

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XIII

NUMBER 3

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 18, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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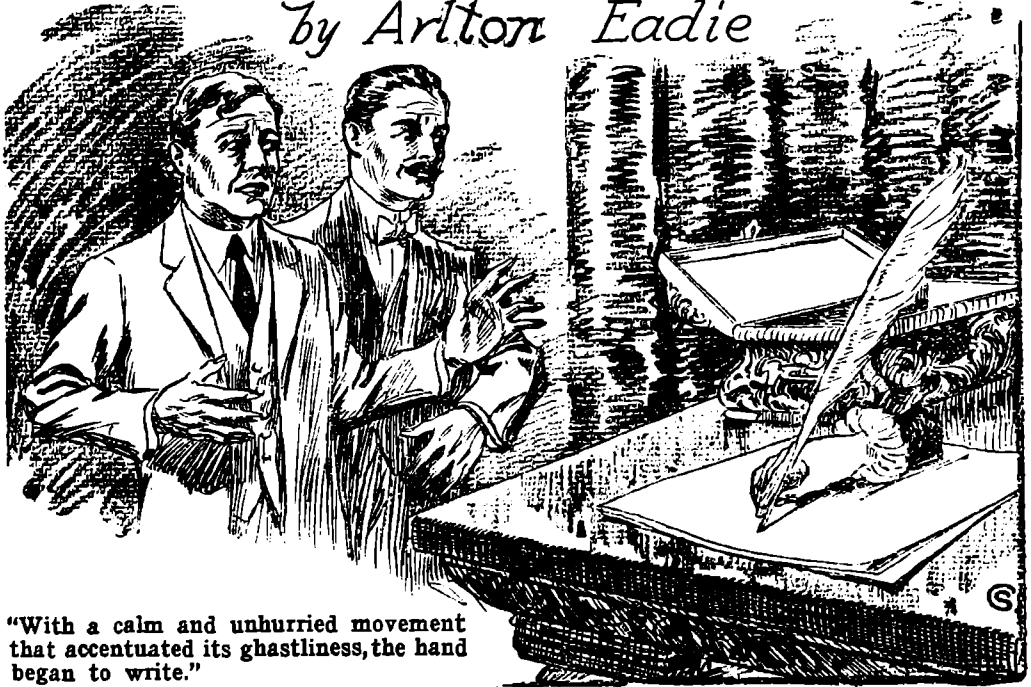
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# The IMMORTAL HAND

by Arlton Eadie



"With a calm and unhurried movement that accentuated its ghastliness, the hand began to write."

"AT LAST the Mecca of our pilgrimage is in sight!"

Wilmer Denton paused in the middle of Henley Street, that Old World thoroughfare that slants across the center of the little town of Stratford-on-Avon, and waved his hand dramatically toward a house on the opposite side of the way. Long, low, its time-mellowed walls crossed with those massive beams of timber which form so picturesque a feature of houses built in the Sixteenth Century; with its three-gabled roof and quaint pent-house over the door, it was the most famous, most photographed, and most venerated private dwelling in Europe—the birthplace of William Shakespeare.

"Doesn't it just thrill you, boys," Wilmer went on, "to think that you are standing within a few yards of the very spot where the foremost poet of his day—'the sweet Swan of Avon'—

'mellifluous-tongued Shakespeare'—'the Wonder of the Ages'—first saw the light?"

I should explain that Wilmer is an actor, and sometimes his private utterances are likely to be more than a little tinged with his professional art. After he had rolled out the measured periods of his eulogy, he glanced at Dick Kinnaird and me as though expecting a round of applause. But neither of us felt in the humor to go into ecstasies just then.

"If you will pardon my breaking in upon your meditations with vulgar, mundane matters," I said gently, "I should like to remind you that it is past 10 o'clock; that the night promises to be cold as well as wet; and that we have failed so far in our efforts to obtain accommodation for the night. It may possibly have escaped your memory that we have already applied at most of the hotels in the town, only

to find—as is only natural during the annual festival celebrations—that they are full up. This may be historic ground—I am quite willing to take your word for it—but I do not relish the prospect of having to sleep on it! So I propose that we get a move on.”

“I second that,” chimed in Dick Kinnaird. “In the morning I will be quite willing to view every relic, no matter how dubious, of the country-bumpkin play-actor whom, with a faith that is as touching as it is uncritical, you credit with the authorship of the immortal works. Meanwhile, as the poet himself says, ‘Come on, then, let’s to bed’—that is, if we can find one!”

Although quite normal in other respects, Dick Kinnaird held the unshakable belief that the whole of the works usually attributed to Shakespeare were in reality written by a gentleman known as Lord Bacon, who was living at the same time. Wilmer, on the other hand, regarded such an opinion as the vilest heresy. Each was a red-hot partizan, and many a long and heated argument had ensued between them on the subject. On one previous occasion they had come to actual blows, and I had no desire to see the contest renewed before the birthplace of the poet with me as the unwilling referee. I hastened to change the subject.

“Perhaps our driver will know of some vacant lodgings,” I suggested, indicating the patriarch who sat dozing on the box of the ancient vehicle which we had chartered at the station.

“Good idea,” agreed Wilmer. “Consult the oracle forthwith.”

The driver was a venerable old gentleman with a long white beard. Had he been robed in a sheet, with an hour-glass slung at his girdle and a scythe in his hand, he would have made a very fair impersonation of old Father Time. Unfortunately he was a little deaf, and it was only on the third repetition of my question that a

glimmer of understanding showed in his watery eyes.

“Whoi, I doan roightly know, zur,” he said in his broad Warwickshire dialect. “Maybes old Martha Condell ’ud be willing to put ’ee up for the night.”

I jumped at the idea. “She has a vacant room?” I asked eagerly.

“Well, zur, she has a room, sartinly, and it’s empty, as ’ee say, but”—he paused and shook his head slowly—“maybes ye’d better seek sumwheres else, arter all.”

“Why?” I demanded. The man’s manner puzzled me.

“It be a main queer sort o’ room, that o’ Martha Condell’s,” he answered.

“What’s wrong with it, anyway?” put in Wilmer.

The old man favored him with a prolonged stare; then took off his battered hat and scratched his head. “Maybes that ain’t for me to say, zur,” he replied at last. “Her house be ’unnerds o’ years old, with queer old furniture, an’—an’ there be things there—”

“Things?” I echoed.

“Queer, creepy things. Cur’osities some folk may call ’em, but to my moind sichloike didn’t ought to be kep’ above ground. The graveyard’s the place for the loike o’ they, surely!”

Dick Kinnaird turned a bewildered face to me. “What can he mean?” he muttered.

“I don’t know, and I don’t greatly care.” I pulled open the door of the cab as I spoke, and motioned them to enter. The rain was now falling with a steadiness that proved it to be no passing April shower, and a bleak east wind was rising. “I’d rather sleep in a veritable chamber of horrors than remain out longer on a night like this. Go ahead, driver!”

At a leisurely pace the cab began to thread its way through the now deserted streets. As it turned to the

right I caught a glimpse of the rain-lashed waters of the Avon; then we left the river road and a few minutes later came to a halt before a small, detached house standing almost in the shadow of the ancient gray tower of the Guild Chapel. In response to our knock the door was opened by a short, frail-looking old lady. Wilmer, electing himself as spokesman, addressed her with his most fascinating smile.

She seemed somewhat taken aback by his request for a room, and for several moments stood as though in thought. When at length she spoke, it was in the quiet, self-possessed accents of a cultured woman.

"I am not in the habit of taking boarders," she said, "but you may stay here if you wish. It certainly is a very wretched night." She made the last observation in a tone which seemed to imply that she was seeking an excuse to justify a departure from her usual rule. "Perhaps it would be as well not to dismiss your cab until you have seen the room. It may possibly not be to your liking."

A vague sense of misgiving came over me as she spoke. It seemed as though her words held some sinister meaning. The next moment the feeling passed. We were not in position to be fastidious.

"There's no need for us to see the room, Madam," I told her cheerfully. "So long as it has a roof and four walls we will be satisfied."

**T**HE moment I crossed the threshold I got my first surprize. The exterior of the house had seemed commonplace enough. Like so many of the old houses in the town, it had at some recent time been faced with common red brick, which made it appear comparatively modern; but the interior was a perfect gem of unspoilt, antique beauty. The tiny hall into which we stepped was paneled with age-blackened oak; the steep, narrow staircase was flanked by carved balustrades of the Elizabethan period;

while the bedroom into which we were finally ushered would have set the heart of an antiquarian beating with delight. No false modern note jarred upon its tranquil, Old World charm. The arched stone fireplace was pure Tudor; the leaded casement still retained the tiny, greenish panes of the original blown glass; the furniture would have fetched a small fortune in a London salesroom.

I could not repress a cry of amazement as I surveyed the room.

"Why, this should be one of the show places of Stratford!" I declared with enthusiasm.

A slight flush of pleasure appeared on the pale features of our hostess.

"Yes, it is certainly a very old house," she said quietly. "It has belonged to our family for generations—in fact, the Condells were living here at the same time that the great William Shakespeare lived at the New Place, which, as you may remember, was the house he bought when he left London, in the year 1611, and came here to spend the last few years of his life as an honored and wealthy citizen of his native town."

A muttered exclamation from Wilmer caused me to glance toward him.

"Condell—Condell"—he was repeating the name with the air of one who strives to capture an elusive memory—"surely I've heard that name before. Why, of course—Henry Condell and John Heminge were two of Shakespeare's company of players, to whom he bequeathed legacies for mourning rings in his famous will. It was they who edited and published the first complete folio of his plays in 1623."

"I am descended from that same Henry Condell," said the old lady with quite excusable pride. "This house formed part of the New Place estate, and, before dying, Shakespeare presented it to his old fellow-player. There existed a strong bond of affection between the two, for Henry Condell was himself no mean poet. It

is said that he composed the lines that are carved on this box."

Quickly crossing the room, she took from the sideboard a small wooden casket and handed it to Wilmer. No sooner had he brought it within the range of the single candle which lighted the room than an exclamation of surprize escaped him. Attracted by his evident agitation, I stepped to his side, but he waved me back impatiently and turned to the woman.

"Have you read the lines that are written here?" he asked in a voice that he vainly tried to keep natural.

"I have not even seen them, sir," came the quiet answer. "I was born blind."

Blind! I peered closely into the withered face and saw that she indeed spoke the truth. Yet so alert and assured had been her movements that the revelation came as a sudden shock. I began to murmur some words of sympathy, but she cut them short.

"I have lived here so long that I know every step, every nook and corner and, as I very seldom stir out of doors, my affliction does not hamper my movements. Is the room to your liking, gentlemen?"

We hastened to assure her that it suited us in every way. Whereupon, after wishing us a good night's rest, the old dame took her departure. Scarcely had the door closed on her when Wilmer was holding out the casket with trembling hands.

"What a find! What priceless luck! Here's a hitherto unsuspected relic of Shakespeare—and *such* a relic! There, read that."

As he spoke he pointed to some lines carved on the lid in strange, old-fashioned characters. I read them out slowly:

Pause, Reader! Gaze with uncover'd Head  
On these Relicks of y<sup>e</sup> Immortal Dead!  
A Poet's Hande, whych, in byegone Dayes,  
Gave to y<sup>e</sup> Worlde full six-and-thirtie  
Playes.

Also hys Pen, whych hee, lyke a magick  
Speare,  
Did Shake o'er Mankind, drawing Smile or  
Teare.

By subtyl Arts preserved against Decay,  
They'll last untyl hys Fame be pass'd away.

Wilmer Denton laid a shaking hand on my arm. "Don't you understand?" he cried. "Inside that casket rests the hand of Shakespeare!"

Wondering, incredulous, still scarcely realizing the tremendous import of his words, I stood staring dully at the little oblong box. Then I put forth my hand to raise the lid. For a second it resisted my efforts, then suddenly sprang upward. As it did so, the sides of the casket, which were hinged, fell away, revealing an inner casket either of clear glass or crystal. This was completely filled with some colorless liquid, and suspended in it was a human hand. Apparently it had been severed from the arm at a spot a few inches above the wrist, but the actual cut was hidden by a portion of red velvet sleeve terminating in a turned-back linen cuff. Between the slender, tapering fingers was a goose-quill pen, held as if in the act of writing.

**D**ICK KINNAIRD was the first to break the awe-struck silence.

"It's modeled in wax—it must be! No dead flesh could remain so firm and lifelike."

Without replying, Wilmer bent over and closely examined the grim souvenir. Then he straightened up and shook his head.

"If that is a model it is the most realistic one ever made," he declared with conviction. "I can even see the tiny hairs on the back of the hand. Moreover, what would be the object in placing a wax replica in spirit? No, no, it's my firm belief that we are looking at the actual hand of the poet. At all events, I think the inscription on the lid is sufficient to set all doubts at rest concerning the authorship of the plays."

"I can not see how," returned Dick with an obstinate frown. "It certainly does not mention the poet by name."

"Indeed?" shrugged Wilmer.  
"Read the lines again:

Also his pen, which he, like a magic *Speare*,  
Did *Shake* o'er mankind.

"Why, the allusion to Shakespeare's name is obvious. Such a play on words is quite in the spirit of the age."

But Dick was far from being convinced. He took up the crystal casket and held it on a level with his eyes.

"I think you're taking too much for granted," he said. "I've seen preserved anatomical specimens before, and they've always appeared bleached, withered and altogether unnatural-looking; while this is so perfect that one might almost imagine the blood to be still coursing through its veins. But, whether it be artificial or real, I still hold to my opinion. I'm willing to stake my soul that this hand never penned—my God!"

He uttered the final words with a gasping cry, his tone of lofty contempt giving place to one of shivering horror.

"What happened?" I stepped forward as I asked the question.

He hastily replaced the casket on the table and wiped the moisture from a face which had suddenly gone gray-white.

"It moved!" he whispered hoarsely. "As I am a living man, that hand moved as I said the words!"

"Nonsense," interposed Wilmer. "Probably you shook the casket."

"I tell you it moved of its own accord," persisted Dick with a shudder. "And it's moving now! Look! Look!"

For a full minute we gazed in silence at the gruesome fragment of humanity. Yes, it certainly seemed as if a slight movement was agitating it, and at first I, like Wilmer, set this down to the disturbance of the preserving medium in which it was immersed. But the next moment I knew this could not be the explanation. For the fingers that held the pen were

flexing in such a manner as no chance current could account for. The others saw it, too.

"By heaven! you're right!" Wilmer gasped. "It's forming letters—writing! Merciful God! the hand of Shakespeare is spelling out a message from the grave!"

Then, as we stood spellbound with horror, scarcely daring to credit the evidence of our senses, we saw the thing happen. With a movement so calm and unhurried that it only accentuated its ghastliness, the hand began to write. Although the pen made no mark, we were easily able to recognize each letter as it was formed:

If ye desire proof to seize,  
Emulate the feat of Ulysses.

Just those words; then the hand was still once more.

For a space we remained tense and breathless, waiting in vain for the message to be continued. Then Wilmer turned to me with a question.

"Before we let this go any further we'd better check our impressions." He drew his notebook from his pocket as he spoke. "What was the message you saw traced?"

I repeated the strange, unmeaning couplet, and Dick Kinnaird confirmed it.

"That was my own impression, but I thought I must be mistaken," said Wilmer as he copied the words down in his book. "We must have misread the message—there's no sense in it. How is it possible for us to emulate the feat of Ulysses?"

Dick Kinnaird gave an unsteady laugh. "The hero of Homer's *Odyssey* is supposed to have performed many marvelous feats during his voyages. We're in for a fairly exciting time if we've got to imitate them all. There must be another meaning——"

"Wait!" I interrupted suddenly, as an idea flashed through my mind.

As is so often the case when one is perplexed, I had allowed my eyes to roam idly round the room. Without

consciously doing so, I noted the low, molded ceiling, the huge oaken chest beneath the window, the high-backed old chairs, the carved chimney-piece of unusual and fantastic design. Its ornamentation consisted of a series of small but beautifully executed figures taken from the mythology of ancient Greece: graceful nymphs, sporting fauns, grinning satyrs, heroes, gods and goddesses were there; while forming the keystone of the arch was a huge Cyclops' head having a single staring eye in the center of its forehead. The moment my eyes lighted on it I knew that I had found the key to the baffling couplet.

"The feat of Ulysses!" I cried, pointing to the repulsive countenance of the carved giant. "Don't you remember how, when captured by the Cyclops, he made his escape by thrusting out the single eye of the giant Polyphemus?"

In a flash they understood. Almost before I had finished speaking, Wilmer's finger was on the eyeball, pressing it inward with all his force. At the same moment, almost without a sound, a portion of the wall-paneling swung forward, revealing a narrow, doorlike aperture.

"There's another room beyond!" cried Dick, snatching up the candle and peering through. Then he entered boldly. We were close at his heels.

**T**O MY surprise, it was no tiny hiding-place that we entered, but a room, tall, spacious and elegantly furnished in the fashion of an age long past. Rows of well-filled bookshelves covered one wall; beneath them was set a long bench bearing piles of untidy-looking manuscripts. A much-used desk stood on one side; near it was a table having upon it a large, silver-gilt bowl filled with still-blooming roses. In one corner rested a long, eup-hilted sword. There was no trace of dust, no dead, musty odor to denote a room long sealed up.

"We must have penetrated into one of the adjoining houses," whispered Dick Kinnaird. "Those flowers are still fresh——"

It was then that we heard the footsteps.

At first they were so faint that it was only by senses strained to the utmost limit of expectancy—as you may be sure ours were at the moment—that they could be detected at all. Slow, intermittent, with a pause of varying length every now and then, they sounded like the steps of one who paces about deep in thought.

"They're coming from the next room—in there," breathed Wilmer, jabbing his finger in the direction of a door on the opposite side of the room to which we had entered. I nodded silently and, drawn by a curiosity which overmastered my fear, crept forward and listened. The steps were louder now, and, mingled with them, came the sound of a voice speaking in low, measured tones. I have listened to some famous actors both before and since that time, but never have I heard such flowing music as I did in that silent, half-lit room in Stratford-on-Avon. My mind likened the words to a stream of molten gold, interspersed every now and then with the gleam of a precious jewel:

I have bedimm'd  
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous  
winds,  
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd  
vault  
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling  
thunder  
Have I given fire, and rivèd Jove's stout oak  
With his own bolt: the strong-bas'd pro-  
montory  
Have I made shake: and by the spurs  
plucked up  
The pine and cedar; graves, at my command,  
Have wak'd their sleepers, oped, and let  
them forth  
By my so potent art. But this rough magic  
I here abjure; and, when I have requir'd  
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)  
To work mine end upon their senses, that  
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And, deeper than did ever plummet sound,  
I'll drown my Book.

As the wondrous voice ceased, a shout from Wilmer caused me to swing round. He had crossed to the piles of manuscripts and was turning them over with feverish eagerness.

"See here, you fellows! Here's something that's worth fifty times its weight in gold. Manuscript plays—originals—in Shakespeare's own handwriting—dozens of 'em! Look at the titles—*Troilus and Cressida*—*The Winter's Tale*—*Love's Labour Lost*—And what's this? *Love's Labour Won*? Evidently an unknown play. Here's *Hamlet*. As I've always suspected, it's been adapted from an older play—look at those interlinear additions. *Timon of Athens*—why, when you consider that, apart from his signatures, there is not a single line of his handwriting in existence, the contents of this room must be absolutely priceless!"

The door at the farther end of the room slowly opened. Framed in the aperture, like a portrait limned by a master hand, was a figure which, though now seen for the first time, seemed like that of a familiar friend. Impossible to mistake that pale, oval face, crowned by the finely arched forehead and lofty brow; those firm, humorous lips half concealed by the short auburn beard; those deep, all-seeing eyes. It was the shade of the man whose name will live as long as the English tongue is spoken.

With slow, easy steps the spirit came toward us, and we, as though impelled by some supreme, dominating will, retreated backward pace for pace. Reaching the table, he stretched forth his hand over the pile of writings with a tender, caressing movement. Then, with a graceful half-sweep of his arm—a gesture that could not have been acquired otherwise than on the stage—he pointed to the door by which we had entered.

I stood like a man dazed. My mind was a welter of conflicting desires. I longed to stay, to question the apparition, to examine those precious

papers on the table, to handle the "silver-gilt bowl" and "sword" which might be the very articles mentioned in the poet's will. For a moment I fought the mysterious force that seemed to be compelling me to obey that unspoken command. Then, as I turned and groped blindly for the door, I heard in the distance a faint cock-crow heralding the coming dawn.

AFTER that, my mind was blank. I have no recollection of passing through the dividing wall, and certainly none of the display of nervous hysteria to which my companions assert I gave way. My next clear memory is finding myself back in our bedroom, with the secret door shut fast and the cold light of the April dawn stealing through the leaded casement.

"Hullo, old man. Feeling better?" Wilmer bent over me as I lay and slapped me heartily on the shoulder. "You've had a nasty dose of ghost-shock!"

He had his coat off and his shirt sleeves rolled up. In his hand he held a long screw-driver, obtained from heaven alone knows where.

"I'm about to open that secret door," he went on in answer to my look of astonishment.

"You have only to press the eye—"

He shook his head. "I've tried that, but there's nothing doing. The door is screwed up."

"Screwed up? Impossible! It opened easily enough last night."

"Look for yourself. There—and there—and there."

As he spoke he indicated a row of screw-heads, counter-sunk flush with the woodwork. Encrusted with rust as they were, it seemed as though they had been there for years.

I watched him in silence as he set to work and, not without difficulty, extracted the screws. As the last one came away the door swung open of its own accord. A simultaneous gasp

(Continued on page 425)



# The Immortal Hand

*(Continued from page 331)*

of amazement escaped our lips. In place of the opening through which we had passed not an hour since, there stood facing us a stretch of solid wall. And not a newly built wall, either. The mortar was set as hard as iron; long festoons of dusty cobwebs hung from the discolored bricks, showing that they had not been disturbed for ages.

We could only stare at each other speechlessly.

“Were we dreaming or drunk when we passed through that door last night?” asked Kinnaird after a pause that seemed to have lasted hours.

Moved by a sudden thought, I stepped to the window and threw it open. Leaning out, I looked along the outside surface of the wall. Our room abutted on a vacant site, and where the room of the previous night had been there was nothing but empty air! But, looking closer, I perceived unmistakable traces that the house had once formed a wing of a much larger building, which had been demolished. I turned my eyes downward; stared—rubbed my eyes—and stared again.

The sun was rising bright and clear behind the peaked gables of the surrounding houses, and by its light I saw that I was looking down on the serried rows of broken and time-stained stones which are all that remain to mark the site of New Place—the last home of William Shakespeare.