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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Horror Undying

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

*A grim and gruesome tale of a strange appetite—
the story of a grisly horror*

THE sheaf of papers—I had found it under the ancient flooring that I pulled up to make a fire—intrigued me at once. The cabin offered shelter, the blaze warmth, and now I had found entertainment. I could forget the night outside, and the blizzard and this chill forest in which I had lost myself. I could forget, too, the disquieting man with the beard and the shabby clothes who had stopped me at the edge of the trees before I began my walk, mumbling something about "haunted places." A foreigner, evidently, who smelled abominably of garlic.

Sitting on a broken stool before the fireplace, I spread the ragged, faded sheets upon my knee.

The largest item was a paper-backed book or pamphlet, of the size of an old-fashioned dime novel. In my fancy I can see, now as then, the limp, discolored cover, tinted red by the flickering fire-light, and the lengthy title in uneven, ornate capitals:

A TRUE STORY OF

THE REVOLTING AND BLOODY CRIMES OF SERGEANT I. STANLAS, U. S. A., HIS COURT-MARTIAL AND EXECUTION

Below this promising indication of excitement within, there was a boldly executed woodcut of a full-length human figure. I held it close to the flames for a clearer view.

The dress, I saw at once, was the American cavalry uniform of the middle Nineteenth Century—shiny boots with spurs, stripe-sided pantaloons, a brief dragoon

jacket and a round, vizored cap. Three chevrons upon the sleeve stamped the man as a sergeant, and even as I noted this my eye caught more and smaller words beneath the picture: *Sergeant Stanlas, from a drawing by the Author, and under this the information: Privately printed, 1848; price ten cents.*

"Ten cents!" Was it a dime novel after all, a dime novel of especially thrilling content? Remembering such shockers as *The Feast of Blood, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, The Secret of the Gray Turret*, and others, I studied the cover illustration again.

The author-artist had depicted his subject in a pose at once formalized and dashing. The booted, spurred feet were planted jauntily apart, toes pointing outward at what must have been an uncomfortable angle. The right hand was thrust into the front of the dragoon jacket, Napoleon fashion, while the left rested elegantly upon a saber-hilt. It was all a trifle ludicrous and waxworky. I might have laughed at it, except for the face.

It was a round face, framed in heavy side-whiskers. The eyes beneath the capvizor were large and expressionless, and so placed as to seem to stare out at anyone who looked at the picture. Below and between them jutted a long, straight nose, thin and sharp as a chisel. The mouth was half open and lipless, and showed two tiny, pointed upper teeth. The chin—well, there was no chin, or very little. Despite the crudity and stiff-

ness of the old woodcut as a whole, that countenance had something of dread, authentic life. I paused to throw more floor-boards on the fire, then opened the pamphlet and began to read.

THE opening of the narrative was flat, in keeping with the style of the 1840's. It said, rather casually, that one Ivan Stanlas was born in Prussia near the Polish border about the year 1810, and that he came to America as a boy of twelve. In 1827, five years after his arrival, he enlisted in the United States army. His record, it appeared, was good, even brilliant—the anonymous biographer suggested that had Stanlas been of American birth he might have won an officer's commission. Foreigner though he was, he rose rapidly to the rank of sergeant first class, and as such did several tours of duty at forts in the south and west. At the outbreak of the Mexican War he saw active service with a dragoon regiment and was wounded at Monterey. In 1847 he was senior non-commissioned officer of a squadron ordered to build and garrison a fort in the western part of the newly acquired territory of Texas.

Up to this point the narrator had seemed vague, as if information on Sergeant Stanlas' early career was his only by hearsay, but the incident of the fort-building and all that followed was by contrast extraordinarily clear and vivid. I, reading by the firelight, guessed that the unknown pamphleteer must have made Stanlas' actual acquaintance at that time; perhaps the forming of the squadron brought together the units in which the two men had been serving.

The fort came in for full, eloquent description—a rectangular stockade of upright logs with sharp tips, rough barracks and stables in orderly array inside, neat ricks of hay cut on the prairies, troops

drilling or working under the eyes of their officers, sentries on post, and over all the brilliant stir of the Stars and Stripes. The war was over now; the garrison felt relieved and relaxed, even peaceful. But a terror was to come that would dwarf the grimmest adventure of the oldest and most seasoned veteran.

Nothing for a time but boresome routine. Then, twice in succession, the account stated, sentries were found dead in the dawn—or rather, what was left of sentries.

The bodies were mangled, mutilated, bloody, the fleshiest parts cut clean away and missing. Indian raiders, was the instant pronouncement of the commanding officer, and after the second atrocity a scouting party was sent out to find and punish the enemy. Stanlas himself rode with that party and it was he who found, or appeared to find, a trail. Following him, the avengers rode for four hours across the prairie and came at last upon an encampment of Comanche hunters.

Taken by surprize, a full half of the Indians fell before the first deadly volley of the troops. The others fled on their swiftest ponies without offering battle. Several wounded Indians were captured and questioned, but all denied attacking or even visiting the fort. They feared, it seemed, a devil that sneaked and hunted around their campfires at night and devoured women, children and even full-grown warriors—a devil that lurked and laired among the white men.

The soldiers naturally scorned this story as fantastic and brought back the prisoners, five of them. As they approached the fort, it was recorded, the Indians trembled fearfully. That night they were placed in the hospital building, and on the following morning one was missing. He was reported "escaped despite severe wounds and close guard," and double vigilance was instituted. A

day and a night passed, a new sun rose, and a second Indian had vanished.

Stanlas happened to be sergeant of the guard on this particular morning, and the commander of the garrison, investigating in the hospital, called upon him for a report. As Stanlas entered, the three remaining Indians set up a wild and unwarriorly wail of terror. All jabbering at once, they expressed sudden dread of the sergeant. He, they charged, had killed and carried away their two comrades—he was the "devil of the fort" which they now knew would be their ultimate destroyer.

Stanlas listened in scornful silence for a moment or two, then broke in upon their frantic charges with angry denials. When they refused to retract, he whipped out his saber and slashed the nearest Indian across the face. Disarmed by two troopers, he was placed under arrest by the commander. A routine search of his quarters was ordered.

As senior sergeant of the garrison, Stanlas had a one-room cabin to himself, and the flooring in it proved loose (reading at this point, I glanced down nervously at the vacant space I had torn in the floor of my own shelter). The boards lifted, searchers saw loose earth. A few probing digs with a spade discovered the skeletons of the two missing Indians, stripped almost entirely of flesh.

FROM this point forward the narrative grew tense and fascinatingly dire, as if the author was bringing a morbid warmth to his work. Sergeant Stanlas, confronted with the grisly findings, confessed to cannibalism. He had murdered and eaten, not only these and other Indians, but the two butchered sentries and many other white men and women in the East. How many, he did not know; all he could say was "more than fifty, perhaps a hundred." Explanation he could

not or would not give, except that he was tormented with an overpowering hunger for human flesh. He relished most the heart and the liver.

Facing the court-martial, he pleaded guilty and made a singular request. That speech of Sergeant Stanlas sticks closest in my memory, for I returned later and read it again:

"Burn me to ashes, I greatly wish it. Only thus can my soul be redeemed."

The officers of the court-martial—they must have been a shocked and pallid gathering—passed sentence, but decreed a less painful death than the one for which the confessed man-eater had begged. He was placed before a firing-squad, to make which, the pamphlet said, every one of his former comrades volunteered. After Stanlas had fallen before their shots, the sergeant in charge of the detail walked close to examine him. The bloody form was seen to move, the eyes slowly opened. Drawing a pistol, the sergeant fired a bullet point-blank through Stanlas' brain, and a few minutes later a medical officer pronounced the guilty one dead. The riddled corpse was buried outside the fort at a considerable distance from the regular cemetery and was left unmarked.

That was the end of the account, at least of the printed part. But at the foot of the final page was a rusty-looking smudge. I drew a brand from the fire to shed brighter and more direct light. With difficulty I made out a single word, written crabbedly and in ink so ancient and faded as to be almost invisible: "Fools."

I closed the pamphlet and gazed once more at the portrait of Ivan Stanlas upon the cover. As before, the expressionless eyes seemed to stare fixedly at me; even so, I mused, must the real man's eyes have looked while his fellow-sergeant gave him the *coup de grace*. And the loose

mouth seemed to smile at me in mockery. I felt suddenly nauseated with the blood-boltered tale. Whether it was true or not I refused to guess. My chief desire was to forget it as quickly as possible, to find more pleasant reading-matter for a lonely night in a strange, isolated cabin. Dropping the pamphlet to the floor, I turned my attention to the other papers in my lap.

There remained a couple of loose sheets or scraps, fastened together with a corroded pin. Removing this, I studied the topmost fragment.

IT WAS a roughly torn upper quarter of an inside page from an old newspaper. At the top margin I could make out a part of a heading: ". . . *the Eagle*, July 11, 1879." The torn piece was three columns wide and filled with short news items, mostly paragraphs with date-lines, grist of the journal's telegraph mill. To such inner pages might a reader turn leisurely after he had satisfied a more pressing news hunger with long accounts on the front page of war in Europe or scandal at home. Around one of the small items, centrally located on the middle column of the sheet, was drawn a bold circle in dark ink, as if to direct attention to it.

The headline, also included within the circle, was in small type, and I remember it as follows:

MERCY FOR SOLDIER-MURDERER
Sgt. Maxim's Death Sentence Commuted

Beneath this I read, substantially in these words:

Fort Fetterman, Wyo., July 9—The War Department today ordered the sentence of Sergeant Wilfred Maxim, previously condemned to death by court-martial, to be commuted to life imprisonment.

Maxim, who was convicted of a strange and brutal crime—the killing of a civilian laborer and the drinking of his blood—had been hanged in full view of his former comrades some weeks ago. Pronounced dead and cut down, he revived. When ordered to mount the scaffold and be hanged a second time, he protested that, being once certified deceased, the full penalty of his crime was

paid and he should be set free. He was held prisoner while the higher authority at Washington was consulted and handed down the commutation of sentence.

A special guard will take Maxim to Fort Leavenworth for confinement.

Just below this final short paragraph came the juncture of the two ends of the line that formed the inked circle, and the pen had apparently wavered over them. No, not exactly; on closer examination I was sure that a word had been written beneath the item and upon the line of the circle, a scrawled, crabbed word: "*Fools.*"

I twitched nervously, and my hands involuntarily clenched. The crackling sound of the old paper as it squashed in my grip made me start violently. I frowned in uneasy mystification.

Brief as the news article was, and almost deadly dull in its patterned journalistic phraseology, it reeked with unvoiced dread. What did it mean—it and the pamphlet which told a tale so ghastly parallel?

Two murderers had lived, two veritable vultures in man's guise, one exposed in 1847, the other thirty-two years later in 1879. Each was an army man, each had the special ability and personality to win himself a sergeant's stripes. Each killed his fellow-man in secret, for the gratification of a horrible hunger. Each was condemned to death, and each proved almost impossible to kill. Each man's story had been published, and some collector of strange and revolting data had found both accounts, hiding them together under the floor of this old cabin—yes, and each published story had come under the hand of a commentator who, through scorn or unbelief or macabre humor, had stamped each with the word: "*Fools.*"

I pored over the inked circle and the written word upon the newspaper. They, too, were faded, but not as much as the scrawl in the pamphlet, and the hand-

writing was strikingly similar. My judgment was that they were the work of the same penman, and that each was jotted down at the approximate time of the publication date of the account thus distinguished.

I LAID the half-crumpled fragment of newspaper on the floor beside the pamphlet. The remaining sheet stared up from my knee—a simple handbill, once folded small and now falling apart along its smoothed-out creases. It bore bold-faced type:

\$100—REWARD—\$100
For the Capture of
WILFRED MAXIM
ESCAPED MURDERER
July 14, 1879

A description followed, which I do not remember clearly except for one phrase: "*Age about 36.*" So Sergeant Maxim and Sergeant Stanlas, at the times of their respective captures, had been alike in age as well as profession, rank and depraved appetite. I shook myself, as if to dislodge panicky thoughts that crept upon the fringes of my consciousness. A corner of the reward notice, I saw, drooped heavily. Something was pasted to its back. I turned it over.

A photograph looked up, a faded and discolored likeness of a uniformed man's head and shoulders. Under it was written, "*Bill Maxim, Jan. 7, 1872.*" I knew that crabbed handwriting at once. I knew, too, the face—but that was unbelievable, unspeakable. . . .

The old soldier's cheeks and jaws were thickly bearded. I could barely see a loose, greedy-looking mouth in the midst of that bushy hair. But the eyes were wide and vacant under their joined brows, the nose jutted straight and chisel-sharp. I started to voice an exclamation, but my lips were gone dry and numb. I stooped slowly for the discarded pamphlet. My hands trembled as they held the two por-

traits toward the flickering light—the photograph and the wood-cut.

I was sure then, and gasped inarticulately with the fearful knowledge.

Ivan Stanlas, shot almost to pieces, had not rested in his disgraced, unmarked grave. He had struggled up from under that burden of earth, had walked again. He had joined the army under a new name, had risen in rank, and was caught as before in the act of feeding loathsomely. Better for him and for the world had his first court-martial done as he had pleaded—what were the words?

I fumbled through the pages to the back of the pamphlet. Again I read: "Burn me to ashes, I greatly wish it. Only thus can my soul be redeemed."

A certainty that was more terrifying than blackest mystery drew in upon me, like a strangling net. With all my strength I hurled pamphlet, newspaper and handbill into the fire. The flames crackled greedily over the old sheets, threw up bright tongues; yet I trembled with a chill that was not of the outer blizzard. And a voice soft as a sigh and fierce as a snarl spoke from the door: "*Fool! . . .*"

The door was open. A figure in a long, dark, formless garment like a cloak or blanket was standing there, shaking wreaths of snow from its head and shoulder. As I gaped, silent and helpless as a charmed bird before a snake, it glided forward to the fire. The enveloping robe sagged open, then slid gently downward from the upper part of the figure.

I saw a round face, pale as bleached bone. Coarse, bushy hair grew low and rank upon a narrow forehead. Wide, expressionless eyes fixed mine, gleaming above the thin nose that seemed to point the way for them with its tip. A shallow chin relaxed, a loose, lipless mouth

fell open. Two pointed upper teeth grinned at me.

I tried to say something, to threaten or beg, but I could not. I only shrank back, and he stole forward, into the stronger light. A hand extended toward me. I saw curved talons, thick hair matted upon wrist and back and palm. . . .

Then came a cry, powerful and ringing as a bugle, a torrent of strange, challenging words. Another figure was bursting through the door and toward us. The first comer turned hurriedly from me. For a moment I saw his pale, chisel-beaked face in profile, heard the cloak rustle like dried skin. Then the other was upon him in a rush.

Fierce eyes above a bristling beard, an assailing odor of garlic, drove into my mind that this was the mumbler I had met at the forest's edge. His upflung hand flourished a staff, a heavy, straight rod with a piece lashed upon it to form a cross. It did not strike, but the sergeant squeaked fearfully, like a bat, and cowered swaying before it. A foot tripped him and, as he fell sprawling, the same foot gave him a spurning shove that slid him in among the coals of the fire.

White flame sprang up all around and over him, as though he had exploded. I shuddered, and the next moment all was black silence to me.

I WOKE laggingly, to the touch of min-istering hands, and found myself lying limply on the floor. Above me stooped the bearded face, anxious and kindly now.

"It is all over," came the grave, accented voice, with a note of triumph in it. "Long have I hunted and hoped, and today, when you entered his domain, I knew you would serve for bait. I made preparations and followed." He drew something from his pocket. "A stake through his heart and holy water would

have been better, but the cross of white-thorn and the fire and this herb"—he threw a handful of garlic into the fire-place—"will serve. He—Stanias or Maxim or whoever he is—will walk and raven no more."

Weakly I rose. Something made a feeble scuttling noise on the hearth, and I looked. The dying fire, now rank with the garlic vapors, was full of dark, fat-looking ashes that never came from wood. Out of these was scrambling some small creeper—a rat or lizard, perhaps. Before I got a fair glimpse of it my companion thrust it back with his staff. It did not appear again.

"Perhaps that was his cursed soul," commented my rescuer. "Do not be afraid, I know that all will be well. Before the Russian Revolution I was a priest in Moscow, and studied these things. By dawn his last shred of foul flesh, his last splinter of undead bone, will be consumed in the cleansing heat."

Stooping, he began to gather floor-boards.

"You're a priest?" I repeated stupidly. "I was beginning to understand before you came. His story said that he wished to be burned."

"I knew of those writings, but I did not disturb them lest he be warned and guard against me. The ancient legends are not legends; they are truth denied by fear. In his first existence he was *volkodlok*—werewolf. Facing death, he must have had a desperate hope of salvation, and he made that request. He knew that, if he were killed painlessly and his body left whole, he would still live as *upir*—what you call vampire."

He threw his armful of wood upon the fire, and it began to crackle with bright, merry warmth.

"My son," said the priest, "have the fear of God before your eyes."