

*This Uncanny Tale of Creeping Horror
Will Hold You Spellbound*

THE HERMIT OF GHOST MOUNTAIN

By C. FRANKLIN MILLER

IT'S gorgeous, sir! Perfectly gorgeous! Fascinating, too! There's something akin to madness in a storm like this. It makes me wild clear through. Thunder, lightning, wind, rain, roar and awfulness! I can scarcely keep from throwing myself right into the thick of it all; but that wouldn't be wise. Too many trees a-crashing down, and it's too dark to see. Besides, there's no telling how much of the slope has been washed away. . . . *Whew!* how she howls! It's the wildest party the old woods have had in many a moon.

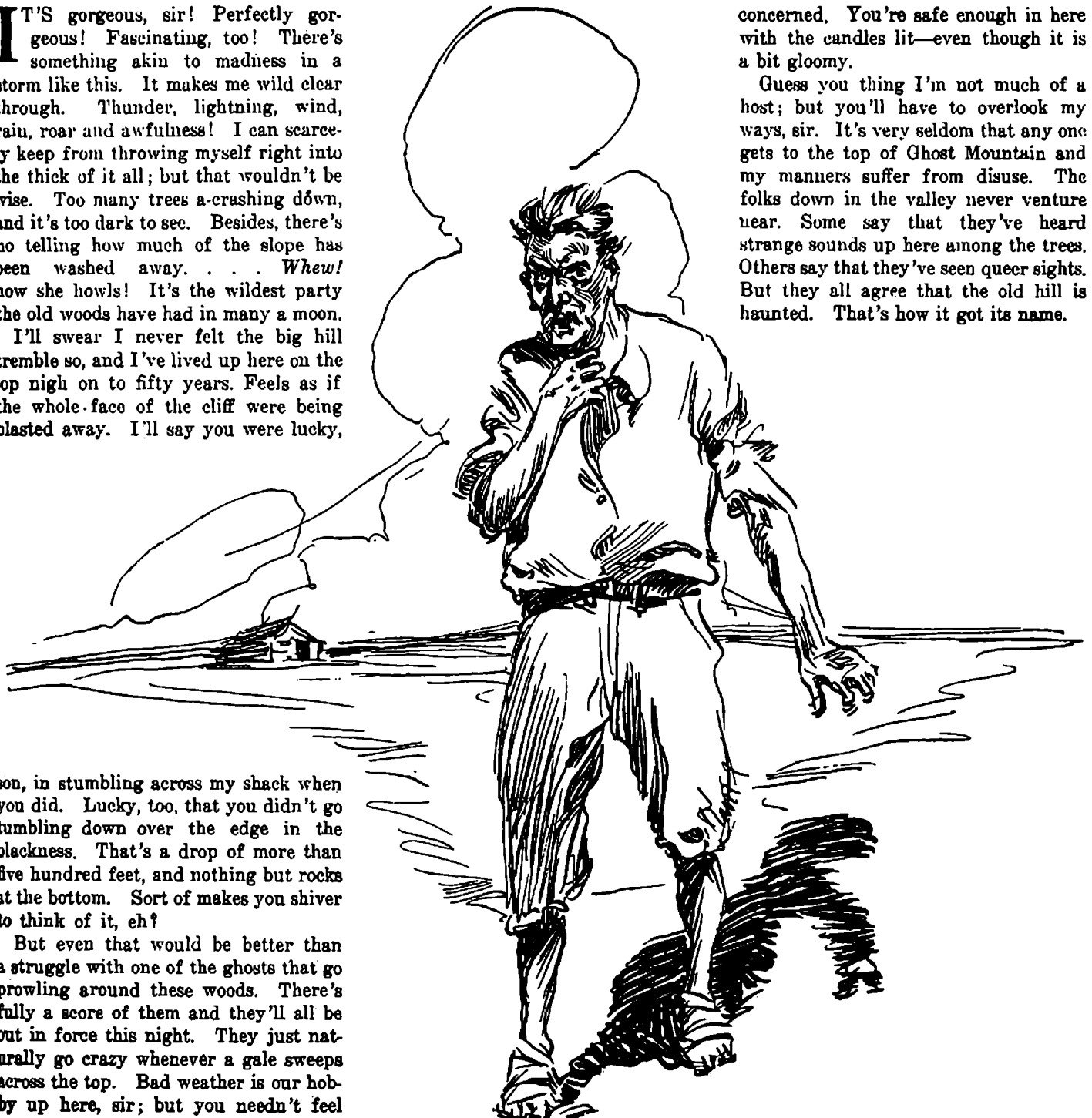
I'll swear I never felt the big hill tremble so, and I've lived up here on the top nigh on to fifty years. Feels as if the whole face of the cliff were being blasted away. I'll say you were lucky,

son, in stumbling across my shack when you did. Lucky, too, that you didn't go tumbling down over the edge in the blackness. That's a drop of more than five hundred feet, and nothing but rocks at the bottom. Sort of makes you shiver to think of it, eh?

But even that would be better than a struggle with one of the ghosts that go prowling around these woods. There's fully a score of them and they'll all be out in force this night. They just naturally go crazy whenever a gale sweeps across the top. Bad weather is our hobby up here, sir; but you needn't feel

concerned. You're safe enough in here with the candles lit—even though it is a bit gloomy.

Guess you think I'm not much of a host; but you'll have to overlook my ways, sir. It's very seldom that any one gets to the top of Ghost Mountain and my manners suffer from disuse. The folks down in the valley never venture near. Some say that they've heard strange sounds up here among the trees. Others say that they've seen queer sights. But they all agree that the old hill is haunted. That's how it got its name.



According to an old story, Ghost Mountain was once the retreat for a band of outlaws who terrorized the country for miles around. Finally they got to fighting among themselves and killed each other off. According to the story, that fight is still raging and can be seen and heard during a storm like this if any one is bold enough to venture up the slope.

Some mighty peculiar thefts have occurred down there in the valley. I've heard it said that food, drugs and chemicals were the articles sought; but, strangely enough, the robbers have never been apprehended. The stolen goods have never been found. That is why the folks down there insist that the ghosts of the outlaws are still operating.

Hm! Perhaps that's why you're up here tonight? Wanted to see those ghosts for yourself, eh? Reporter—maybe? You've got the grit, son. It was a bold move.

Ah! Bold blood! This is gorgeous. You came just in time, sir. Yes—yes, indeed! Science can make use of you.

But, here! Slip off those sopping clothes and crawl into this blanket. I'll put another log on the fire. Your things will soon be dry. . . . Come on, son, you might as well. You won't be able to venture out, anyway, until the storm has gone down. . . .

There, you look real comfortable now. We can't let your blood get chilled. That would be unpardonable! I'll pour out a drink that will warm you up. Guess you need it after that soaking. . . .

It's a pretty color, isn't it, son? Good stuff, too! Yes—it does look like blood, but what if it is? I've swallowed some viler liquids with the same color in my time and they were called wine. Come—what's in a name! No? Well, I like it. It's such a beautiful red, Mighty nourishing, too, especially if it's fresh.

When I was younger there was nothing to me but skin and bones. I wasn't expected to live. Someone suggested that I drink a quart of ox blood every day. At first it was worse than any medicine; but that was only a queer idea. I grew to like it. It made me immensely strong in time.

Look at me, son! You would never guess that I was a puny weakling at one time. You might not believe that I've passed the century mark in age. This gray head of mine has gone uncovered through more than a hundred winters and I haven't known sickness in years. That is my secret, son. Maybe I'll tell it to you. . . .

Listen! Do you hear that wailing? Sounds like wind in the trees, but it's

not. That's the ghost of Jerry McFadden. I know them all—I ought—and he's the wildest one in the lot. Always comes prowling around at this hour, whether the moon shines or not, and starts his wailing.

Jerry was as strong as an ox and no more intelligent. Just a hopeless idiot. There was nothing courageous about him; he simply didn't know enough to keep out of danger. But he had strong blood. That was his redeeming feature. Strong blood! So I used him!

He hates me like poison. Sets a lot of traps to get me, but I'm wise in the ways of ghosts. He tries to creep into my brain whenever I'm off guard and make me do things which might cause death. Sounds unusual for an idiot; but they do say that death is a wonderful healer. Why, whenever I get near the Now you'll hear a sobbing that will just urging me to jump. But I always manage to fight him off. . . .

Whew! What a crash! Seems to be getting worse outside. My toes are tingling yet from the shock. Felt as though it split the old hill right in two. Now you'll hear a sobbing that will just about wring your heart. Over here under the window on the outside. Hear it?

Poor little Nina! A perfect beauty in her time—and young. Young blood! Just another martyr to science. She's scared to death of thunder and always comes a-crying whenever the noise is especially piercing. I was hoping that Jerry would be able to comfort her, but it seems he is too busy watching me.

BUT about Jerry—I didn't finish, did I? I killed him! Now don't look that way. This was years ago when the big idea first dawned. . . . Why, you aren't afraid, are you, son? Of course, not! Bold blood can't be scared.

Everybody down in the valley knows that I killed Jerry. At least I've told them; but they won't believe me. They just wag their heads and smile. Some tap their temples with their fingers as if to say that I've gone mad. Fools!

I killed Jerry, and that is the truth. Nothing could be plainer. In some way or other he wandered into the shack and was a-sitting right there where you are when I first saw him. I had been experimenting for some time—years, in fact—and when I saw his powerful frame the big idea came to me in a flash. Strong blood!

I plunged my knife straight through his heart and turned it round and round. He squealed like a stuck pig and bled just as much. Yes, Jerry was a husky ox!

Did you ever see blood gush out of a dying heart, son? It's a gorgeous sight—and interesting! At first it shoots out thick and rich—like oil. It's a beautiful color. Jerry's was especially fine. Then it wells up fitfully for a spell and finally eases off into a tiny trickle. I'd like for you to see it, son. . . .

Jerry started his tricks from the very first. He made me feel scared for a spell. That is how I came to make the mistake I did. I thought I had to hide his body. So I drained him down in the work-shop and stuffed him underneath the bunk there. . . . It was a mistake to keep it secret.

For days I could not rid my mind of that dead carcass. The thought kept me from sleeping, too. My nerves grew jumpy and violent pains began to knock in my head. It got so that I could see that body wherever I looked. I could feel its heart thumping and burning away at my back whenever I tried to lie in the bunk.

The time came when the beat of that heart never left me at all. It made no difference whether I was in the shack, or out in the woods, I could always hear its monotonous *thump—thump—thump*. It felt like a hammer knocking in my ears and I began to get dizzy spells. The horrible feeling possessed me that the beat of that heart was chipping off bits of my brain with each thump. I thought I was going mad.

But a madman cannot reason, son. Always remember that. I began to reason. What was it that troubled me? The heart of Jerry McFadden! And why? Because I was nursing an overpowering secret. The remedy was simple. I'd reveal my secret and smother the heart.

So I pulled out Jerry's body. His heart stuck like glue—Jerry hates me like poison!—but I managed to pry it loose. I sealed it in a bottle. Here it is. See! Quite a little thing to kick up such a rumpus. That hole in the center is where I turned the knife.

The smaller lump in there is the heart of little Nina. I thought she would be good company for Jerry, but he doesn't seem to pay much attention to her. He just wails around in the tree-tops while she cries outside the window there.

Listen! Do you hear them? Jerry can't be much of a ladies' man. He could at least be gallant on a night like this.

Are you sure you won't have a drink, son? You look as pale as a ghost. Remember, it's very strengthening. No?

Well, I hate to drink alone, but here's to you!

Yes, I bottled Jerry's heart and made my way down into the valley. They told me that a body had been fished out of the river and identified as Jerry's. No one would believe my story. They just smiled behind my back and whispered that the Hermit was going mad.

I suppose my tale did sound wild and, instead of jailing me, they pitied me. Someone even suggested that I come down in the valley to live. They didn't know it, but that was impossible. I had my work to do up here.

They thought Ghost Mountain was getting on my nerves. Funny—that! Why, son, I love this big, old hill and the more the ghosts the merrier. They understand me and I understand them—except for Jerry.

Are you smiling, sir? I saw the corners of your mouth twitch. Don't make the same mistake that the valley folk did. Don't be a fool!

No sooner had I bottled Jerry's heart than he started wailing—just like that! Hear him? I thought he wanted company. Nina was such a pretty little thing and I felt sure Jerry would be pleased.

I found her lying in the midst of an auto smashup near the bottom of the falls. She said her machine had hurdled the road at the top. She was badly jarred and her left leg was broken, but she had no serious injuries.

I carried her up here and tried to set the broken bone. She fainted. I wish you could have seen her then, son. She was a beautiful sight—and young. Young blood! So I used her.

I severed an artery in each wrist. I doubt if she ever knew what had happened. But I didn't make the same mistake as I had with Jerry. Only a fool would do that. I dug out her heart while it was still warm and put it in the bottle there.

Again those fools down below refused to believe me. They found her machine where I had left it and said that her body was caught among the rocks deep under the surface where no one could get at it—because of the force of the stream pouring over the side.

I and my tales were beginning to be a joke. The Hermit of Ghost Mountain was surely mad, but perfectly harmless. He was simply too old to live alone.

That's why I don't bother them any more with my tales. I haven't been seen down there in years. Truth is stranger than fiction—and no one believes fiction. It is easier to believe a lie.

LISTEN! Do you hear that groaning—outside the door? That's the ghost of old Buck Weaver. He was old enough to die, anyway. Old Blood! Didn't have enough in his body to keep him warm. But what he had was useful. A little drop of old blood will go a long way, son!

You are smiling, sir—just like the rest. Fools! Fools! All of you! The day will come when the Hermit of Ghost Mountain will be famous. Then no one will smile. They'll call me a genius instead of mad. They'll live for centuries and revere my name. For I've unearthed that thing which the world has been seeking since the days of Ponce de Leon. I've discovered the Spring of Life!

You think I'm mad. I can see it in your eyes. Oh, you skeptics! You disbelievers! You've stood in the way of progress ever since the dawn of man. Even I had to steal away from your laughter and jeers and hide away among the phantoms of Ghost Mountain. A martyr to science! But in spite of your jeers I'll make you rich. I'll give you everlasting life!

Ah, that interests you, son! Always ready to live and enjoy—never ready to do and die. Bold blood takes all and gives nothing. Ha! Ha! This is gorgeous.

Listen! Granted the existence of food, air and water, which are the gifts of nature, what one thing is essential to human life? Arms? Legs? No! I can cut them off and you'll live. Your head? I can decapitate you. Your heart? I can dig it out. But what would then happen? You'd bleed and I wouldn't be able to stop the flow. As soon as you'd be drained your body would be useless. Why? Because you cannot live without blood. That is what life is dependent upon. *Blood!*

You see, I reason! And still you think I'm mad. A madman cannot reason, son. I've told you so before.

I like you, bold blood! Come, I'll show you the living proofs of my scientific statement. I keep them in my work-shop underneath. Better bring another candle. The place is always dark, and one won't be enough. Catch hold of the railing, son; these steps are mighty steep. . . . Careful!

Cold down here, isn't it? Keep that blanket wrapped about you. Your blood must not be chilled. . . . Guess it isn't necessary to start a fire. We won't be down here long.

You are the first to see this, son, and you'll find it mighty interesting. Instructive, too! I call it the Morgue of

Life, for here lie the martyrs of life eternal. Some are only flesh and bones. That is why their ghosts keep prowling around, like wailing Jerry. . . . Some are still living, but I keep them drugged. There is no suffering.

Look at this one first, son. You see, his tongue is out. He cannot talk. And still he lives. You can feel his heart.

And this specimen here has neither arms nor legs. I had a hard time pulling him through, but his heart is still a-thumping.

Both of them have blood. They live.

In this row of sacks are nothing but flesh and bones. The bodies are drained. They're dead. I keep their blood in separate jugs—all labeled—over there.

Notice, son, the blooded ones are living and the drained ones are dead. That proves the theory which forms the basis of my secret. Life cannot be maintained without blood. It is the very first essential.

Are you cold, son? Your candle is shaking so. Better tuck that blanket close about you. There!

Now let us take our reasoning a step further. We know that blood will maintain life. Then why do we all die in a few short years? Because each body contains only one type of blood—either weak blood, strong blood, old blood, or some other one of the various types. In no body will we find a mixture.

You must remember that some of the types of which I speak tend to increase life and some tend to diminish it. Therefore, we conclude that a correct mixture of certain types, eliminating the undesirable ones, will materially lengthen life. As the average length of life increases, longer-lived types will be forthcoming which, upon being added to our mixture, will still further increase the human span of years. And so on to life eternal!

Do you follow me, son? The process is simple—like all things when once thought out. My difficulty arose over the selection of the correct types for my life-giving potion. I had still to determine my formula. And that is where Jerry helped me out.

This is Jerry's sack. He'll soon be nothing but a powder. That jug there contains what is left of his blood. I had to add certain chemicals to keep it from coagulating. You will notice that it is a rich red. Strong blood!

Listen! Jerry is unusually wild tonight. Guess he knows we're talking about him.

Here is the blood of little Nina. It is lighter in color. Young blood!

Bring your flame a little closer, son. I want you to see clearly.

This is the blood of old Buck Weaver. It is very dark—almost black in the candle light. Old blood!

And there you've seen three-fourths of my formula. Strong blood to give the necessary vitality for a longer life. Young blood to keep the system pliant and active. Old blood to increase the span of years. . . . But the thing is not complete. One other is needed to fill the formula. . . . Bold blood—to lend mental courage and keep the body going. That's where *you* come in, son. . . .

Ah . . . There! Don't struggle. I've got you. Bold blood never says die. This is gorgeous. If you hadn't jumped me then, I couldn't have used you. Bold blood is essential!

See—I can hold you like a baby. And my hair is gray; my bones are old. Another proof of a certain phase of my theory, sir. A man is no better than his blood! And I drink—strong blood!

It's useless, son. Take it easy. Don't be selfish. Think of humanity. Your

bones will be famous in my Morgue of Life.

Wait . . . I'll strap you down . . . There! I said that science could make use of you—and now is the time. I envy your martyrdom!

Let's see! My knife! Don't shout, son; you'll frighten little Nina. There! 'Twas thus that I turned it round in wailing Jerry. See how it gushes! Ah! Bold blood is brisk. This is gorgeous. .

Strong blood! Young blood! Old blood! Bold blood! My formula is complete. I can live another century. .

Are the candles still lit, son? I can—scarcely see. Everything is black—black! My head is—swimming—and I feel all numb.

It's Jerry! I can hear him—wailing—in my brain . . . He's gotten—in! Light—son—*light!* . . . He's choking . . . killing . . . *Ah—h!*

THE following is an extract taken from a feature story appearing in the *Valley Courier*, dated September 10, 1923:

"What happened up there in the Hermit's cabin will always remain a mystery. When Detective Sanderson's men broke in they found a trap door in the floor standing open. The dug-out below was littered with horrors. The ground was caked with dried pools of blood, while gallons of the same liquid filled numerous jugs standing around like wine. Fully a dozen burlap sacks stood arrayed along the wall, each one containing the decomposed remains of a human body.

"Two unidentified men, both drugged, were found tied down to logs. One had his tongue cut out, while the other was minus arms and legs. Both of them are strangers in this locality. They are not expected to live.

"Young Donaldson was found strapped down on his back with a long hunting knife protruding from a horrible wound in his chest. The Hermit was huddled up close by. His whole body was a mass of blood. There are indications of a hemorrhage having occurred from his nose and mouth. It is thought that he died of apoplexy, but no definite statement can be made until after the autopsy.

"Donaldson was the local correspondent of the Associated Press. It is believed that he intended collecting sufficient data to weave a feature story around the Hermit of Ghost Mountain."

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