his throat ached. Luke felt stiff all over.

Suddenly the haze cleared and he stared down at his hands gripping the wrinkled throat. He tried to relax his grip, remove his hands. And—he could not. His muscles were rigidly contrasted about the neck of the dead man, as though in *rigor mortis*.

Luke began to whimper like a hurt dog.

**A**N HOUR later Luke Holland still crouched over his uncle's corpse in the big dark room where now the shadows crept away to secret caverns in the night. Time after time he had attempted to free his fingers from their grisly embrace, but to no avail. They were deeply imbedded in the rapidly cooling flesh—ten white links in a necklace of death.

He wondered how long he had been lying here. Five minutes? No, an age, a century, seemed more accurate. The dull ache in his throat had increased, and the strange cold had penetrated his knees.

It was apparent that he could not free himself from the ghastly grip without tools to assist him. At the thought hope shot through him. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He must get rid of the body. A knife would pry his fingers free.

Luke tried to crawl to his feet, but fell heavily. His legs were encased in blocks of ice. Breathing in hoarse gasps, he hitched himself laboriously on his knees, painfully dragging his monstrous burden behind him. There seemed to be no knives in his uncle's room; he dared not waste time searching further.

Into the hall he crawled, dragging the ghastly prisoner between locked fingers. Down the great staircase he clambered. Almost at once he lost balance and plunged forward, wheezing. Down they came, dead and half-dead together. And slowly, slowly, Luke felt the icy tide of doom creep through his veins.

How could he handle the knife? His feet were useless; his hands trapped in their frightful grip of horror. Yet there remained his mouth;

he could grip the hilt of the knife in his teeth and pry his fingers free.

Blood smeared his face before he managed to drag a kitchen drawer from its place and let the cutlery cascade to the floor. There it was—a slender-bladed carving knife. Now—

He deliberately rolled over on the floor until his lips brushed the bone handle of the knife. The dull ache had subsided from his throat now, but there was a sensation of icy cold in his jaws. . . .

He could not open his mouth! The jaws were rigidly clenched! The muscles worked in hard knots, the knife lay mockingly against his lips, but he was powerless to grip it between his teeth. Whimpering, he tried to catch it between shoulder and cheek, but this was impossible. And all through his body the cold crept slowly. . . .

Luke knew then that this was the end. He could not leave the house, chained to the evidence of his crime. He could not eat, nor sleep, nor stand erect. He was as dead as the corpse between stiffened fingers; the corpse with the mocking face that seemed to smile upwards in triumphant appreciation of the grim jest.

What had the old wizard said? That Luke's body would become rigid and paralyzed. "But not your brain, Luke. You'll be able to see and hear quite clearly—when they put you in your coffin."

Luke visualized what searchers would find when at last they broke into the house. Two dead men, stiff in *rigor mortis*, the icy fingers of one sunk into the cold throat of the other. *But one of those men would be living within that dead shell. . . .*

"No!" gurgled the stricken murderer. "No!"

And he painfully rose to his knees, crawling along the floor with his grisly Nemesis dragging behind.

**H**E MADE the stairs, somehow; cut and bruised, with blood flowing sluggishly from wounds he could not feel. It took ages to ascend the staircase with his monstrous burden, and more than an hour to reach Lionel's room with the open windows

through which sea-borne twilight seeped.

The icy bonds were tight on Luke now. He could scarcely move his stiffened body, and the hideous bulk he dragged made his task almost an impossible one. Very slowly he crawled toward a window. He had to make it. There was only one way to break the bond, to sever his linkage with the dead. Only one way to kill himself and not be buried alive. A fall from a height would loose his fingers, kill him. He'd escape the wizard's planned vengeance yet.

Somehow Luke propped himself up against the wall, reached the window-sill with his knees, and dragged the smiling thing up beside him. Only the ghastly thrill of triumphing over his uncle animated him, for the cold was gripping his heart now, stopping it. Soon he would be merely a living mind in a dead body, unless he fell out into the street, quickly. He must.

He stared down between his fingers at the smiling sardonic face that leered insanely upwards. He felt it stiffen. Six hours dead, and *rigor mortis* was actually setting in on his uncle's body. It was nearly as stiff as his own. Luke wanted to smile, but his face was ice. And now he had to will himself to lean forward and topple out, dragging the stiff body with him. He had to. He felt the cold stop his heart. Now he was only a living mind in a dead body.

He leaned, plunged—tried to drag the body after him.

NEXT morning the hastily-summoned police broke into the Holland mansion and invaded the second-story bedchamber. There they found what had attracted a crowd to the streets below—the body of a man, dangling from a window, hands clutched in an inflexible grip of death about the throat of Lionel Holland. Lionel Holland's body had become wedged in the narrow window-opening; *rigor mortis* had kept it from becoming dislodged and squeezing through. Apparently *rigor mortis* had held Luke's grip firm on the dead throat of his uncle so that he had hung there in midair, attached to the rigid body of the old man.

The mystery was never solved, and the undertaker seemed singularly disinclined to speak of what measures he had taken to loosen the hands of Luke from their iron grip.

The two were buried with modest obsequies a few days later. The funeral was for the most part quiet and dignified, as befitted services for one of the oldest families in the region. A brief disturbance, however, was occasioned when a youthful artist attending the funeral suddenly went into hysterics over the rigid smile on Lionel Holland's face—and because of a certain look he swore he glimpsed in the glazed eyes of Luke Holland as the coffin-lid swung into place.