

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1948

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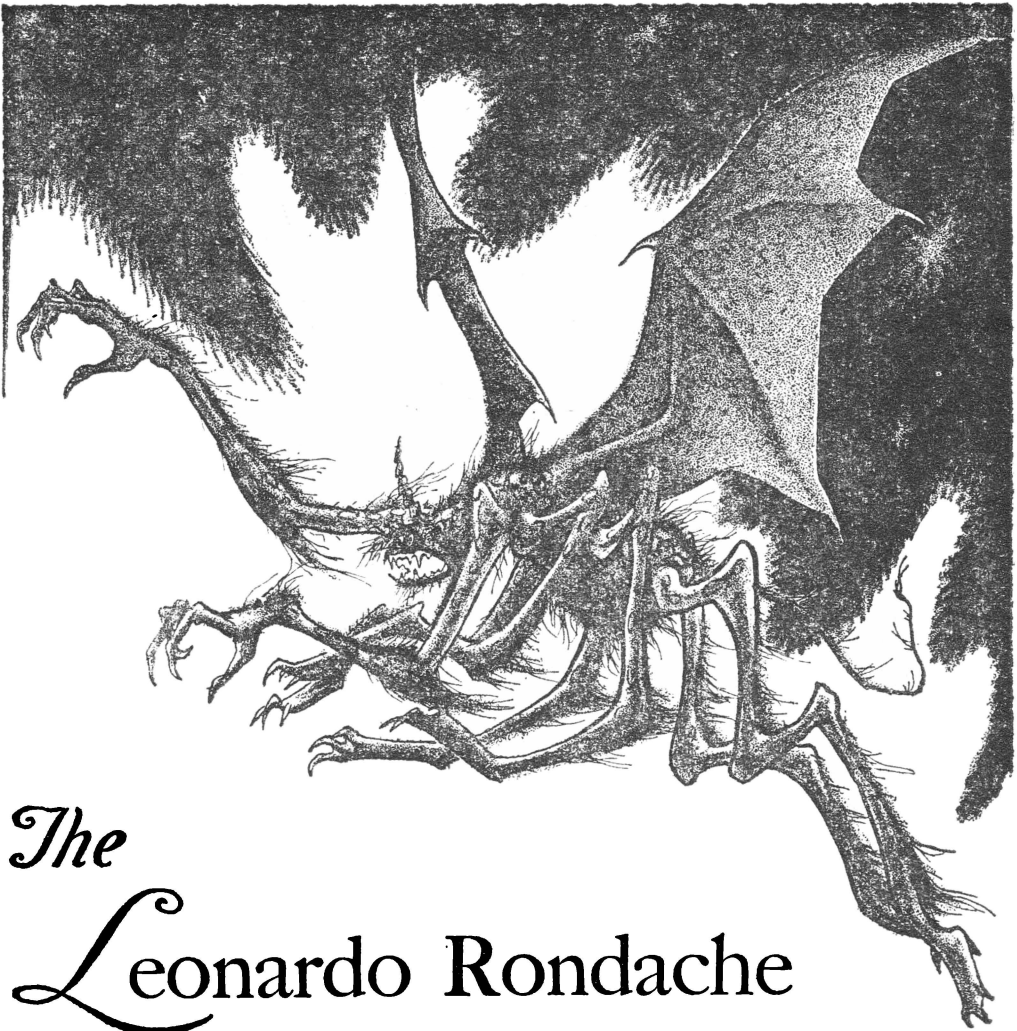
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The Leonardo Rondache

BY MANLY WADE WELLMAN

BETWEEN Prendic Norbier and John Thunstone were not many physical differences. They were both inches over six feet, they were both broad even in proportion to such height, they were both dark-haired and strong-featured. Each had huge, long hands such as one associates with statues, each was perforce dressed in specially tailored clothing and specially cobbled shoes. And just now, in Norbier's

little study-shack behind his country house, they sat on opposite sides of the table beneath the bright ceiling light in attitudes of eager interest almost exactly alike.

Differences were the great differences one sees at a second glance. That second glance, if a thoughtful one, would define John Thunstone's weight as hard, active weight and Norbier's as relaxed, good-humored weight. The tan on Thunstone's broad

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

.... a deep, dead silence and strange light that grew less and less ...

brow and lined jowl was somehow the tan of open-air activity, and that on Norbier's recognizable as fashionable tan, the product of lounging on beaches or dozing under sun lamps. And the expression in Thunstone's eyes was of intent, almost apprehensive study, while Norbier looked on in confident anticipation.

Dwarfed in Thunstone's great fingers was a magnifying glass. He narrowed his eye to peer through it at the photograph on the table. Finally he laid the glass down and looked at Norbier.

"It's a da Vinci signature," he announced gravely. "The reversed writing and the distinctive letter-forms—of course, those in themselves could be trickery, even clumsy trickery. But the glass shows that the lines are real writing, not a forger's painstakingly drawn replica. It's da Vinci, though with more of youth in it than any I remember seeing. Of course, there are other experts, better qualified than I—"

"You're one of several that says Leonardo da Vinci wrote the signature I photographed," said Norbier. "Thank you, Thunstone." He took the photographed writing back. "Now as to your pay—"

"For my pay," said Thunstone, "show me the original."

Norbier smiled. His smile was not like Thunstone's, it was a trifle crooked and suspicious. "Well," he said, "I've thought and even worried about showing the original. But you, Thunstone, study other things than handwriting and Renaissance art. Your specific studies might make it all right for you to have a look. Those studies of yours—and the honest wish I feel to make a friend of you."

"My only other serious study," reminded Thunstone, "is black magic and how to nullify it."

"Exactly," nodded Norbier. "You'll see how it fits in. Step this way."

They rose and Norbier led the way across the floor to a wide narrow table that stood against a wall. Something stood there, like a big round mirror, covered with a white cloth. "Here it is," announced Norbier, and pulled the cloth away.

What Thunstone said would have been a curse, but for the tone that made it a prayer. He gazed at the round disk of

wood, old and heavy and as big around as a tea tray. For a moment it was no disk, nor was it wood. In the brilliant light of the ceiling lamp he had a sense of attentive menace, glaring and scrambling. Then he made himself realize that he was looking at something painted; and painted long ago at that—the colors dimmed, the detail faded. Thunstone's mouth looked thin for a moment, but he kept himself steady.

"There's the signature I photographed, dashed in with black pigment just below the picture," Norbier was telling him. "And you probably realize just what one of Leonardo's lost masterpieces this is."

THUNSTONE gazed at Norbier. "I know what story of his life it immediately tells," he agreed. "A story some say is a legend, and others—Mrs. Rachel Annand Taylor for one—feel sure it is true. Leonardo was a boy in the home of his father, the notary Piero da Vinci. A peasant brought a round of wood—a *rondache*, such as foot-soldiers of that day used for shields—asking that a decoration be painted upon it—"

"Exactly, exactly," Norbier almost crowed. "And Leonardo was always interested in monsters. He shut himself away and studied all kinds of unpleasant little things—lizards, spiders, bats—and borrowed from all, blending and flavoring them with his own genius. What he managed," and Norbier seemed not too anxious to look at the picture, "was sufficient to startle his father; then the elder da Vinci's business sense asserted itself. He gave the peasant another *rondache*, nicely painted with an arrow-pierced heart. He sold the weird masterpiece of his son, at a thumping price; enough, perhaps, to pay Leonardo's first tuition fees in the studio of Verrochio in Florence."

"And this may be the *rondache* in question." Thunstone studied it again. "You understand Piero da Vinci's first reaction to it, don't you? May I ask where it came to modern attention, and how you got it?"

"In Germany," said Norbier. "I had a little hand, as no doubt you've heard, in studying and identifying the hodge-podge of art treasures stolen by the Nazi bigwigs and stored away in vaults. This turned up in a neat little trove locked up in a cellar

owned by one Herr Gaienstein. Know him?"

"Gaienstein," echoed Thunstone. "Not much publicized, but admired by his chiefs for certain ancient pagan knowledge. Quarrelled with Himmler because he, Gaienstein, suggested that Himmler's elite henchmen needed special initiation before they assisted at the old rites with which Nazi chiefs wanted to replace German churches. Nobody knows how Gaienstein died, except that he did die, completely and messily. I know about him. That's where my black art studies come in."

"This *rondache* was in a vault within the vault," explained Norbier. "The other art objects fell into two classes—expensive popularized items, and pretty average obscurities. This was something special. There was no way to find where it came from. Finally I secured its release to me."

He turned back to the painted round and touched its edge with his finger. "I've been at pains to clean it without damaging. Only today there came to light this writing around the edge—a triple spiral of letters. What do you make of it, Thunstone?"

Thunstone bent, peered. His lips moved slowly, then seemed to freeze stiffly. He caught up the cloth and veiled the *rondache* once more.

"Norbier," he said, as earnestly as a judge on the bench, "if I've done you any service, do me one. Leave this thing alone for the time being. Don't uncover it or look at it until I return."

"Return?" repeated Norbier. "When?"

"Soon. Within an hour, perhaps. Agreed, Norbier?"

"Agreed," smiled Norbier, and Thunstone hurried out, with less courtesy than common with him.

LEFT alone in the study-shack, Norbier thought briefly that the silence was deeper and deader than it had been before Thunstone's call, and that the light on the ceiling was at once more lurid and less brilliant. He shook his big body, and smiled consciously to rid himself of such manifest illusions. He'd let himself become unsettled, ever so slightly, by Thunstone's strange manner in studying that triple-spiral of letters around the edge of the *rondache*.

He told himself to leave creep-sensations to Thunstone. Who was Thunstone, anyway? A man of undenied gifts and scholarship, who nevertheless fiddled and fumbled with superstitions ordinarily taken seriously by nobody over the Hallowe'en age. There were those rumors about Thunstone's enmity with some self-styled wizard named Rowley Thorne, and Thorne's destruction, and those others, even less clear, about some people called Shonokins—was that the right word?—who weren't people, but something like people. Norbier could not even remember where he had heard the stories, or whether they had been told for the truth.

Anyway, he had better things to think about. This *rondache* was the work of Leonardo da Vinci, without whom the Renaissance would certainly not have been the Renaissance. More than that, it was perhaps the first artistic labor of Leonardo da Vinci ever to attract more than family notice, and it was the basis of a delightful story of a great man. Leonardo, blessed demigod of the Quattrocento—here was his first token of greatness. Even if Norbier had been aware that he had made a solemn promise to Thunstone, he now forgot it. One hand twitched the covering cloth from the *rondache*.

No getting away from it, even after so many glimpses he found the impact of that painting almost physically strong and daunting. But Norbier, for all his appearance of lazy softness, was neither naive nor cowardly. He sat down before the painted thing to study it.

If Leonardo da Vinci, a curly-blond boy in his teens, had studied lizards, bats and spiders for this, he had not hodge-podged his studies. Anyone else would have been content with a lizard's body, a spider's knuckly jointed legs, a bat's wings. Not so Leonardo, master of his eye and hand and brush even before his voice had changed and the first peachy fuzz had sprouted for the beginning of that apostolic beard he was to wear. What had Thunstone said? ". . . blending and flavoring them with his own genius." That was right. It sounded almost like a phrase from an art critic's description, what time Norbier would call in the art critics. But first he would enjoy the thing to the full, then decide which museum

—civic or university—to offer it to as a loan. Not a gift, a loan. Then the critics would come and stare and wonder and worship.

Gazing and pondering thus, Norbier told himself that he was seeing the odious figure in the center of the round wood more clearly than ever before. It had clarity and life, that ancient color on that ancient wood. The thing was head on toward an observer, but you sensed the shape and extent of the foreshortened body, at once lizard-lithe and spider-squat. The legs—there seemed to be a great many of them—were hairy and jointed, but those in front, at least, bore handlike extremities, reminiscent of the forefeet of lizards. Those wings were true da Vinci work; Norbier remembered the tales of how da Vinci, seeking to invent the airplane centuries before Langley or Wright, studied painstakingly every flying creature, bat, bird and insect. As for the thing's head, that was apparently meant to seem a squat, dark-furred blotch, with two glowing close-set eyes peering from the thick fur as from an ambush. A real face to it, flattened like a bat's, and a mouth with a jaw of ophidian shallowness, but a little open, to show . . . yes, fangs. No wonder that everyone who saw the thing, from Piero da Vinci to the present, squared his shoulders a trifle to dissemble a shiver.

THE writing around the rim, now. Oddly enough, Thunstone had been more impressed with that than with the picture. Men had told Norbier that Thunstone was never frightened, but Norbier thought different. What said the writing? It was a string of Roman capitals, that began at almost the exact top of the *rondache* and curved away to the left around the wooden rim, then came back and made a second circuit within the first, and a third within the second—a triple spiral. Aloud Norbier spelled out some letters:

"A—G—L—A—"

A cross-mark came there. "The end of the word," he said, and enjoyed the comfort of his own voice's sound. "If I read backward from left to right, there are words. What language? Let's see."

He took hold of the *rondache* and revolved it, reading more words aloud as they came to the top:

"Agla . . . Barachiel . . . On . . . Astasieel . . . Alpahero . . . Raphael . . . Algar . . . Uriel . . . end of the first circle."

Some of the names sounded familiar, names from old songs or prayers. He revolved the disk to read the second circle:

"Michael . . . Iova . . . Gabriel . . . Adonai . . . Haka . . . Ionna . . . Tetragramaton."

That last name he had heard before, and neither in song or prayer. Some devil-story—wasn't Tetragramaton a fiend or goblin? Once more he revolved the disk, reading the final circle of names:

"Vusio . . . Ualactra . . . Inifra . . . Mena . . . Iana . . . Ibam . . . Femifra."

Norbier wished Thunstone had remained. But Thunstone said he would return. The names might mean something to Thunstone. Meanwhile, that monster-painting continued to impress. Any fool, even someone with no art appreciation, must admire the master touch of the boy who had been Leonardo, son of Piero da Vinci. The flat representation actually looked three-dimensional, as though it were a bas relief.

"Hmmm!" grunted Norbier aloud. For it was a bas relief. He hadn't noticed that before.

The painted figure, too adroit to be grotesque, actually bulged from the flat surface of the wood. Norbier put out a hand to explore its contours—and snatched the hand back. Something had moved behind him, in the direction of the dying fire on the hearth, with a solid *plunk*.

He hopped out of his chair, as swiftly as John Thunstone might, and spun around to face whatever it was. For the instant he fully expected to see something, big and living, crawling out of the fireplace toward him; something that had come down the chimney, a sort of baleful antithesis of Santa Claus, with gifts of violence or ill fortune.

There was nothing there. No movement. Norbier became aware that he was fluttering and writhing the hand with which he had touched the *rondache*, and rubbing its fingertips together. Those fingertips still harbored a sensation of unpleasantness. For when he had touched the likeness of the monster, it had seemed to stir and yield, as painted wood could and would never do.

That was what had startled him, more than the noise from the direction of the fireplace. But what had made that noise?

He walked warily across the floor, and then he saw. A book had fallen from his shelf beside it, and lay open on the reading table below the shelf. He bent to see. The Bible, of all books—it had popped open to Isaiah, the eighth chapter. His eyes caught the verse at the top of the inner column; the nineteenth verse:

And when they say unto you, Seek them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep and mutter. . .

It was coincidence, of course, this passage, but Norbier cursed his imagination that made him think he heard actual muttering behind him. His eye skipped to the last verse of the chapter:

And they shall look unto the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness.

"Dimness of anguish," repeated Norbier aloud, for he relished the neat turn of a phrase. "Driven to darkness. Sounds as if it should fit in somewhere with what's going on—

"What IS going on?"

Again he whirled around, facing toward where the *rondache* was propped up on the table opposite.

Something huge, heavy, many-legged, was lowering itself with ponderous stealth from the tabletop to the floor.

NORBIER stood dead still, his brain desperately seeking to explain what he saw. Explanation came.

Hypnotism. That was it. Self-hypnotism. He had gazed too intently at the painted nightmare. Or, more likely, it was that triple spiral of letters. He'd read, a year ago, something in a national magazine about hypnotism and how it was induced. You can hypnotize yourself by gazing raptly at a helix—a spiral line, curving in and in and in within its own whorls to a central point. You look at it, and it eventually seems to begin turning like a pinwheel, and you go to sleep. You may have dreams in that sleep. That was what he, Norbier was doing now—sleeping, dreaming.

The entity had completed its slow, pon-

derous journey from table to floor. It seemed to crouch there, then to hoist itself erect on the tips of its multiple claws. Among the curved, jointed brackets of its legs hung a puffy body, like a great crammed satchel. The integument had pattern, like scales, and from the spaces between the scales sprouted tufts and fringes of dark fur, like plush grown wild. And it had wings, also scaly and tufted, ribbed like a bat's, that winnowed and stirred above its bulk. The head, a shaggy ball, craned in his direction. Deep within the thicket of fur upon the face clung two wise, close-set eyes, that glowed greenly, then redly, at him. Between and above them the fur seemed to part in two directions, as if the undeveloped forehead frowned. A mouth opened, the light caught a stockade of white, irregular, pointed fangs. A great gout of foam came out, and fell splashing on the floor

THE talons scraped on the floorboards, like the tines of a dragged pitchfork. The creature moved toward Norbier. The two foremost limbs rose, and at the ends Norbier saw hand-like claws, like the front feet of a big, big lizard.

He shook his head, like a mauled boxer trying to clear his wits. He kept remembering that article about hypnotism. It was never of long duration. Even if someone hypnotizes you, and falls dead next minute, you have a short nap and waken again, as well and serene as ever. But while you napped, what dreams may beset you. Norbier tried to retreat before the advance of the creature, and his back came up against the bricks at the side of the fireplace. He reached down and caught hold of a pair of fire tongs.

"Get back from me!" he bawled shakily, and lifted the tongs as if to strike.

The wings flapped and stirred the air. The big body—it looked as big as a bear—rose slowly from the floor. Another flap of the wings, and it sailed at him. He swung the tongs, missed. A wing brushed him with its furry tip, the shape circled round in the glaring light, and dropped down facing him near the opposite wall. Norbier felt sick. The touch of the furry wing had seemed to nauseate him, to weaken his joints.

The creature was lifting itself on its wings again. This time—

"Stay against the wall, Norbier!" came the stern, quiet voice of John Thunstone.

Norbier could not have moved from his position against the wall had he tried. He sagged there, grateful for the solid brickwork, and his eyes seemed to cloud over so that only as a huge, vague shadow did Thunstone move forward and in front of him. Toward Thunstone came another shadow, also big and vague, but seeming to flap wings and flutter many legs.

"Would you, though?" Norbier heard Thunstone say, and there was a quick move as one shape moved to meet the other. Norbier's inner ears were wrung and jangled by a cry, so high as almost to top the audible range for human hearing and go among the soundless vibrations—a cry sharpened by pain and rage and terror, such a cry as might be uttered by a bat larger and more evil than all bats ever seen or imagined.

Norbier dashed at his eyes with the back of his hand, and he saw the struggle. Thunstone was poking or thrusting with something—with Thunstone's back toward Norbier, the weapon could not be seen. The creature retreated before him, trying to strike or grapple with some of its limbs.

"Get back," Thunstone was saying. "Back where you started. There!"

THE thing had scrambled up on the table. It was shrinking unbelievably—no longer bear-size, more the size of a cat. It retreated toward the standing *rondache*. It was gone. The *rondache* showed the picture Norbier knew. Thunstone quickly laid down something slim and shining, and seized the *rondache* with both hands. He spun it around and around, from left to right. He faced toward Norbier.

"All safe now," he said, quite cheerfully.

Norbier gazed at a splattery blackness on the floor—an uneven wet blot, another and another beyond, clear back to the table. It would look like the trail of blood from a wound, but it was so black. His nostrils caught, or he thought they caught, a sickening odor. He swayed, pawing at the wall for support.

"Sit in that chair next to you," said

Thunstone, and Norbier managed to reach it. Thunstone laid the *rondache* down and made a long stride, swift as a tiger, to a cupboard. The door was locked, but Thunstone plucked it open with a rending rasp of broken metal. He explained in satisfaction, drew out a bottle and poured from it into a glass. "Drink," he said, steadying the glass in Norbier's hands.

It was good brandy. Norbier reflected that he always bought the best brandy. He looked up, revived. His eyes sought the shining, slender object on the table beside the *rondache*.

"That?" said Thunstone, following the direction of the glance. "It's a stabbing blade, made of silver—black magic never faces silver, you know. Silver bullets kill witches and werewolves, silver charms keep away devils. Someone has claimed that Saint Dunstan himself forged that blade. It isn't the first time I've used it successfully, nor the second or the third."

"I'm—sorry, Thunstone," Norbier managed. "I got looking at that spiral of writing—"

"Of course. And you turned it around three times from right to left—widdershins, contrary to the clock and to the sun. That let the demon come out to you. And any one of fifty legends will convince you that no demon wants to be called up by someone who is at a loss for ways to treat it. I put it back where it came from, by turning the *rondache* the opposite way."

"But that isn't a work of Leonardo!" Norbier protested, feeling like a child whose dearest illusion has been shattered. "Not Leonardo! He might have to do with gods, but not with devils."

"Think of the story of the *rondache*," reminded Thunstone gently. "Leonardo's father was frightened by the picture, but he was money-conscious enough to offer it for sale. Who would buy such a thing from him, and for what purpose?"

NORBIER made no answer, and Thunstone went on. "A sorcerer, naturally. Italy was full of them then, and they are not gone from the world. The addition of the spiral writing, and the method of turning it, was a spell to invoke the monster."

"Destroy it," begged Norbier. "What-

ever I spent for it will be money well spent if the thing is put out of existence."

Thunstone smiled. He had picked up his silver blade and was wiping it.

"I rather hoped you would say something like that, Norbier." He bent and caught up a rod that lay on the floor. Norbier saw that it was a walking stick, but hollow. Thunstone fitted the silver blade into it, and so out of sight. Leaning it in a corner, he went back and took up the *rondache*. This he carried to the fireplace, stirred the last coals with a careful toe, and put the round wooden disk upon them.

There was a leap of flame, pale and hot as the center of a blast furnace. Around that leaped up a circle of glowing redness, and sparks rose as from a fireworks display. They died down again, fat, black clouds of vapor billowed and vanished in their turn. When Norbier looked closely, the wood was burned to ashes. Norbier rose and walked to where the open Bible lay.

It was as if some power tried to warn

me," he said. "Look at what this page says —no, the pages have turned."

"There was considerable stirring of air in here," observed Thunstone. He came to Norbier's side. "Now the book is open to the beginning of the Gospel of Saint John. If your other reference warned you, this should comfort you."

He put his finger on the page. "'In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God,'" he read. "'The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.'"

Thunstone smiled at Norbier. "That's enough, eh?"

"No, it's not all," demurred Norbier, studying the page. "Look below, where the sixth verse begins. "'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. . . .'"

John Thunstone put out his hand and closed the book. "All my life I've tried to deserve my name," he said softly. "Some day, perhaps, I shall deserve it a little."