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THE HEADLESS HORROR

By ROBERT EUGENE ULMER

WHAT makes my hand tremble so? You wonder why one so young should appear so old and haggard? And the gray in my hair—the lines of my face? Perhaps, too, you notice a furtive, hunted manner about my movements? Nervousness, my friends. You would like to hear about it?

Well, then, gentlemen, I shall tell you the story, for the rain is beating without and we cannot travel in such weather. Come closer, and hug the fire, for the tale of the headless horror will make your blood run cold.

You must understand that I have always been very superstitious, with a marked tendency toward spiritualism and the pursuit of weird ambitions and hobbies. One of these, in my younger days, involved a human head—that of a murderer famed in history, the assassin of a national figure. This murderer had been hanged, and the head, horribly severed, was sent to the government for preservation. It happened that I was the proprietor of an embryo museum; and when I heard of the head, I resolved to add it to my collection, foreseeing the big help it would mean for my institution.

However, I had competition. One of my friends, engaged in the same work, also desired the head. So we both set out together, each resolved to possess the prize. There was nothing of bitterness in our relations, for Bergman and I had been associated,

in friendly intercourse, for many years, and always maintained sincere mutual regard. Our common desire at this time partook of good-natured rivalry, and nothing of ill-will. The one who obtained the head would have the other's good wishes.

We came to our destination. After much formality and red tape we finally were permitted to view the head, preserved in a large jar of alcohol. The murderer in life had been a pronounced brunette, with a silken mustache, glistening like a raven's back; brows of fierce concentration and force; and hair that was thick and wavy. He had been a handsome fellow, evidently; but the action of the preservative had turned the countenance to a ghastly yellow hue; the hair, brows, and mustache were a faded henna. What made the thing more repulsive was that the container was too small for the head, and the nose was pressed flat against the glass, while the staring eyes had taken on a watery, colorless complexion. The neck, crudely severed and mangled, was marked with swollen and burst arteries, while sections of the windpipe and other organs streamed from the ragged edges, floating gently in the fluid.

I regarded the object with superstitious veneration. I confess, too, a creepy sensation, and a strengthening of my occult sensibilities.

We then opened our subject. It was days before we persuaded the

government officials to listen favorably, but they at last decided to sell the head to the highest bidder. Bergman waged a hard fight, but I won eventually, and my competitor shook my hand good-naturedly, smiling to conceal his disappointment. We parted on the best of terms.

When I returned, I took my treasure into the laboratory, to prepare it, later, for display, and locked it in a cabinet, resolving to sleep and live in the building. I could run no risk of losing my valuable acquisition.

For some time following I gave myself up to a prolonged study of the history of the man whose head I now possessed, and in the course of my reading was startled to find reference to a threat made by the condemned murderer, that he would return, after death, and claim his head, no matter where, or with whom, it chanced to be. The threat was regarded, of course, as the child of a disordered mind; but upon me it produced a deep and lasting impression. The head assumed new significance, and night after night have I, surrounded by freaks and strange objects of all kinds, sat in silent meditation, gazing intently into the grotesquely distorted features of that long-dead criminal, and striving to fathom the secrets entombed within that grisly skull. I found myself looking forward confidently to the fulfilment of the murderer's prophecy; at every trifling sound I started; ordinary events were cloaked in mystery and ominous import; I saw and heard things that no other mortal recognized, until I felt myself tottering on the verge of madness.

There was one other person, incidentally, to whom the head was an object of superstitious terror. This was my only assistant, an old negro who had been in the family for years, and the one being, outside of myself, who knew that I possessed the head. Mose never looked at it without a rising of every hair on his cranium.

ONE night I retired as usual amid the fantastic relics of my collection, to my bed in a dark corner of the building. The moonlight shone through the window and relieved the darkness with ghostly luminance, through which strange faces peered and leered at me from other nooks and crevices. Grotesque mummies seemed to live again in the mysterious atmosphere, holding silent communion. With all this, I believed my state of mind to be normal. My nerves were keyed to highest tension.

Sleep was wooed with difficulty, and my eyes constantly wandered to the cabinet wherein was the head. From the partial darkness of its confinement, the face seemed to stare at me, with a leering grin, jeering silently at my apprehensions. In that moment I heartily wished that the murderer would return and claim the thing.

As the night wore along and sleep still did not come, I arose. As I did so, I noticed a strange quality in the air. Some occult sense was aroused and seemed to respond to a quality I could not define. Puzzled, I glanced around. I was alone, save for Mose, sleeping soundly in his corner. All was as usual. Nothing missing, nor misplaced. The sensation grew until I was conscious of a subtle, unseen presence somewhere close at hand. Long before I saw or heard anything of the horror that followed, I sensed its approach, and was waiting.

When I finally heard the closing of a door, though the sound was guarded, I concealed myself in a dark recess and waited, every sense, physical and occult, alert, convinced that the murderer had come. A thrill shuddered through me, but I waited silently, my eyes fastened upon the door through which the unseen must enter. In the passage outside all was semi-gloom. Then I saw—O God!—with a wave of

horror, a huge, misshapen form before the entrance. Nothing of it was definite, and its vague impression of general deformity made me shiver. Where the head should have been, I discerned nothing but a shapeless mass of heavy shroud; and it was this amorphous quality, this indefiniteness of form and feature, this quality of shapelessness, that struck mortal terror to my soul. I trembled in apprehension, and was bathed in icy perspiration.

Meanwhile, the silent thing without was preparing to enter. The thought of being in the same room with it wakened a frenzy of horror in me, and I wildly burst from my concealment, staggered blindly through the gloom waving a revolver, and made for the horror; but before I reached the door, the object of my frenzy disappeared as if by magic: the shrouded form seemed to melt into the surrounding darkness, and when I dashed into the corridor it was empty.

I was fully convinced now of the suzerainty of the murderer's dying threat, and held not the slightest doubt as to the identity of my midnight visitor: but I resolved to fight for the possession of the head, though it cost my life. Just how I was to battle against the terrible and subtle powers of the supernatural, I had no definite idea: but I distinctly recall making an expedition, the following evening, into town and purchasing a supply of ammunition.

It was not yet 7 o'clock when I left, and I promised Mose I would not be long, for he dreaded the idea of being alone with that hideous head. However, the news of my adventure had preceded me, through what medium I do not know, and I was forced to retail an account of it to every person that waylaid me. By the time I returned it was well past 11, and silence had long since settled over the little rural community.

JUST as I was within half a square of the museum, a dreadful cry of mortal terror rang upon the air. I burst into a run.

The first thing I saw on dashing into the building was Mose, struggling to his feet. His face was livid, and his eyes were staring wildly, as if he had seen a ghost. His knees knocked, and it was some time before he could speak coherently.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy!" he groaned, with chattering teeth. "I done seen de debbil! He bust in here 'bout fifteen minutes ago, an' wake ol' Mose up. All wrapped in black, so's I couldn't see de face of him. He rush right past me, and knock poor Mose to de floor. He—he in dar—in de museum, suh!"

I waited for no more, but burst into the museum. What I saw halted me in horror.

My visitor of the preceding night stood before the cabinet, and in the gloom I could see that his hands were opening the locked doors; and they then lifted the head, jar and all, from the shelf. As if unconscious of my presence, the hideous thing removed the cover, plunged its shrouded hands into the alcohol, and dragged forth the head, dripping and clammy.

Fascinated, I saw the concealing shroud fall away, and beheld, with a thrill, the ragged, gory base upon which a head once rested. There stood the awful object, so grotesque in its headless being, proceeding about its work with the method and surety of a normal man. Nothing of halting in its movements, for it seemed that hidden eyes directed them; but when I saw the head lifted and set upon the gory base, my horror at the fantastic sight forced a cry from my lips.

The figure started, and carried the head swiftly to the pit of its arm, protecting it, evidently, from any onslaught of mine, and then came toward me, menacingly.

All my valiant determination fled. Utterly unnerved, I turned and sped like the wind, the horrible thing pursuing. The building was three stories in height; we were on the first floor. Up the steps I dashed, turning frequently to see my awful pursuer gliding, rather than running, swiftly after me, with the dogged determination of a grim messenger of death. In the pit of an arm the head rested, and I thought its sightless eyes were fixed upon me, and were directing the shrouded body in its pursuit. Not a sound from the flying feet, nothing to indicate the slightest human quality. I dashed ever upward, from step to step, my voice paralyzed by fear. How interminably long each flight of stairs seemed! Though the entire affair did not, I suppose, occupy more than fifteen minutes it was an eternity of terror to me.

I fled blindly on, and it followed relentlessly, until the roof was reached. I fled its length, but was forced to halt at the edge. There was no other roof adjacent, and I could not jump the three stories without being killed. Death was both before and behind me, and in a flash I chose the latter.

WHIRLING, like a wolf at bay, I faced the grim phantom bearing down upon me. Savagely I threw out

my revolver hand, though mechanically realizing that shots could have no effect upon a thing of spirit, and fired—once, twice, three times. Blinded and temporarily deranged by fear, I failed, at first, to note the halt of my enemy, as my first shot rang out. After pressing the trigger for the last time, I saw the deformed horror sway, stagger, and then crash heavily to the roof. A strange sound of splintering wood penetrated my dazed faculties, and, amazed, I stood staring at the fallen figure as it uttered a strangled groan and relapsed into deathly silence.

When I finally plucked up sufficient courage, I bent, drew back a fold of the heavy shroud, and started away in horror.

Before me was the face of Bergman, my old competitor, distorted in death's agony.

In a flash I saw it all—the utter duplicity of the man, his clever deceit, and the subtle trick upon my superstitious nature, by which he hoped to possess the head. The false shoulders he had worn were of wood, very light, painted realistically, crushed in the fall.

The head I returned to the government; the museum I deserted. I am a nervous wreck.

Such is the tale of the headless horror.

