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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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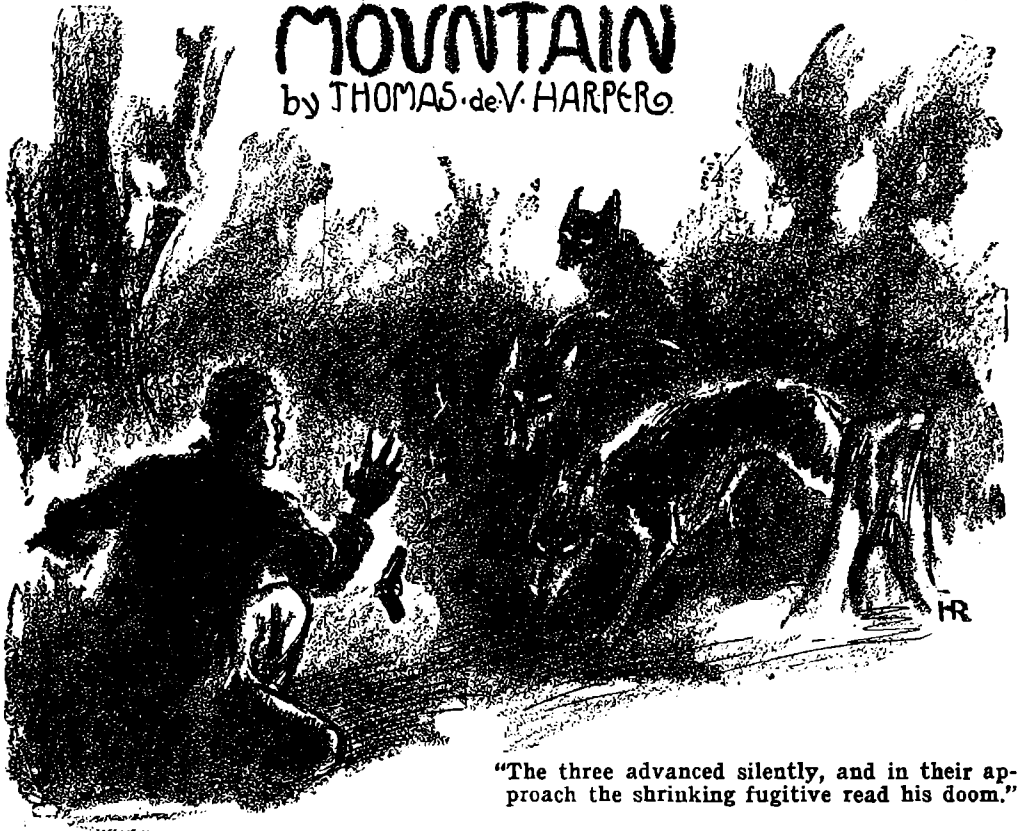
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The HERMIT OF CHEMEKETA MOUNTAIN

by THOMAS de V. HARPER



"The three advanced silently, and in their approach the shrinking fugitive read his doom."

CHEMEKETA MOUNTAIN is a wild bit of densely wooded country in the heart of a thinly settled farming district. In the valley at the foot of its eastern slope is a small hamlet of forty or fifty souls which forms the business and social center of the district. The farmers, mostly frugal, hard-working Bohemians, eke out a meager living from the small truck gardens and orchards which constitute their holdings, and help to keep body and soul together by working as day laborers part of the time, while their wives and families labor in the fields. Three days a week the younger children attend the district school, and on Sunday there is church in the village. It is a life of hard work,

little pleasure, and back of it all the sinister shadow of Chemeketa Mountain, dark and silent against the setting sun.

There had always been a deal of mystery about the Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain. High up in the forest near the top of the mountain he lived, he and his two dogs. He was a tall, gaunt man, with a ragged, unkempt beard, long, tangled hair, and cold, green-gray eyes that in moments of anger glowered in their deep sockets in a malevolent, unwinking stare. His clothing was filthy and ragged, and was kept in place by bits of string, rusty nails in lieu of buttons, and a frayed rope for a belt.

Where he came from no one knew;

how he made a living was also an unfathomed secret. His shack was high up on the mountain, in the heart of the timber, surrounded by a small patch of half-cleared ground, set off from the forest by a rail fence which seemed always on the verge of falling apart, but somehow never quite accomplished it.

His only companions were two great shaggy wolf-dogs, vicious, evil-looking brutes with red slaving jaws, whose appearance as they would come charging up to the fence on the approach of a stranger was enough to strike terror into the stoutest heart.

If you chanced on the hermit and spoke to him his lips would draw back in a snarl, disclosing vicious, pointed fangs rather than teeth, and his words came in a low, rumbling growl that carried a menace in the tone as well as, usually, in the words.

The natives generally regarded him as having kinship with the two dogs, and believed all three were in league with the devil. They regarded the mountain with fear and awe; and while some drew their wood from the edge of the forest, none was bold enough to venture into its depths after sundown.

It was said that the two dogs ran wild in the woods at night, and woe betide the luckless traveler whose trail they held. True, there were no actual disappearances which could be charged against the brutes, but this was because none tempted the devil, whose agents they were, by venturing into the woods after dark. In the daytime they apparently stayed at or near the hermit's shack, but at night—ah! that was different.

As for the hermit himself, he was possessed of the evil eye, said the natives. If he looked you squarely in the face your cow would become dry; the water in your well would be polluted; and numerous other misfortunes would surely make your

days unhappy and your nights full of fear. Your honest farmer would look fearfully over his shoulder, crossing himself the while, as he explained this to you.

One day there came to the hamlet a stranger from the big city down the valley near the sea. A small, furtive, rat-faced chap he was; he appeared on the street but seldom, having obtained a room at Mrs. Sezura's, in which he stayed except when it was absolutely necessary for him to be out. When he did appear on the dusty road which passed for the main street, he walked with his head down and his cap pulled well over his eyes; and if by chance a person happened to approach him suddenly from behind he would find immediate reason to back up against a wall, while his right hand would seek his coat pocket.

After a few days he began to be on the street a little more frequently, and gradually struck up a speaking acquaintance with some of the men who frequented the grocery store corner of an evening. He was reticent regarding his motive in coming to the village, but seemed very much interested in the geography of the surrounding country, asking numerous questions regarding distances to the next towns, the farm-houses by the way; and the like.

It was inevitable, of course, that he should hear of the Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain. Indeed, he had shown a good deal of interest in the topography of the mountain, the depth and denseness of the forest, and the trails through the woods, before anyone thought of the hermit. Or maybe they thought of him, but hesitated to speak; the stranger was from outside, and would not understand.

But eventually someone mentioned the hermit, and described his peculiarities; how he lived alone, except for his two dogs; spoke also of

the ferocity of the dogs, and of the malevolent powers of their master.

The stranger listened, and a ghost of a smile passed across his face, to be instantly repressed. Casually, as if it were a passing thought and a matter of no importance, he suggested that it might be possible that the hermit had a miser's hoard of gold in his little shack on the mountain, and that his apparent poverty was a subterfuge for the purpose of misleading the villagers, while the dogs were purposely kept vicious and his own reputation for supernatural evil powers carefully cultivated purely as a means of insuring undisturbed enjoyment of his hidden wealth.

But no, they said, this could not be; the man was known to have the evil eye. Why, look you, Stanislaus Mathewzewiski, who lived nearest of all the village to the wood, had suddenly come upon the hermit one day face to face just inside the forest, and what had happened? That very night a loose stone on the road had turned under his foot and he had fallen, breaking an arm. And young Hrdlika, who went into the forest with his rifle for a deer, and having wandered farther than he intended—you know what happened to him? Two days later Matilda Czerny, whom he was to have married the following month, ran away to the big city by the sea and married an outsider, a stranger whom she had known for no more than two or three years. Yes, indeed, the hermit had the evil eye, no doubt about it.

As he walked back to his room that night the stranger's ratlike eyes continually sought the black depths of the forest on Chemeketa Mountain, which seemed to hang over the village like a shadow of evil. At his gate he paused and stared long at the summit of the mountain, and then, like one who has come to a definite decision, he nodded his head a couple of times, an ugly light shin-

ing in his eyes, then slowly turned and went into the house.

IT WAS two days later that he left his room in the morning, strolling through the village carelessly, as if bound for nowhere in particular, and speaking casually to such of his few acquaintances as he met, until he reached the edge of town. Then he became more circumspect, and was extremely careful that none should see him from there until he plunged into the forest. About sundown, if you had been watching, you might have seen him return, keeping carefully out of sight until well within the village, and returning immediately to his room.

Matt Borlitz, who had a small garden patch on the edge of the village near the forest, came into the post-office the next day with a strange story. He had been aroused about midnight by the frenzied barking of his two fox terriers, and had got up to ascertain the trouble and quiet the dogs. They were on the porch, and as he opened the door they dashed into the house, very evidently in terror of some danger without. Borlitz stepped out on the porch, but at first could see nothing to cause the dogs to act so strangely. As he stared into the darkness, however, three great wolf-dogs suddenly broke out of the forest and passed down the road toward the town. They ran silently, looking neither to the right nor the left; their eyes gleamed like coals of fire, and from where he stood he could see the froth dripping from their slavering jaws as they sped by on their mysterious trail. Borlitz's dogs, ordinarily noisy, fearless animals, cowered and whimpered in apparent abject terror as the spectral figures passed and vanished around a bend in the road.

When he returned to the house Borlitz put the dogs out, much against their will. He heard nothing more from them during the night, but when morning came he found

them both dead, their throats torn out and their bodies mangled.

This was the first of three nights of terror for the village. It was the next night after Borlitz's dogs were killed that Katrina, the little twelve-year-old daughter of Thaddeus Polonski, left the house about 9 o'clock to go to the spring, about fifty yards down the road, to draw a bucket of water against its use in the morning. She was gone a little longer than usual, and then came dashing back to the house, hysterical with terror.

She told how she had drawn the water and was just leaving the spring when three great beasts came rushing down out of the forest. As she crouched, terror-stricken, in the shadow of the little shed over the spring, they rushed silently down the road toward the town and disappeared. The child was too frightened to move from her hiding-place for a time, until she finally mustered up sufficient courage to run across the open space between the spring and the house, arriving breathless with fear, and sobbed out her story to her father.

The next morning Serge Hrdlika, who was the father of the young man whose love affair had terminated so unhappily, and who lived about a hundred yards down the road, found a week-old Holstein calf dead in front of his house, killed in much the same manner as had been Borlitz's dogs the night before.

The men of the village met at the grocery store the next day to see what, if anything, could be done about it. It was pretty generally believed that they must be the hermit's dogs, suddenly taken to straying farther afield than had been their custom. True, he was only known to have two, but it was not impossible that he had recently acquired a third.

A great deal of talk was indulged in, and Borlitz, Polonski, and Hrdlika were especially anxious for

something to be done, but the meeting broke up without anything being accomplished when it developed that no one was willing to run the risk of calling on the hermit for the purpose of persuading him to restrain his dogs.

IT WAS that evening, just before dusk, that the second stranger arrived. He was a big, determined-looking chap, with an indefinable something in his appearance that caused Gorgas Pichutzki, the town toper, to hasten home at his first glimpse of the newcomer and bury in a deep hole in his radish patch the gallon jug of hard cider which he had kept in his kitchen. It seemed safer to take no chances.

But the stranger was apparently not interested in Pichutzki's cider or its age or potency. He immediately sought the grocery store, and in the back room held a short conference with Jan Chezik, the proprietor, who was also postmaster and town constable. During the conversation he exhibited certain papers which apparently gained him considerable respect on the part of Jan. He also showed that gentlemen two photographs; they were a full face and profile view of the rat-faced stranger, and at the bottom of each picture was a number.

When he stepped out on the street again the newcomer proceeded directly to Mrs. Sezura's, where he inquired for her roomer. The good woman informed him that the man he sought was out, but would surely return shortly, and would he care to wait? He would, he replied grimly. "And he did, in Mrs. Sezura's 'sitting-room.'"

Now, it so happened that just about the time he stood at Mrs. Sezura's door, the man for whom he was asking was coming up the street to the house. When he saw his landlady's visitor, he cursed under his breath, and immediately effaced himself from the

scene by stepping behind a convenient tree, where he remained until the big man had entered the house. Then he retreated back down the street and kept well out of sight of the house until after dark.

His room was on the ground floor, and about 9 that night, when there was no one on the street, he returned and entered the room through a window. He struck no light, and moved with extreme caution, being careful to make no noise. He quickly gathered up a few things which he made into a small, compact bundle, slipped out of the window, and keeping carefully in the shadow, left the town and plunged into the darkness of the forest on Chemeketa Mountain.

His many questions regarding the surrounding country had been in the way of providing for just such a contingency as this, and his plans were all formed. As he neared the top of the mountain he paused for a moment to rest, and the thought of the hermit came to him.

With the thought came a grim smile; there was no danger of any interruption as he passed the place now; no, indeed.

Those doddering fools in the village, with their superstitious talk of the "evil eye"! True, the old man's eyes did gleam wickedly, like two coals of fire, when—what was that? Bah! Nerves! Mustn't let this stuff "get his goat." He reached in his pocket for a cigarette—there it was again! Two flaming red eyes in the path ahead of him! Could it be that the old man—no! For God's sake, what was it?

A long, lean, gray phantom shape that advanced slowly, noiselessly, down the trail; and with his blood turning to ice in his veins he saw coming slowly toward him a great wolf-dog, larger than any he had ever seen, with foam-flecked jaws and an almost human expression of malevolent triumph in the creature's blazing

eyes. And the gleaming eyes and snarling lips, God help him, were those of the Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain!

As he stared, paralyzed with terror, the brute was joined by two others; they were possibly not quite so large as their apparent leader, but they were every bit as awe-inspiring. Together the three advanced, silently, noiselessly, and in their relentless approach the shrinking fugitive read his doom as surely as if it were written with letters of fire against the blackness of the forest.

In frantic terror he suddenly whipped out a revolver and emptied it in the direction of the approaching brutes. The six shots had no effect whatever, and with a despairing curse that was half a shriek of terror he flung the gun at them, and turned and fled at full speed back through the forest toward the village. And following him in a noiseless, effortless lope that slowly, surely lessened the distance between them, the three phantom hounds relentlessly held the trail.

About midnight the big stranger who waited in Mrs. Sezura's "sitting-room" made arrangements with that worthy woman for the use of her spare bedroom for the rest of the night.

Came morning, and with it Matt Borlitz, fearfully crossing himself as he told of the hideously mangled body that he had found almost at his doorstep. The news soon came to the ears of the big stranger, and he, with a number of the villagers, returned with Borlitz to the little farm at the edge of the wood.

THE body was literally torn to pieces, but identification was not difficult; the man had been a subject of considerable interest in the small community, and his clothing, general build, and other details made recog-
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The Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain

(Continued from page 477)

dition a simple matter in spite of the terrible condition of the body.

The big stranger, taking mysterious articles from his pockets, knelt down beside the body, and in a minute arose with prints of the victim's fingers, which he compared with papers in his possession, after which he announced that the man was a desperate criminal, for whom a considerable reward was offered, "dead or alive." He intimated that Borlitz would be entitled to a share in the reward, but Matt crossed himself fervently, and vowed he would have none of it.

But regardless of whether or not the man was a criminal with a price on his head, and may have richly deserved his fate, one serious feature could not be overlooked. This was that the hermit's dogs had suddenly become a serious menace to the community, and something would have to be done about it.

The committee which was formed to call on the hermit that afternoon included the big detective, the town doctor, the postmaster, several of the older and more influential men of the village, and last, but by no means least, the priest. Indeed, several of those on the committee vowed they would not so much as enter the forest unless he were with them, and even then it is said that charms, warranted to counteract the effects of the evil eye if judiciously employed, were secretly carried by several members of the committee.

But, at any rate, they started, bravely enough at first; the big detective, who scoffed at their fears, led the way, with the priest walking beside him to show him the trail. As they advanced up the mountain the conversation became quieter; a noise in the thicket, or the sudden rustle of

a bird overhead, would result in an effort on the part of the group to keep more closely together, and the man of God at the head of the band was called on more frequently for spiritual reassurance. This he gave, willingly enough; but it was noted that on one or two occasions, as they drew near the hermit's place, his voice may have trembled a little, and he was observed to cross himself quite frequently, and with possibly a little more fervor than usual.

Nearing the cabin one of the group picked up a revolver, with six empty shells in the chambers. This was passed from hand to hand, and at least one of the group claimed to have seen it in the dead man's possession.

They at last came out on the little clearing, and paused at the dilapidated fence. The detective had volunteered to do the talking, since he claimed to be undismayed by the prospect of facing the hermit's evil eye, and also since he was especially interested in the death of the man he had come to the village to seek. There was no protest at his taking the lead in the negotiations.

There was no one in sight in the little cleared space surrounding the cabin, and the thing that impressed itself almost immediately on the minds of all present was the absence of the dogs. Invariably on the approach of strangers they had always charged up to the fence, threatening annihilation to trespassers, but now there was no sign of them whatever. Nor of the hermit himself.

The detective called a couple of times from where they stood at the fence, and receiving no answer, announced that he was going in. He climbed the fence, walked across the field, and disappeared behind the shack. A moment later he reappeared and motioned to the group to come to him, and, after some hesitation, with two or three of the bolder ones leading the way, the committee crossed the field.

As they arrived at the cabin the detective silently pointed to the ground, and there, cold in death, lay the bodies of the hermit and his two dogs. They were not a pretty sight; the birds had discovered them.

The doctor, after an examination of the bodies, said that they had all three been shot; the hermit apparently at close range, as the bullet had passed clear through the body and was found in his clothing. He showed it to them, and the detective, who knew about such things, said that it had undoubtedly been fired from the revolver they had found on the trail. And the doctor said that from the condition of the bodies they had been dead at least three or four days!

WHEN he returned to the big city by the sea the detective reported to his superiors that the man he sought had been killed on Chemeketa Mountain by timber wolves which had harassed the community for a few days previously. But if you go to Matt Borlitz, or Stanislaus Mathewzewiski, or even Gorgas Pichutzki, when he is sober, they will tell you that it had been fifteen years since a timber wolf had been seen in the country, and that there never has been one seen there since. And besides, timber wolves leave tracks, and howl, and there never was a track left or a sound made by the three phantom beasts who terrorized the village until they killed the murderer of the hermit and his two dogs.

The three phantoms have never been seen since. That was insured, however, when they buried the hermit and his two dogs. There is one sure way of keeping in its grave the body of a dead man who takes the form of a beast and roams the woods at night, or of a vicious wolf-dog which will not stay dead, and this was done. You will not be able to learn who did it, but before the graves were filled there was driven through the heart of each of them and deep into the ground beneath a long wooden stake.