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WEIRD TALES

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A Short and Terrible Tale of Murder

The Headless Spokesman

By IRVIN MATTICK

Author of "Red and Black"

FOR the sixth time Slater looked at the clock on the shelf. He took the ax from his knees and tip-toed across the rough floor of the cabin to a door of an adjoining room. Listening intently he heard the deep breathing of a drunken man sleeping within.

Twenty minutes had passed now, since his son Drayton and old Settler Hurt had tottered across the big mess-room of the hut and each gone, dead drunk, to his own room to sleep off the hootch they had guzzled. The three men had celebrated the lordly haul of pan gold they had washed from the river that winter.

In little cloth sacks the dust and pebbles of the precious metal were stacked under the boards of the mess-room floor.

Slater had put up to his son the proposition of removing old Hurt, but the son had refused to kill, had even winced at being an accomplice to any such affair. So old man Slater gathered the three of them that night in a drinking bout.

Himself sipping tea from a bottle, Slater had watched his son Drayton, who was unaware of his father's murderous plan, drink the hootch with Settler Hurt from the big jug until the two men were beyond their senses and had reeled to their separate bunk chambers.

And now, the ax in his hands, Slater stood before old Hurt's door, listening.

Why should Hurt have one third of the gold when Slater and his own boy could have each one half of it?

What if Drayton was afraid to kill Hurt? A shot—a gun accidentally discharged—a razor-lipped ax falling from a bracket—and old Slater had chosen the ax.

Twenty minutes was ample time for a boozed man to be fast asleep.

Slater was now inside of Hurt's room, closing the door behind him as cautiously and soundlessly as he had opened it. The room was inky black with the darkness, but a bit of good fortune was with Slater.

Through a tear in the window-shade of heavy paper a single strip of moonlight shone, and this fell straight across the sleeping bunk. The sleeper's face was turned from Slater, and the moon lay appropriately on the sun-brownèd nape of the drunken man's neck, just below the unkempt fringe of hair on his head.

Slater raised the keen ax to his shoulder and stepped toward the snoring man on the rough wooden bunk, to within a full swing of the weapon. Like a huge chalk mark the moon drew its white death-line across the sleeping man's neck, and the next second a purplish froth bubbled in that line of light.

Slater yanked the heavy ax from its dent in the bunk board. With another swing of the chopper he left a blood-weltering slot between the head and body. Then he stepped back to watch the gore from the torso mix with that oozing from the head arteries. A coagulating mass boiled and spurted about in the ribbon of moonlight where Slater had struck and beheaded a man.

Then Slater turned to re-enter the big messroom. He wanted to pull up the floor boards and estimate very carefully the gold which now belonged half to himself and half to his son.

Someone knocked outside on the door to the cabin.

Slater viewed the decapitated body on the bunk, then stepped back to the messroom. He saw the bottle partly filled with a brown liquid next to a fat-bellied jug on the table.

He started to take these away, when the knock on the door was repeated.

"Who's out there?"

"Me, Slater; I just came up from the forks to borrow some of your flour."

Slater opened the door and admitted Yank DuPerret, another prospector in the region, who camped three miles down-stream.

DuPerret walked straight to the table with the jug and bottle, and with a smile of greeting on his weathered face he tipped the bottle to his lips and sucked one big mouthful from the neck, then turned and spouted the liquid from his teeth.

"Dammit, what a swill! Phew!"

Slater saw that DuPerret had taken a swig of the stale tea.

"That's tea, neighbor. Whisky's in the jug."

"Tea?"

"Yeah—I drink it sometimes."

"And do you bottle it?"

"When I make too much at a time, yes."

Slater fidgeted a bit, trying hard to conceal his agitation. In the dim light from the single oil lamp on a bracket near the fireplace, the men looked silently at each other, only as men can look at each other in a country where gold is scratched from the earth and hidden again in rude huts where other men can not find it.

A door was banged shut in the cabin and Slater stole a guarded glance in the direction of his son's bunkroom. Then DuPerret laughed.

"I know you've got a fortune hidden here somewhere, but I'm not after it. Flour is what I want. And I'll test the jug, too."

DuPerret put the nose of the jug to his lips, turned back his head and let a few gulps of the hootch gurgle into his throat.

"That's more like," DuPerret exclaimed as he put down the whisky, satisfied.

Slater shifted uneasily. He tried with his nostrils to smell if there was a trace of gore in the cabin.

"Now, Slater, you let me have some flour and I'll clear for home. My stuff's comin' up from the post in three days and I'll fetch it back to you then. And say, by the way, I dropped my ax into the slough this morning, and I'm out of wood. I see you're supplied for a time. Can you give me your chopper a few days?"

Slater went to a covered box in the messroom and dipped some flour with his hands into an empty cartridge box. He was trying to think of a way to get the ax cleaned in Hurt's room before handing it to DuPerret, when . . . Why, here was opportunity! The devil spawned a scheme in the prospector's brain.

DuPerret, here at Hurt's cabin just after the murder—his wheel tracks in the mud — the ax, red with Hurt's blood, found in DuPerret's wagon . . . They weren't so technical up here in the pan country: everybody knew that DuPerret was

poor and that there was gold aplenty in Hurt's cabin. The ax and the murder and DuPerret's wagon tracks—it would look mighty funny.

A smile crept through Slater's countenance but died again before it reached his eyes.

"Sure thing, DuPerret; you can have my ax, as soon as I tie up this box. By George, there's no string in the house. I strung it all up on a nail out in the stable. Take the lamp out there and get me a couple of pieces for this box. I'll put the ax in your wagon while you're gone."

DuPerret took the oil lamp from its bracket and went to the stable for a length of string.

Slater made sure DuPerret was far enough toward the stable not to catch sight of the smear on the ax blade when he should run out with it to the wagon and put it under the seat. In the darkness Slater ran to Hurt's door. As he opened it he looked instantly toward the bunk where he had left the murdered man bleeding.

Settler Hurt's body was gone from the bunk!

IN THE full glare of the moon, now that the paper shade had been torn away from the window, Slater saw a pool of black glistening matter stain the bunk boards at about the spot where the man's head had been severed with the ax. But the bunk was unoccupied!

Slater backed through the door, away from Hurt's room. As he reached the center of the messroom, Hurt's voice came deeply with a grave tremor from the shadowy doorway of the sleeping chamber.

"Milton Slater!"

DuPerret, returning now from the stable, the chimney lamp flickering in the wind, called to Slater as he neared the door of the cabin.

"There ain't no string out there, Slater."

"Milton Slater!" Settler Hurt's deep-toned voice boomed again in the darkness.

DuPerret came in and put the lamp on the table. He saw Slater in the middle of the room, pale and trembling.

Then DuPerret looked toward the doorway from which Settler Hurt had just called. In that oblong of darkness, the light from the smoking lamp-chimney dimly lighting the gruesome thing, stood a headless body.

It dangled heavily and awkwardly, as if weary from being propped up on its limp rubbery legs. The top of the neck, a raw stump butting up from the bloody-shirted shoulders, was a horrible mass. A gigantic mushroom it seemed, with the pasty coagulation of its life blood swollen and fringed about the headless stump.

Just beyond the doorway the awful thing swayed unsteadily, and then from its invisible throat came Settler Hurt's stentorian voice.

"Milton Slater. I have returned from the dead. I have come back from hell, from my bunk where you slew me. I have risen to accuse you of murder."

DuPerret saw Slater fall to his knees, saw his face turn stony and his body shiver with a terror that transformed the brawny prospector to an abject shriveling coward.

"Milton Slater."

Hurt's words came as from the pit of a grave.

"I come to throw the proof of your crime at your feet, here in the presence of one who will see that you are punished. Milton Slater, stand up!"

Slater was groveling now, clutching at the floor as one saving himself from drowning.

"Milton Slater," the headless body shouted, "stand up! This is your hour of judgment."

Terrorized, DuPerret beheld Slater. Slowly the man raised himself from the floor but shut his eyes, put his

arms before them, and stood shuddering against the far wall of the messroom straight across from the specter that confronted him.

"Look at me!" the headless corpse commanded.

Slater kept his eyes covered.

"Milton Slater, you coward—look at me now!"

The man took his arms from his face but held his eyes shut.

"Look at me!" the headless specter screamed.

Slowly Slater opened his eyes and gazed at the awful thing. Then he picked at his face with ungoverned hands.

"Put down your hands, Slater," the decapitated corpse shouted. "I can see you, without my head. Put down your hands!"

Slater put his weaving arms down at his sides. DuPerret beheld the sinister tableau.

Then the voice of Settler Hurt boomed forth again with a finality of conviction.

"Milton Slater, now you shall be punished. Stand still, and look."

A moment of silence hung in the dimly lit cabin room. Then an ax swung out from Hurt's room. Through the air it flew and clattered to the floor at Slater's feet.

"That's the ax you killed me with, Slater. Let DuPerret use it, but ask him first if he wants an ax that you swung clear through my neck—through this neck you see now. Ask him, Slater."

DuPerret saw the brown stain on the ax wedge. Another minute of silence ensued. Then Slater put up a whimpering.

Suddenly a spherical thing, a lopsided ball with a matting of hair, was shot out over the headless body. From the doorway of Hurt's chamber it came, flying straight at Slater.

The thing hit with a thud on the wall just above Slater's head. It came down, bounced on Slater's shoulder

and bumped to the floor. As the unwieldy shape hit the hard floor boards, it split open like a melon.

DuPerret cried out.

"Slater! For Christ's sake, that's Drayton's head on the floor—that's your son's head—Slater!"

Slater shrieked and covered his eyes.

When DuPerret again looked toward the doorway, the headless corpse was on the floor. Settler Hurt, gigantic, black with rage, his knotted arms bare and menacing, stood in the messroom beside the body. Slater was on the floor whining, clutching the hair on his son's shattered head. Then Settler Hurt let loose his words.

"DuPerret, he wanted the gold for his son and himself. He got us drunk tonight, drank some fake booze, tea or coffee, himself. I and his son were so full of hooch we got our own room doors mixed. Drayton went into my room, I into his. I woke up and saw my mistake. Going through the door between our chambers, in my own room I found Drayton's body on my bunk, his head severed. I tore down the paper shade to make sure I wasn't snaky from the hooch, and there I found Slater's ax. Then I knew. Slater meant to kill me, and killed his son. It sobered me, that did. After I heard you were here I did the rest with Drayton's body in the doorway. And now, Slater—"

Hurt curled his lips for a final imprecation upon the murderer, but the sight before him stifled speech.

Old Slater, brushing his son's head, was singing a soft lullaby with a breaking tune that betrayed departed reason. Fondling the horrid shape, he planted kisses on his son's ghastly lips.

Settler Hurt groped for the whisky jug and gulped as he watched the man on the floor.

"Leave some for me," DuPerret whispered as he put his hands on the upturned jug.