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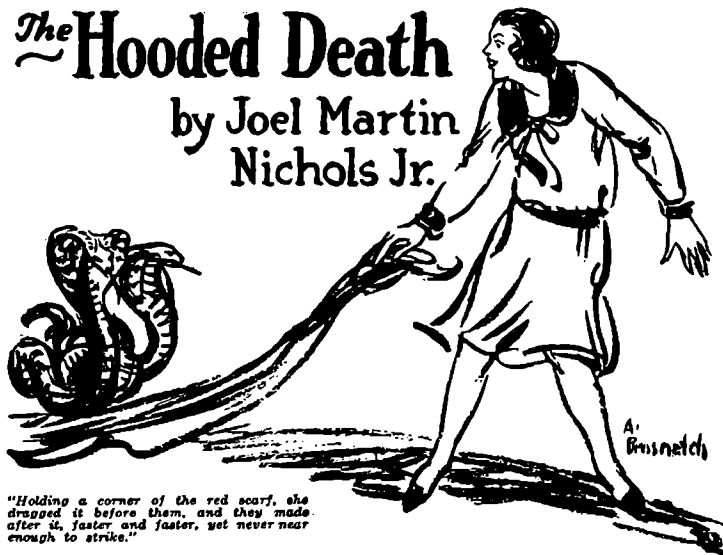
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The Hooded Death

by Joel Martin
Nichols Jr.



"Holding a corner of the red scarf, she dragged it before them, and they made after it, faster and faster, yet never near enough to strike."

THE open log fire threw only a dim flicker into the far end of the room where the window looked out upon the terraces, and yet I was sure that I saw a face there, an evil yellow face made the more ugly by a broad nose flattened against the pane. For the moment I thought it might be Peronne, the watchman, who had glanced in on his weary rounds about the château, but that would have been directly contrary to my orders and he was not the man to disobey. Moreover, I had explained to him his own peril, pointing out that Brinville in his present nervous condition would be more than likely to shoot first and ask questions afterward were he suddenly confronted with any face not immediately familiar to him.

It angered me to think that Peronne had been so careless as to let this fellow get by him and thus brave

us boldly to our faces. Yet I knew I must remain cool and make no false move, for I had no mind to be potted from that window without a chance to defend myself. Calling up as much sleepy indifference as I could muster I shifted about in my chair, letting my hand fall carelessly to my hip where the hard bulge of my pistol lent its reassuring pressure. In an instant that face had faded into the black background of the night. But no, he was watching me clearly from a distance, for his nose was on the glass again when I had once more half-closed my eyes in mock slumber. Where was that careless fool, Peronne?

What move should I make? I could try a shot at him from my pocket, but there would be several seconds lost in getting at my weapon. If he were so minded he could kill me easily before my finger even touched the

trigger. Besides, there was Brinville's condition to be considered. He sat there facing me in his armchair, his Gargantuan figure now limp in the fitful sleep which was all that haunting fear had granted him during those many long months. By his side on a small taboret was his ever-present automatic, the heavy butt ready to his hand. For my own safety I dared make no sudden disturbance, since on two other occasions I had seen him, thus aroused, bound out of his slumber, a raging, fear-maddened animal, ready to grasp and strangle the first living thing at hand. I would not care to be caught in those bone-crushing fingers of his!

It must be that fear prodded him even in his sleep, for at that instant he leaped to his feet with a cry of horror that still rings in my ears.

"It's Cunningham! It's young Cunningham, curse him!"

He was quick for his great size—I suppose fear had made him so. Even quicker than I could have done it from a full-awakened start he had seized the pistol, wheeled about and sent three bullets crashing through the window. But the face had gone the instant before.

"I—I dreamed there was somebody at the window," he muttered, sinking back into his chair.

"Will you take this opiate now?" I asked, pushing toward him the sleeping mixture he had refused the hour before—refused because he feared that the demons of his imagination would come upon him chained in slumber.

He gulped it down and sank back with a sigh. I watched him until his heavy lids had fallen and then I got up and went to the door. Yvonne Marcy was there, but Madame Brinville had not put in her appearance.

"He was dreaming again," I explained hurriedly. "He thought he saw somebody at the window. He was back to it and couldn't have seen

it—but there was a face there this time. Where is Madame, your mother?"

"She would not come," she answered. "She has asked for you several times this evening. You must go to her. But you are so pale, Edward. You are not going out there?"

"I must," said I. "I am beginning to fear that something may have happened to Peronne. He should have heard those shots and come."

I closed the door softly after me. Out in the night the moon lay pale and still on the terraces. Far away on the lower slopes beyond the deserted warden's lodge the Marne swirled swiftly by under the stone-arched bridge leading to the village. I wanted to follow that road—follow it far away toward the warmth and love and life that were there—follow it away from all this behind me, so dank and grim and foreboding.

But there was Yvonne Marcy—and my errand at Brinville's château. I pulled myself together and glanced about for Peronne. He was not there, so I called his name, at first low and then louder, until the stone walls banded the echo with the trees in the forest and threw it back to me in hollow mockery.

I hurried about the château in the path he should have taken. He was not there. I whistled. I called his name once more. No answer. After a time I went down to the edge of the wood. There were patches of dead white snow there under the trees—sodden, lifeless snow that hid from the light of the sun and rotted the leaves in the thickets. I walked about for a while and then I found footprints. There were Peronne's heavy hobnailed boots. There were two others—quick, light little man, to judge from the indentation. I followed them as best I could, losing them here in the sodden underbrush, finding them again where the snow lay a soggy blanket upon the moss.

Presently I found him. He had been dragged a short distance and there was blood on the snow. His body was still warm, so I turned him over, but let him drop quickly back when I saw that dripping rent in the back of his jacket. He had gone down there, lured by a crackling of the underbrush, and they had stalked him, those silent prowlers of the night, even as they were stalking Brinville up there in his château!

There was nothing to be done for the poor fellow, and as I could not leave Brinville alone for very long I walked slowly back, pondering the situation. I had come to this place ten months before as an operative for a firm of international secret service agents. I will not mention the name—suffice it to say they are well known in all quarters where a business is made of knowing such things. They furnish guards and sometimes spies, as the case may be, for those individuals who feel the need of protection from other sources than the local police where protection often entails awkward explanation. As yet I had attained no giddy heights with the firm, being merely a sort of chief watchdog—an office which satisfied all my ambitions in that profession, for I had relished it but little during the five years I had been with the bureau. Indeed, I had been minded several times to abandon it altogether.

Thus I had been sent to this obscure corner of France to eat and sleep at the side of a man whose every waking and sleeping hour was filled with mortal dread—dread of something which the events of this night had shown me were no mere chimera of his imagination.

AT THE door I paused, a sudden ejaculation of surprize leaping to my lips. The clear moonlight showed it so plainly I wondered why I had missed it before—a long, curved dagger, a species of short Malay kris,

imbedded in the timber! It was the man at the window! He must have thrown it there as he slunk by, for I could scarcely reach it, though I stand near to six feet. It was not until I pulled it down that I saw it was still wet with blood—the blood of poor Peronne down there in the thicket!

I brought it inside but hid it quickly under my coat, for Yvonne Marcy was there waiting for me and I did not want her to see. She was crying now.

"I can not stand it any longer, Edward," she sobbed. "Why does mother insist on staying here? She owes him nothing. I believe she hates him just as much as I do and yet she lingers. Can't you take us away and leave him here?"

"I think it is high time that you both went away," I admitted, speaking to her as casually as I could, though my own nerves were shredding under the strain. "I will speak to her about it tonight. You said she wanted to see me, so I must go. But you must promise me to go up to your room. Lock the door well and remember that I shall be about all night."

She drew nearer and whispered in my ear, "I think she is going mad. I found her again this afternoon listening at that barred door in the east tower—the one he never lets us into. And she has sent all the servants to the village since noon. But you have enough to worry about now. Will you kiss me before I go?"

I gazed after her as she went slowly up the stair. Then I locked the door, looked in at Brinville sleeping in his chair, closed the heavy oaken shutters that guarded the library window, and went up to Madame's room. I found her there as usual, peering morosely into the fire, her heavy iron-gray hair in disarray, her gaunt body swathed in the folds of a dark velvet dressing gown.

She took but one look at me out of her hollow eyes.

"You are ready to take Yvonne away, now?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes," I said. "It is time for you both to go. I should not have hesitated so long as I have. My man, Peronne, was murdered out there tonight. I found this knife sticking in the door. We have tarried too long."

I laid the bloody thing down on the table at her side and stood over her while she examined the handle. "Yes," she said presently, as though with a great weariness, "it is the Gohils. They have come for us—him and me. I do not care. I am ready. But he is afraid now, the coward! Oh, he was brave enough that night in the temple because nobody knew. But you love Yvonne. Perhaps you will not want to marry her when you know."

"What I shall know will make no difference with me concerning her," I answered. "I love——"

"Listen," she cut in; "when he jumped up and fired those shots he shouted Cunningham's name, did he not? Yes, I knew it would be Cunningham or Marcy. Sometimes it is Marcy that he sees, but not so often as Cunningham because he knows that Marcy is dead. So is Cunningham dead, but Cunningham had a brother. His kid brother, he called him. I always thought the kid brother got away. But the river was full of crocodiles."

Until then she had been peering before her into the fire, but now she turned toward me and I saw deep in her eyes a faint flicker of madness.

"Look," she whispered, grasping my arm and peering into the room behind us. "There is the temple again in the jungle. I always see it, but now, tonight, it is clearer. There is a god there, a green god high up on a pedestal of ivory. In his hands a bowl. There are pearls in that bowl—a fortune in pearls tossed in by the

priests. A fortune in pearls—and death. The moon is shining through the roof. There are two persons waiting in the shadows. One is Cunningham, the American. The other is Marcy's wife. Cunningham is impatient. The woman is pale, trembling. Another comes in through the arched doorway. Ah, see, it is Brinville! The woman stifles a scream. 'You will have to climb the altar,' says Brinville to the American. 'Marcy has been delayed at the river and sends word not to delay. All is in readiness. Your brother awaits us at the canoe.'

"Cunningham mutters and moves toward the altar. 'Remember you are not to touch the god,' says Brinville. 'Otherwise the curse will be upon you.' He hides a sneer as he says it.

"'It is a rotten business,' says Cunningham. 'I wish I'd never brought the kid into this.'

"He climbs up the altar. Brinville lays his lips to the ear of Marcy's wife. 'You are a widow now, Marie,' he whispers. 'He died without a murmur. But that accursed brat of a Cunningham got away from me. He heard me in the bushes and began to run. I cut him good in the shoulder as he went by. But he is dead now. I cornered him and ran him into the river. A good morsel for the crocodiles.'

"Brinville is enjoying himself. He relishes such tales as this. He relishes the misery of the woman. She moans softly to herself. She would turn back now but it is too late. 'Tell him to come down,' she whispers, hoarsely. 'Tell him to come away. Do not let him die. He has done us no harm. Tell him, for God's sake, not to touch that bowl. I can not go farther with this. It is not worth it.'

"Brinville seizes her wrist and twists it until she cries out in pain. 'You fool,' he whispers. 'If he comes down from there alive he will know

enough to hang us both. Let him go. Not a word.'

"Cunningham on the altar reaches up toward the bowl. But he is not high enough yet. It is a difficult climb and he dare not touch the god, for he is superstitious. He is up one more step now. The woman would scream out a warning, bid him for God's sake not to go farther—bid him keep his hand away from that bowl.

"See, now, there is but one more step necessary and his fingers are on the edge. He climbs again. Now he dips his hand down into it in the darkness. The woman screams, but it is too late. Cunningham cries out. It is a low, fearful cry. He stumbles down from the altar. He holds one hand up in the moonlight. There are four tiny holes there—and blood.

"'I have been bitten,' he says. 'I think they were cobras. Watch out!'

"In a few minutes he is dead. He has struggled it out in silence there on the floor of the temple, for death sleeps but lightly outside in the village. Unknowing, he protects his murderers even to the end.

"And now Brinville mounts the altar. He is quicker, for he scorns the curse. His hands are on the god in many places. He clings to the throat of it as he thrusts with his foot at the bowl in its outstretched hands. The bowl sways and falls, hurtling down in the moonlight. It strikes the earth. It flies in a thousand pieces. A thousand creamy globules roll out over the temple floor. A thousand pearls—the ransom of a king. But there is something else there—creeping, sliding things that wriggle across the floor toward the woman. She screams, but Brinville is down in a moment. Two padded blows and the cobras are dead. Their work is done."

Her voice had begun in a low whisper, rising to a sort of chanting monotone, but now it broke into a shrill scream as she clutched at me with

her clawlike fingers. "I tell you, madman," she shrieked at me, "they brought that curse away with them. They have lived in fear of it all their lives. It has smothered their souls. And now, it comes to take their bodies."

"Madame, Madame," I broke in. "Hush. He will hear you."

Whatever spell Brinville had woven around Marcy's wife in years gone by had not yet lost its potency, for she calmed immediately at the mention of his name, and I knew then that she feared him still. "I know," she said, "you are right. He must not hear. I must keep to my purpose, for you are to go away with her tonight. But there is more to be told. Listen: that god—that god of the temple is here under this roof."

"In heaven's name, Madame, hush!"

"It is here, I tell you. Yes, yes, you are right. I must be quiet. He must not know what we are going to do. But it is here. I know because it was only five years ago that he brought it back. Oh, he was cunning! He did not tell me. He sent us away, Yvonne and me. He was gone a year, but when I saw him again his face was tanned. I knew then that he had been back to the temple. I knew that he had brought it here. That was the curse. That was why the American would not touch it. Oh, he is cunning! Brinville was always cunning. He brought it here and now he hides it behind that door in the tower room. He holds the key. It is there. I must seek it. That was the curse."

Her voice dropped again to a whisper. She peered at me cunningly through those haggard eyes of hers. "But we must be careful—very, very careful. You have noticed how he asks that a bowl of warm milk be brought to him every morning? Yes, he pretends to take it to his room and drink it. Yet neither you, nor I, nor

anybody here has ever seen that bowl touch his lips. He carries it while you are sleeping to that room in the tower. I know, because I have spied upon him."

Sane or insane, what she said was true! I had never seen Brinville drink from that bowl he ordered each morning.

"Why?" she demanded suddenly. "I can see the question in your eyes. Ah, I will tell you, because it is I who have guessed it. In India I have seen a king cobra drink a whole bowl of warm goat's milk."

"Good heavens——" I broke in, but she cut me off.

"And now they are coming. Those Gohils are here. Or perhaps it is Cunningham's kid brother. Perhaps the crocodiles did not get him. But I think it is the Gohils, for this is a Gohil knife. In the morning—no, it must be now, tonight!—you must take Yvonne out of this—far away from here. She must never know. But first get the keys to that room. He is asleep. Only you can move in that room without awakening him. Will you go?"

What it was in her eyes that was so compelling I do not know, but I answered, "I will do it."

BBRINVILLE was sitting there much as I had left him, when I re-entered the library. I walked slowly across the carpet and sat down opposite it for a few minutes. He stirred uneasily in his sleep but did not awake, so keenly attuned, even in slumber, were his acute senses to my presence at his side.

Presently I reached out to the taboret and took his pistol. Emptying the magazine into my pocket, I replaced it carefully at his side. He did not stir. I got to my feet and stood over him. The keys were on a ring at his belt. I knew the exact place, for I had not lived at his side these many long months for nothing.

I reached down and ran my fingers slightly around his waist as far as the back of his chair would permit. I touched the keys and they rattled, it seemed to my taut nerves, like a thousand drums. He stirred and groaned, his subconscious mind struggling against the opiate that had dulled his being. The second time I gritted my teeth, slipped my finger under the ring and jerked it loose. They were in my hands! He did not move again.

I met Madame Brinville at the door of the tower room and handed her the ring. There were five keys and it was the third that turned the bolt. She pushed back the door.

It was standing there opposite on its ivory pedestal, its grinning features made the more horribly alive by the rays of the flickering oil lamp overhead—the green god of the Gohils!

I had expected a scream from Marcy's wife but there came from her lips only a gasping rattle. Then, with a little sob, a smothered cry, she ran toward it.

I should have acted quicker—I had no wish to see her die. She had been punished enough in those fifteen years she had lived with that arch-fiend back there in the library. I guessed her purpose before she reached it, but I was too late! She was up that pedestal, and before I was half-way across the room had plunged her hand into the open bowl on the knees of the god.

I saw only the heads of the brutes as they struck. I saw her wince once, twice, and then tumble backward. I caught her as she fell. "The cobras," she murmured. "They were there." Then she fainted.

There was a low couch in the room, so I laid her on it. Then I snatched off my coat, stripped shirt and undershirt from my body, twisting the fabric into a rude tourniquet. But it was idle effort. The venom would

have struck well into her heart before I could so much as apply it to her arm.

Presently she opened her eyes. They rested on me for a moment and then suddenly shot by toward the door. "Watch out—Brinville," she whispered. I turned slowly and there he was standing in the doorway.

"Now," he said, quietly, "I shall kill you both."

Out of the depths of my soul there came a deep surge of anger, the suppressed emotion of ten long months. I stepped toward him while his bulky figure, the god, everything in that room, went red before my eyes.

"You will not have to bother with her," I told him between clenched teeth. "Those snakes of yours have done it for you. As for me—we shall see."

I saw it in his hand then—that big automatic of his. I remembered how carefully I had drawn its teeth, so I threw back my head and laughed. To be sure, I was no match for him physically, and yet my hands yearned for the moment when they should fasten themselves on that big corded throat of his.

He raised the pistol and brought it to bear across the room. I heard another laugh—a strangely horrible laugh that must have been mine, for his lips were tense, unmoving. But I had laughed too soon! Like a flash the thoughts seared my brain! I had made one fatal mistake after all. There would still be one bullet in the chamber, for he kept it always at cock!

He seemed to gloat over me while he carefully took his aim. My fingers fumbled helplessly for my own weapon, reminding me that I had left it in Madame's room. I felt a choking sensation at the throat. Breath failed me altogether. I knew that I should jump—spring at him—do something—but what?

I saw his finger tighten on the trigger and leaped sidewise. There was a roar as the heavy charge tore open the silence. I heard the crack of the bullet as it drilled past my ear. He had missed me at that distance—Brinville, who practised daily in the courtyard and boasted, not without reason, of his prowess!

A second later I knew why he had missed, for I saw him reach back into the hall. An instant's struggle out there and he had dragged her into the room. It was Yvonne Marcy who had pushed his arm as he fired.

"So it's you!" he muttered. "The two of you together, then."

He raised the automatic once more, and this time the hammer rapped uselessly against the empty chamber. But he was quick to recover. His big hand shot back and I dodged as the heavy weapon went hurtling past my head. From behind me there came a crash. The girl screamed. I turned just in time to see that green bowl in the hands of the god fly to flinders—just in time to see those two hooded brutes tumble down upon the floor!

THE three of us stood there as though fascinated with the sight of it. They coiled themselves quickly and raised their ugly heads, hoods outspread and menacing. I backed away toward Brinville, for I knew the cobra to be a fighter; knew that these two would come for us so long as we remained in reach of their limited vision.

They started for me—I being nearest. Yvonne cried out a warning and I turned, hardly in time to shift quickly as Brinville swooped down upon me. His great fist came crashing down across my naked shoulders—fortunately for me, only a glancing blow, but withal a blow that rocked me from head to heel. I rushed in then and clinched, and the snakes, confused for the moment by the swirl of bodies, paused.

I knew Brinville must be as wary of them as I, so I squirmed out of his grasp when he had me almost cornered. He rushed again and I caught up a chair, driving it in toward his head. He brushed it aside like a straw with his flail-like arms. I saw, then, that there was but one salvation for me—my quickness. He had his great strength, but those ponderous muscles were not so quick as mine.

He rushed again, but this time I was ready for him and rapped him smartly on the chin. It might have been a flea-bite, so little did it bother him, though there was blood on his lips a moment later. Once again he had me nearly boxed in a corner, but this time it was the chair that saved me—the chair shoved in between us by Yvonne Marcy. It held him up only a second. That second was my life. Given a moment's respite, now, I glanced about and saw that the cobras, confused by the turmoil, had crawled forward and stood between us and the door. There would be no egress there!

Again Brinville bore down upon me, attempting to drive me within reach of their fangs, and again I tried to slip under his arm. But I slipped and fell and he had me. Like a gorilla, he wrapped his huge arms about me, pulling his muscles taut until my ribs seemed to crack under the strain. He could have killed me then and there had he pressed further, but he was a fiend and the thoughts of a fiend lived in his brain.

"Ah," I heard him mutter in my ear; "the cobras shall have you."

He dragged me toward them, pushing me down upon the floor where they could strike easily and quickly. Of a sudden, a deathly stillness fell upon that room. I lay there, helpless, unable to move a muscle, so chained was I by horror. Those two brutes were not long in taking advantage of it. I heard the soft rustle of their bodies as they glided toward me.

Something had to be done, and quickly. I could make no move in his iron grasp. There came a scream to my ears and I remembered Yvonne—remembered a red scarf she had thrown across her shoulders.

"Quick," I shouted to her, "your scarf! Drag the end of it before their eyes!"

Thank heaven for its generous length and bright color! She, holding the corner of it, dragged it before them and they made after it, faster and faster, yet never quite near enough to strike.

I heard Brinville curse between his clenched lips. And then he made his first mistake. He tried to drag me after them. I managed to wriggle one arm free and drove my knuckles up under his chin until he cried out with the pain of it. I had his head and eyes away from the floor now, and I knew that so long as he could not see the cobras he would not dare draw near to where they were.

Until now I had been fighting coolly. I had boxed him, I had dodged him, I had run away before him. He held me now, so I could do none of these, but I still had my two hands. There was his throat, and my fingers had ached to clamp upon it. One hand was already free. I loosened the other with a desperate wrench that almost stripped the muscles from my shoulder. And then, with a savage joy such as I have never known before or since, I settled them on his throat, shifted them quickly to his chin and pressed back his head.

He groaned and I felt the grip about my waist weaken. Back, back I pressed that head of his. Could I but bend his spine I would have him! With as much force as I could summon, I pulled back my foot and drove it in against his shins. These tactics worked better than I could have hoped, for he stepped backward and I had him with his knees crumpling

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The Hooded Death

(Continued from page 464)

under him. Then it was I felt the first savage triumph, felt the sodden strength running out of him like water.

"For God's sake," he gasped between pain-twisted lips, "let me up. I'm through."

"Never while I have the strength, Brinville," I said in his ear. "Come, I will let the cobras have you as you did poor Cunningham."

They were not long in seeking us, those wriggling devils. Closer and yet closer they came. I pushed him down to make it easier for them, and then I laughed long and loud as they struck and struck again. I did not move him until I was sure that the deadly fluid had seeped well in toward his heart. Presently, with the first twist of pain on his face that told me it was working, I threw him down upon them and crushed out their lives with the weight of his body.

He lay there gazing up at me in the abject fear that his kind always has for approaching death. "Take a good look at me, Brinville," I said. "I could have killed you a dozen times during these past ten months. But you were suffering and I wanted to see you suffer. I would have left you for a better death than this, but you yourself have willed it otherwise. I am leaving you here for the Gohils. They will be here for you before the dawn—for you and their god."

"In God's name," he gasped hoarsely, "who are you?"

Then I bent closer to his ear, for I wanted him to take the knowledge with him where he was going.

"Look well at the scar here across my shoulder," I whispered. "I am Cunningham's kid brother."