

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1950

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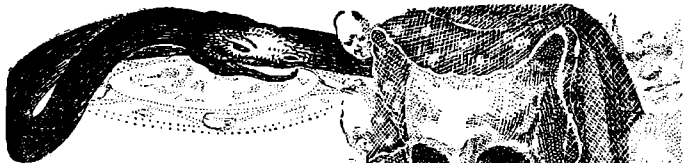
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



He had to speak quickly; the power would not last long.

The Last Man

BY SEABURY QUINN

One cup to the dead already—
Hurrah for the next that dies!
—Bartholomew Dowling, *The Revel*.

MYCROFT paused self-consciously before the little bronze plate marked simply TOUSSAINT above the doorbell of the big brownstone house in East One Hundred and Thirty-sixth Street. He felt extraordinarily foolish, like a costumed adult at a child's masquerade party, or as if he were about to rise and "speak a piece." People—his kind of people—simply didn't do this sort of thing.

Then his resolution hardened. "What can I lose?" he muttered cynically, and pressed the button.

A Negro butler, correct as a St. John's Wood functionary in silver-buttoned dress suit and striped waistcoat, answered his ring. "Mister—Monsieur Toussaint?" asked Mycroft tentatively.

"Who iss calling?" asked the butler with the merest trace of accent on his words.

"Uh—Mr. Smith—no, Jones," Mycroft replied, and the shadow of a sneer showed



Heading by Vincent Napoli

at the corners of the young Negro's mouth. "One minute, if you pleez," he returned, stepped back into the hall and closed the

door. In a moment he was back and held the door open. "This way, if you pleez," he invited.

Mycroft was not quite certain what he would find; what he did find amazed him. Vaguely he had thought the place would reek with incense, possibly be hung with meretricious tapestries and papier-mâché weapons, perhaps display a crystal ball or two against cheap cotton-velvet table covers. He was almost awe-struck by the somber magnificence of the room into which he was ushered. Deep-piled rugs from Hamadan and Samarkand lay on the floor, the furniture was obviously French, dull matte-gold wood upholstered in olive-green brocade, on the walls were either Renoir and Picasso originals or imitations good enough to fool a connoisseur; somewhat incongruously, above the fireplace where logs blazed on polished andirons hung a square of rather crudely woven cotton stuff bordered in barbaric black and green. On second look the border proved to be a highly conventionalized but still disturbingly realistic serpent. More in character was the enormous black Persian cat that crouched upon a lustrous Bokhara prayer rug before the fire, paws tucked demurely under it, great plummy tail curled round it, and stared at him with yellow, sulphurous eyes.

"Good evening, Mr. Mycroft, you wished to see me?" Mycroft started as if he had been stung by a wasp. He had not heard the speaker enter, and certainly he was not prepared to be greeted by name.

AT THE entrance of the drawing room stood his host, smiling faintly at his discomfort. He was a tall man of uncertain age, dressed with a beautiful attention to detail in faultless evening clothes. The studs of his immaculate white shirt were star sapphires, so were his cuff links, in his lapel showed the red ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur, and he was very black. But not comic, not "dressed up," not out of character. He wore his English-tailored dress clothes as one to the manner born, and there was distinction, almost a nobility, about his features that made Mycroft think of the

head of an old Roman Emperor, or perhaps a statesman of the Golden Age of the Republic, carved in basalt.

He had planned his introduction, humorous, and a little patronizing, but as he stared at the other Mycroft felt stage fright. "I—" he began, then gulped and stumbled in his speech. "I—uh—I've heard about you, Mister—Monsieur Toussaint. Some friends of mine told me—"

"Yes?" prompted Toussaint as Mycroft's voice frayed out like a pulled woolen thread. "What is it that you want of me?"

"I've heard you're able to do remarkable things—" once more he halted, and a look of irritation crossed his host's calm features.

"Really, Mr. Mycroft—"

"I've heard that you have power to raise spirits!" Mycroft blurted confusedly. "I'm told you can bring spirits of the dead back—" Once again he halted, angry with himself for the fear he felt clawing at his throat. "Can it be done? Can you do it?"

"Of course," Toussaint replied, quite as if he had been asked if he could furnish musicians for a party. "Whose spirit is it that you want called? When—and how—did he die?"

Mycroft felt on surer ground now. There was no nonsense about this Toussaint, no hint of the charlatan. He was a businessman discussing business. "There are several of them—twenty-five or -six. They died in—er—different ways. You see, they served with me in—"

"Very well, Mr. Mycroft. Come here night after tomorrow at precisely ten minutes to twelve. Everything will be in readiness, and you must on no account be late. Leave your telephone and address with the butler, in case I have to get in touch with you."

"And the fee?"

"The fee will be five hundred dollars, payable after the séance, if you're satisfied. Otherwise there will be no charge. Good evening, Mr. Mycroft."

The impulse had come to him that evening as he walked across the Park from

his apartment to his club in East Eighty-sixth Street. Spring had come to New York, delicately as a ballerina dancing *sur les pointes*, every tree was veiled in scarves of green chiffon, every park was jeweled with crocus-gold, but he had found no comfort in awakening nature, nor any joy in the sweet softness of the air. That morning as he unfurled his *Times* in the subway on his way downtown he had seen the notice of Roy Hardy's death. Roy had been the twenty-sixth. He was the last man.

More than fifty years ago they had marched down the Avenue, eager, bright-faced, colors flying, curbside crowds cheering. Off to Cuba, off to fight for Liberty. Remember the Maine!

"When you hear that bell go ding-a-ling,
And we all join in and sweetly we will sing, my baby,
When you hear that bell go ding-a-ling,
There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

the band had blared. He could still hear the echo of Max Schultz's cornet as he triple-tongued the final note.

They didn't look too much like soldiers, those ribbon-counter clerks and bookkeepers and stock exchange messengers. The supercilious French and British correspondents and observers smiled tolerantly at their efforts to seem military; the Germans laughed outright, and the German-armed, German-trained Spanish veterans disdained them. But after El Caney and San Juan Hill the tune changed. Astounded and demoralized, the Spaniards surrendered in droves, the foreigners became polite, the Cubans took the valiant Americans to their collective hearts, and no one was more gracious in his hospitality than Don José Rosales y Montalvo, whose house in the Calle O'Brien became an informal headquarters for the officers and noncoms of the company.

Don José's table creaked and groaned beneath a load of delicacies such as those

young New Yorkers had never seen or even heard of and his cellars seemed inexhaustible. Lads who had known only beer, or, in more reckless moments, gin and whiskey, were introduced to St. Estephe, Johannesburg and Nûites St. Georges. Madeira and Majorca flowed like water, champagne was common as soda pop at home.

But more intoxicating than the strongest, headiest vintage in Don José's caves was Doña Juanita Maria, his daughter. She was a *rubia*, a Spanish blonde, with hair as lustrous as the fine-drawn wires of the gold filigree cross at her throat. Little, almost tiny, she walked with a sort of lilting, questing eagerness, her every movement graceful as a grain-stalk in the wind. Her voice had that sweet, throaty, velvety quality found only in southern countries, and when she played the guitar and sang *cançons* the songs were fraught with yearning sadness and passionate longing that made those hearing her catch their breath.

Every man-jack of them was in love with her, and not a one of them but polished up his Spanish to say, "*Yo te amo, Juanita—Juanita, I love you!*" And there was not a one of them who did not get a sweet, tender refusal and, by way of consolation, a chaste, siterly kiss on the cheek.

THE night before their transport sailed Don José gave a party, a *celebración grande*. The patio of the house was almost bright as noon with moonlight, and in the narrow Saracenic arches between the pillars of the ambulatory Chinese lanterns hung, glowing golden-yellow in the shadows. A long table clothed with fine Madeira drawnwork and shining silver and crystal was laid in the center of the courtyard, at its center was a great bouquet of red roses. Wreathed in roses a fat wine cask stood on wooden sawhorses near the table's head. "It is Pedro Ximenes, a full hundred years old," Don José explained proudly. "I have kept it for some great occasion. Surely this is one. What greater honor could it have than to be served to Cuba's gallant liberators on the eve of their departure?"

After dinner toasts were drunk. To *Cuba*

Libré, to Don José, to the lovely Nofia Juanita. Then, blushing very prettily, but in nowise disconcerted, she consented to sing them a farewell.

"*Pregúntale à las estrellas,
Si no de noche me venillover,
Pregúntale si no busco,
Para adorarte la soledad . . .*"

she sang,

"O ask of the stars above you
If I did not weep all the night,
O ask if I do not love you,
Who of you dreamt till the
dawn-light . . ."

Sabers flashed in the moonlight, blades beat upon the table. "Juanita! Juanita!" they cried fervently. "We love you, Juanita!"

"And I love you—all of you—*señores amados*," she called gaily back. "Each one of you I love so much I could not bear to give my heart to him for fear of hurting all the others. So" —her throaty, velvet voice was like a caress—"here is what I promise." Her tone sank to a soft ingratiating pizzacato and her words were delicately spaced, so that they shone like minted silver as she spoke them. "I shall belong to the last one of you. Surely one of you will outlive all the rest, and to him I shall give my heart, myself, all of me. I swear it!" She put both tiny hands against her lips and blew them a collective kiss.

And so, because they all were very young, and very much in love, and also slightly drunk, they formed the Last Man Club, and every year upon the anniversary of that night they met, talked over old times, drank a little more than was good for them, and dispersed to meet again next year.

THE years slipped by unnoticed as the current of a placid river. And time was good to them. Some of them made names for themselves in finance, the court rooms echoed to the oratory of others; the first World War brought rank and glory to some; more than one nationally advertised

product bore the name of one of their number. But time took his fee, also. Each time there were more vacant chairs about the table when they met, and those who remained showed gray at the temples, thickening at the waist, or shining patches of bald scalp. Last year there had been only three of them: Mycroft, Rice and Hardy. Two months ago he and Hardy had acted as pallbearers for Rice, now Hardy was gone.

He hardly knew what made him decide to consult Toussaint. The day before he'd met Dick Prior at luncheon at the India House and somehow talk had turned on mediums and spiritism. "I think they're all a lot of fakes," Mycroft had said, but Prior shook his head in disagreement.

"Some of 'em—most, probably—are, but there are some things hard to explain, Roger. Take this Negro, Toussaint. He *may* be a faker, but—"

"What about him?"

"Well, it seems he's a Haitian; there's a legend he's descended from Christophe, the Black Emperor. I wouldn't know about that, or whether what they say about his having been a *papaloi*—a voodoo priest, you know—has any basis. He's highly educated, graduate of Lima and the Sorbonne and all that—"

"What's he done?" Mycroft demanded testily. "You say he's done remarkable things—"

"He has. Remember Old Man Meson, Noble Meson, and the way his first wife made a monkey out of her successor?"

Mycroft shook his head. "Not very well. I recall there was a will contest—"

"I'll say there was. Old Meson got bit by the love-bug sometime after sixty. Huh, love-bug me eye, it was that little gold digger Suzanne Langdon. The way she took him away from his wife was nothing less than petty larceny: He didn't last long after he divorced Dorothy and married Suzanne. Old men who marry young wives seldom do. When he finally pegged out everybody thought he was intestate, and that meant Mrs. Meson number two would take the jackpot, but just as she was all set to rake in the chips Dorothy came up with a last

will and testament, signed, sealed, published and declared, and unassailable as Gibraltar. Seems the old goof got wise to himself, and, what was more to the point, to Suzanne, before he kicked the bucket, and made a will that disinherited her, leaving the whole works to Dorothy.

"They found it in the pocket of an old coat in his shooting cabin out on the island, and found the men who'd witnessed it, a Long Island clam-digger and a garage mechanic out at Smithtown."

"How?" asked Mycroft.

"Through this fellow Toussaint. Dorothy had heard of him somehow and went up to Harlem to consult him. She told my Aunt Matilda—Mrs. Truxton Sturdivant, you know—all about it. Seems Toussaint called old Meson's spook up—or maybe down, I wouldn't know—and it told them all about the will, gave 'em minute directions where to look for it, and told 'em who and where the witnesses were. He charged her a stiff fee, but he delivered. She's satisfied."

Mycroft had dismissed the story from his mind that afternoon, but next day when he read Roy Hardy's death notice it recurred to him. That evening as he walked across the Park he reached a decision. Of course, it was all nonsense. But Prior's story hung in his mind like a burr in a dog's fur.

Oh, well . . . he'd have a go at this Toussaint. If nothing more it would be amusing to see him go through his bag of tricks.

THE furniture and rugs had been moved from the drawing room when he reached Toussaint's house ten minutes before twelve two nights later. Before the empty, cold fireplace a kind of altar had been set up, clothed with a faircloth and surmounted by a silver cross, like any chapel sanctuary. But there were other things on it. Before the cross there coiled a great black snake, whether stuffed or carved from black wood he could not determine, and each side of the coiling serpent was a gleaming human skull. Tall candles flickered at each end of the altar, giving off the only light in the room.

As his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness he saw that a hexangular design had been drawn on the bare floor in red chalk, enclosing the altar and a space some eight feet square each side, and in each of the six angles of the figure stood a little dish filled with black powder. Before the altar, at the very center of the hexagon, was placed a folding chair of the kind used in funeral parlors.

Annoyed, he looked about the room for some sign of Toussaint, and as the big clock in the hall struck the first stave of its hour-chime a footstep sounded at the door. Toussaint entered with an attendant at each elbow. All three wore cassocks of bright scarlet, and over these were surplices of white linen. In addition each wore a red, pointed cap like a miter on his head.

"Be seated," Toussaint whispered, pointing to the folding chair before the altar and speaking quickly, as if great haste were necessary. "On no account, no matter what you see or hear, are you to put so much as a finger past the confines of the hexagon. If you do you are worse than a dead man—you are lost. You understand?"

Mycroft nodded, and Toussaint approached the altar with his attendants close beside him. They did not genuflect, merely bowed deeply, then Toussaint took two candles from beneath his surplice, lit them at the tapers burning on the altar and handed them to his attendants.

Fairly running from one point of the hexagon to another the acolytes set fire to the black powder in the little metal saucers with their candles, then rejoined Toussaint at the altar.

The big hall clock had just completed striking twelve as Toussaint called out sharply:

"Papa Legba, keeper of the gate, open for us!"

Like a congregation making the responses at a litany the acolytes repeated:

"Papa Legba, keeper of the gate, open for us!"

"Papa Legba, open wide the gate that they may pass!" intoned Toussaint, and once again his attendants repeated his invocation.

It might have been the rumble of a subway train, or one of those strange, inexplicable noises that the big city knows at night, but Mycroft could have sworn that he heard the rumble of distant thunder.

Again and again Toussaint repeated his petition that "the gate" be opened, and his attendants echoed it. This was getting to be tiresome. Mycroft shifted on his uncomfortable seat and looked across his shoulder. His heart contracted suddenly and the blood churned in his ears. About the chalk-marked hexagon there seemed to cluster in the smoke cast off by the censers a rank of dim, indistinct forms, forms not quite human, yet resembling nothing else. They did not move, they did not stir as fog stirs in a breath of wind, they simply hung there motionless in the still air.

*"Papa Legba, open wide the gate that
thou this man would speak with may
come through!"*

shouted Toussaint, and now the silent shadow-forms seemed taking on a kind of substance. Mycroft could distinguish features—Willis Dykes, he'd been the top kick, and Freddie Pyle, the shavetail, Curtis Sackett, Ernie Proust—one after another of his old comrades he saw in the silent circle as a man sees images upon a photographic negative when he holds it up to the light.

Now Toussaint's chant had changed. No longer was it a reiterated plea, but a great shout of victory. "Damballa Oueddo, Master of the Heavens! Damballa, thou art here! Open wide the dead ones' mouths, Damballa Oueddo. Give them breath to speak and answer questions; give this one his heart's desire!"

Turning from the altar he told Mycroft, "Say what you have to say quickly. The power will not last long!"

Mycroft shook himself like a dog emerging from the water. For an instant he saw in his mind's eye the courtyard of Don José's house, saw the eager, flush-faced youths grouped about the table, saw Juanita in the silver glow of moonlight, lovely as

a fairy from Tinania's court as she laughed at them, promising . . .

"Juanita, where is Juanita?" he asked thickly. "She promised she would give herself to the last man—"

"Estoy aquí, querido!"

In fifty years and more he had not heard that voice, but he remembered it as if it had been yesterday—or ten minutes since—when he last heard it. "Juanita!" he breathed, and the breath choked in his throat as he pronounced her name.

SHE came toward him quickly, passing through the ranks of misty shades like one who walks through swirling whorls of silvery fog. Both her hands reached toward him in a pretty haste. All in white she was, from the great carved ivory comb in her golden hair to the little white sandals cross-strapped over her silken insteps. Her white mantilla had been drawn across her face coquettishly, but he could see it flutter with the breath of her impatience.

"Rog-ger," she spoke his name with the same hesitation between syllables he remembered so well. "Rog-ger, *querido*—be-loved!"

He leaped from the chair, stretched reaching hands to her outstretched gloved fingers past the boundary of the chalk-drawn hexagon. "Juanita! Juanita, I have waited so long . . . so long . . ."

Her mantilla fell back as his fingers almost touched hers. There was something wrong with her face. This was not the image he had carried in his heart for more than fifty years. Beneath the crown of gleaming golden hair, between the folds of the white lace mantilla a bare, fleshless skull looked at him. Empty eye-holes stared into his eyes, lipless teeth grinned at him.

He stumbled like a man hit with a blackjack, spun half-way round, then went down so quickly that the impact of his limpness on the polished floor made the candles on the altar flicker.

"*Maitre*," one of the attendants plucked Toussaint's white surplice, "*Maitre*, the man is dead."