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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Long Arm

By FRANZ HABL\*

*Creeping, writhing, insidiously crawling and groping, the long arm reached out in its ghastly errand of death*

I HAD been out of Germany for thirty-five years, drawn hither and thither by various glittering of will-of-the-wisps. When I returned to my native country, I was as poor in pocket as when I left, and much poorer in illusions.

The Berlin insurance company which I had represented with such mediocre success in Switzerland, Austria and Belgium agreed to let me sell for them at home, and by a curious coincidence there was an opening in the quaint old Bavarian city in which I had been born and bred.

I will pass over the strangely mingled feelings with which I rode in a Twentieth Century railroad train past the thousand-year-old walls of one of the most curious ancient cities in Europe, a town moreover whose every winding narrow street and sharp-gabled building had been the companion of my infancy and childhood. No one seemed to know me, and I recog-

nized no one. For several days I made no attempt to sell life insurance, but wandered in a dream, the bewildered ghost of my former self, about the spots which I had known in happier days.

One dull rainy afternoon I took refuge from the weather in a dingy little coffee-house in which, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, I along with certain boon companions, had learned the gentle art of billiards. It seemed as if every article of furniture was just as I had walked away from them, well toward half a century before. It was raining outside, and I sat alone in the gloomy, smoky old place, pondering the sweet and bitter mysteries of life.

While I sat thus, staring out with unseeing eyes at the rain which was by this time beating down smartly on the pavement, I became conscious that someone in the room was staring at me. I had not noticed that there was anyone else in the

\*Adapted by Roy Temple House from the German.

dark, low-ceilinged place except the obsequious proprietor who had served me my cigar and coffee. Now I realized that a man who sat in the corner diagonally across from me was studying me curiously from over his newspaper. His face was one that I had seen before. Suddenly, across all the years, I remembered him. And in that same moment he rose and came toward me with his hand held out.

We had been in school together, in the

Gymnasium. He had been a strange fellow with few friends, but had enjoyed the reputation of being the best student in his class. But in his last year in the Gymnasium he had, for what reason I never knew, excited the animosity of a cantankerous old professor who had publicly declared that Gustav was not the kind of boy who should have a Gymnasium diploma and that he, the professor, was determined never to give him a passing



"And she went, too, like the other."

grade. My father had admired the boy very much, and at one juncture when my marks looked perilously low, he had employed Gustav to tutor me. Gustav had been so successful that Father was delighted and made him a present of a silver cigarette case with Gustav's initials and mine engraved on it. I remembered all this very distinctly as we shook hands, but I was doing fast thinking, because for the life of me I couldn't remember his strange last name. I had a feeling that it was a very foreign name, Polish or Croatian or something of the sort. As he mentioned this and that, I fear I answered him a little absently and incoherently. The name was almost there. The syllables flitted tantalizingly just out of my reach. But I was sure the name began with a B. Wasn't it a Ban- or a Ban-something? Ah! I had it. Banaotovich!

From that moment the conversation went more easily. I was surprised and pleased when Banaotovich drew his silver cigarette-case out of his pocket to prove to me how highly he thought of my poor deceased father. We were soon launched on a cordial exchange of childhood memories. Banaotovich seemed a good-hearted fellow after all, and I wondered why in my childhood I had never been quite comfortable in his company. I remembered that other boys of the group had admitted to me confidentially that they were more than a little afraid of him.

**T**HE longer we talked the more intimate, the more in the nature of a mutual confession, our conversation became. I admitted to Banaotovich that the hifalutin fashion in which I had left the town to win fame and fortune years before, had been asinine in the extreme, and that it served me just right to have to sneak back unknown and penniless.

Banaotovich rejoined that for all his pride in his school marks he had remained a person of no importance, and that the pot had not the slightest intention of making itself ridiculous by calling the kettle black. He seemed almost painfully inclined to run himself down. I could feel in his manner a sort of pathetic reaching out for sympathy and consideration. And it began to seem as if he were about to tell me something or ask me for something. But whatever he had to tell seemed hard to say, and it was slow in coming over his lips.

Banaotovich ordered two bottles of the heavy native wine. I drank sparingly of it, because it goes to my head. But Banaotovich swallowed two or three glassfuls in hasty succession, and his cheeks grew flushed. There was a pause. Suddenly he leaned across the table toward me and spoke in a hoarse, excited whisper.

"Modersohn," he said anxiously, "I want to make a confession to you—a terrible confession. It may turn you against me completely. Maybe you don't want to hear it. If you don't, say so, and I'll go home. But it seems as if I've got to tell somebody about it. It seems as if I've got to find somebody who understands me and can excuse me, or it will kill me. Shall I tell you? Shall I?"

I was startled. I was reasonably sure that Banaotovich was no criminal, since he had lived half a century in his native city, undisturbed and from all he had told me solvent and respected. I had always known that he was a queer fish, a brooding, solitary sort of person, and I settled myself to listen to some harmless bit of psychopathy which meant nothing except to the unfortunate subject.

"My dear fellow," I said, no doubt a little patronizingly, "I am sure you haven't anything to confess that will make you out an outrageous rascal, but if

it will do you any good to tell me your troubles, I am ready to listen to them."

"Thank you," said Banaotovich in a trembling voice. "I've done nothing that they can put me behind the bars for. But I—I——"

He stared at me sternly.

"But I've done worse things," he said solemnly, "than some poor fellows that have been strung up by the neck and choked to death!"

I laughed, a little nervously. "Tell me your story, if you like," I said, "and let me decide just how black you are. But I haven't a great deal of apprehension. We're all of us poor miserable sinners, as far as that's concerned. I could tell you things about myself——"

Banaotovich was not listening to me at all. He had fallen suddenly into a fit of black brooding. After a minute or two, he looked up and asked sharply:

"Do you remember Wolansky?"

Wolansky was the Greek professor who had threatened to vote against Banaotovich when he was finishing his course at the Gymnasium.

"Of course," said I. "And I remember well how he abused you that last year. If there ever was a cantankerous old scoundrel, Wolansky was just that identical individual!"

"Maybe," he said absently; then after another pause:

"Do you remember that Wolansky died suddenly, just a little while before the end of the school year?"

I nodded. "I imagine that was a great piece of good luck for you," I said.

"Yes," said Banaotovich. "If he had lived, I should never have had my diploma. As it was, I finished with honors. If Wolansky hadn't died when he did, I'd have been ruined. Don't forget that—ruined!"

I was puzzled at his insistence. "Yes, you would have been seriously handi-

capped," I agreed. "Ruined is the word, perhaps."

Banaotovich's face was purple with wine and some strange kind of suffering. "Do you remember another thing?" he said thickly. "Do you remember an old Hindoo who had a dark little hole away back of the shops and the beer depot and the livery stables between the Old Market and the river?"

"The old fellow that had love charms and told fortunes and helped people to health and wealth and happiness?" I said in a tone of slightly forced cheerfulness. It was hard to be cheerful with those somber eyes boring into you. "Yes, I remember him, all right. I wanted to go and see him once, when I was about fifteen or sixteen, but Father told me that meddling with the black art had sent more people to hell than it had helped. And Father was so terribly earnest about it that he frightened me. I never went. As a matter of fact it was only a passing fancy, and I soon forgot all about him."

"That Hindoo," said my old school-fellow thoughtfully, "knew things about the secret forces in the universe that made him almost a god. And he taught me things that the wisest philosopher in the world doesn't suspect. Still, your father may have been right. I think it very likely that what he taught me may send me to hell!"

I shivered. I looked up nervously to make sure that the way was clear to the door. I began to suspect that my friend Banaotovich, though he was certainly not a criminal, might be a dangerous lunatic.

My *vis-à-vis* rubbed absently at a protuberance on his left side. I had noticed it when he first came across the room to speak to me. A deformity—I was sure it had not been there when he was a boy—or perhaps a tumor or some such thing as that.

"I kept very quiet about what the Hindoo taught me, because I knew most people felt about such things much as you say your father did. And I wanted to get on in the world. But I had an idea the Hindoo could help me get on. Perhaps he *has*—"

And he stared gloomily at space.

"Perhaps he has. And perhaps he hasn't."

He brooded. Then he took up the thread of his story.

"Wolansky nearly drove me to suicide. I read and studied and crammed, day and night. I tried everything I could think of to overcome the man's antagonism. I crawled in the dust before him like a whipped cur! Nothing did any good. And when I saw he hated me and was determined to smash me, I began to hate *him*, too. I came to hate him worse than I hated the devils in hell. There was a time when I had to hold myself back with all my strength to keep from sticking a knife into him or braining him with a chair. But the Hindoo and I made some experiments with telepathy, and I discovered that there are other ways of killing a man besides stabbing him or giving him poison.

"I learned how to make a man in front of me on the street turn around and look at me. I learned how to make *you* dream about me and come and tell me the dream the next morning" (when he said that, I jumped, for I remembered having done exactly that thing!). "I learned how to bring out a bruise on Wolansky's face although he lived on the other side of town; so that he went around asking people how he could have bumped his forehead without knowing it. And at last I went to bed one night, set my mind on Wolansky, and said over and over to myself a thousand times: Die, you dog! You've *got* to die! I *order* you to die!

"I said it over till I fell into a sort of

trance. It wasn't sleep, I tell you. You can't sleep when you are in a state like that. And in my trance, I could feel another arm grow out of my side here and grow longer and longer, and grow out through the window although the window was closed, and grow out across the street and down the street and right through the walls and across the river.

"I had never known where Wolansky lived. But that night I knew. I had never known the street or the house number. I had never been there in my life. But I can tell you just exactly how his bedroom looked. The wash-stand between the two windows, the work-table against the west wall, the wardrobe, the old divan against the north wall. In a corner the blue-gray tiled stove with some of the tile chipped off. And against the south wall—the bed he lay in. I can tell you the color of the blanket he pulled up over his face. It was a dirty brownish red.

"But my hand seemed to go through the blanket and grip Wolansky by the throat. First he sighed and turned his head to one side and tried to wriggle free. Then he raised his arms and tried to get hold of something that wasn't there. His sighs turned into groans, and the groans changed to a death rattle. He threw his arms and legs wildly around in the air, his body bent up like a bow. But my hand held his head down against the pillow. At last he quit struggling and dropped down limp on the bed. Then the arm came crawling back in to my body, and I came out of the trance—and went to sleep—or perhaps I fainted.

"The next morning the director came into our classroom and told us Wolansky had died in the night of some sort of attack. You remember that, I am sure—"

When Banaotovich began to tell me this story, he had looked away from me,

and his eyes never met mine during the telling. He had begun with a painful effort, but as he went on he grew more and more excited and more and more inflamed with hatred of the malicious old Greek teacher, till it almost seemed as if he had forgotten me and was living the astounding experience through for himself alone. When he was through, his ecstasy of indignation left him and he sat dejected and apprehensive, studying me pitifully out of the corners of his deep gray eyes.

WHEN he stopped speaking, there was a moment of silence. Then I said something. I think what I said was, "Very extraordinary!"

He smiled, a strained, sarcastic smile. "Extraordinary?" he repeated, with an interrogation point in his voice.

"Your nerves were strained to the breaking-point," I said. "Your trouble with the old rascal had driven you half distracted. Then there was all that occultistic hodgepodge with the old Hindoo. And you were overworked and run down, anyway. No wonder you dreamed dreams and saw visions. And it may have been that there was some telepathic contact between you and Wolansky, and when he had his apoplectic attack——"

The sarcastic smile deepened on Banaotovich's face. "So you have it all explained, and I'm acquitted?" he inquired.

"Acquitted?" I cried. "You were never even accused. If the state were to bring action against every man who had a feeling that he would be happier if someone else were out of the way, the state would have a big job on its hands!"

"Very true," Banaotovich assented icily. "I see I haven't got very far with you yet. You are forcing me to continue my not very edifying autobiography.—Did you know my father?"

I remembered his father, and I remem-

bered that he had not enjoyed the best possible reputation.

"I think I knew him," I said hesitantly. "He was a—a money-lender, wasn't he?"

"Don't spare my feelings," said Banaotovich bitterly. "He was a usurer, and a cruel one. I had a feeling for years that his business was a disgrace to the family, and I made no bones about telling him so. There were ugly scenes. I thought several times of leaving home. Finally, Father told me one day \*that since I didn't approve of the way he got his money, he was doing me the favor of disinheriting me. I told him that was all right with me, that I'd rather starve than live on money that was stained with the blood of poor debtors.

"I thought at the time that I meant it. But about that time I had become interested in a young woman. I had never had much to do with the girls, and very few of them seemed at all interested in me. But this one appeared to like me, and when I made advances to her, she didn't repel me. I am no connoisseur of female beauty, but I think she was unusually attractive, and at that time I was half mad about her. Still waters run deep, you know.

"Well, she had me under her spell so completely that I changed my mind about Father's money. I began to truckle to him, much as I had truckled to Wolansky. I began to feel him out to find whether he had made a will. He was very cold and non-committal. Finally I asked him outright if he would reconsider his decision to leave me penniless. He told me it was I that had made the decision, not he, and that he had no use for wishy-washy people that changed their minds like weather-cocks. He was very sarcastic. I lost my temper and answered him back. We had a terrible quarrel, and finally he—he struck me. I was twenty years old

and a bigger man than he. And I think no man ever had more stubborn pride, at bottom, than I have.

"It was the Wolansky thing all over again. The humiliation, the effort at ingratiating, the failure, the long, eating, gnawing, growing hatred. And it—it ended the same way. The night of brooding that hardened into a devilish decision, the vision of the long arm, growing, stretching, crawling—but not so far this time, only through two walls and across our own house. You remember that Father died of an apopleptic stroke, just as Wolansky had done a year or two before."

"Yes, I think I remember," I said in considerable embarrassment. The thing *did* begin to look uncanny. I was thoroughly sorry for the poor, cracked fellow, but I would just as soon not have been alone with him in that solitary drinking-place in the twilight.

"Well?" he said, almost sharply.

"Well, Banaotovich," I answered with a show of confidence, "you have had a great deal of unhappiness, and you have my sympathy. This strange faculty you have of anticipating deaths, like the night-owls and the death-watch that ticks in the walls, has made these bereavements an occasion of self-torment for you. I think you should see a psychiatrist."

"Anticipating — anticipating?" Banaotovich had gone back and was repeating a word I had used, and as he repeated it he drummed madly on the table with his fingers. "It's a curious coincidence that 'anticipating' is just the word my wife used when I told her about it."

"You—told—your wife—what you have just told me?" I stammered. "Do you think that was wise?"

"I couldn't help it," he said with a catch in his throat. "I thought I loved her, and I had to talk to somebody. I was miserable, and I had a feeling that

she might understand and be brought closer to me by sympathy. Now that I think of it, I can see that I was an egotistical idiot, but I discovered long ago that we aren't rational beings after all. We are driven or drawn by mysterious forces, and we go to our destination because we can't help it.

"My wife had always seemed a little timid with me. I never seemed to have the gift of attracting people. And I don't know whether she would ever have been interested in me at all if I hadn't used a little—a little charm the Hindoo taught me. Perhaps that didn't have much to do with it—but I had never been happy with her. However that may be, one evening when she seemed unusually approachable, I had just the same impulse that I had when I met you here tonight, and I told her about Wolansky and Father. She pooh-poohed it all just as you did. But she was afraid. I could see that. She was more and more afraid of me as the days went by. For a long time she tried to be cordial and natural in my presence, but it was a sham and the poor thing couldn't keep it up. Each of us knew as well what was in the mind of the other as if we had talked the situation over frankly for hours. We reached the point where we couldn't look each other in the face. No solitude could have been as ghastly as that solitude of two people who shared a revolting secret. For I had convinced her that I was guilty. I had succeeded in doing what I had set out to do, and I had ruined two lives in doing it. I have the faculty, it seems, of poisoning whatever I touch. Only today, my wife said to me——"

I started to my feet with a great rush of relief and thankfulness. "Ah, your wife is alive, then?" I cried.

"My wife is alive. That is—my *second* wife is alive," he said, with a horrible forced smile.



I sank back gasping. "What did you do with your first wife, you dirty hound?" I moaned in helpless indignation.

HE CLOSED his eyes, and a wave of bitter triumph played about the muscles of his mouth. "Have I convinced you too, at last?" he said.

Then I realized that I had been an insulting idiot. At worst, the man before me was a pathological case, and he certainly belonged in an asylum rather than in a prison.

"Forgive me, Banaotovich," I panted. "I don't know what made me——"

He looked at me sadly, almost compassionately. "There is nothing to forgive," he said, very quietly. "I am all you called me and a thousand times worse. Now let me finish my story."

"You don't need to," I said hastily. "I know all the rest of it."

All interest, I am afraid nearly all sympathy, had gone out of me. What I wanted most of all was to get away from this melancholy citizen with power and madness in his gray eyes.

"No, you don't know quite all of it yet," he insisted. "Perhaps if I tell you the whole story, even if you can't excuse me—and I don't deserve your excusing, I don't *want* your excusing—you can understand me a little better, and think of me a little more kindly.

"There was another woman. I couldn't help it, any more than any of us can help anything. A fine, sympathetic young woman, who loved me because she knew I was unhappy. I had been married to the other woman for four years. We were completely estranged. We could scarcely bear to speak to each other. I couldn't be easy one moment in the same house with her. I had a cot in my office out in town because I couldn't even sleep soundly at home. It was hell. The terror in her eyes made me physically sick. My

wife learned about the other woman. My wife was a devout Catholic, and there was no possibility of a divorce. I could read in my wife's face just what went on in her mind. She knew the other woman had become my only reason for living. And one day I read in her eyes, along with the terror, a glint of desperate determination. She knew she was in danger, she knew I had a power that I could exercise when I chose in spite of all the courts and police and jails in the country. She knew her life was in danger, and her eyes told me that mine was in danger for that very reason. I didn't blame her. Half my grief through all the years had been grief for *her*. But the instinct of self-defense in me was strong—and she went—too—like——"

He never finished his sentence. He dropped his head on the table and began to sob hysterically. I laid a gingerly hand on his shoulder.

"Banaotovich," I said unsteadily, "I'm sorry for you——"

He sat up and supported his chin in both hands. "I haven't been as—as bad as all this sounds like," he said after a while. "Before I was married a second time, I went to the chief of police and gave myself up. The chief listened to my story—I didn't try to explain it all, as I've done with you, but just blurted out the main facts; but the longer he listened the uneasier he became, and when I got through he asked me nervously if I didn't think I ought to go into a sanitarium for a while. Then he bowed me out in a big hurry. Perhaps if I had told him all the ins and outs of it, it might have been different——"

"But don't you think he's right about the sanitarium?"

"Right? I'm as sane as you are. I've killed three people, a crazy scoundrel, a

hard man, and a pure, innocent woman. But I did it all because I had to. A sanitarium wouldn't do me or anyone else any good, and it would be a heavy expense. I have taken the responsibility for another pure, innocent woman, and I must support her. The war and the depression swept away my father's fortune, and my present business has dwindled away till I am making only the barest living. I have applied for the agency for a big Berlin insurance company, and if I can get it, along with my other business, I shall be fairly comfortable. But I understand there is some talk of their sending in a representative from outside. If they do that, if they take the bread out of my mouth like that, it won't be good for the outsider!"

He was drunk, and his drunkenness was working him into an ugly mood. He was dangerous, and physical courage was never my strong point.

"What is the name of the Berlin company?" I asked timidly.

He named the firm I myself worked for. Then he fumbled for his bottle, and with stern and painful attention set

about the difficult and delicate task of filling his glass again. I muttered something about being back in a moment, and made for the door. He was too busy to pay any attention to me.

When I had the door safely shut-behind me, I sprinted through the rain to my hotel as if the devil himself were after me. . . .

**I**T WAS a long time before I got over waking up in the middle of the night with the feeling that an icy, iron-muscle hand was clutching at my throat. I don't have the experience often any more, but I have never seen the city of my birth since that awful night. I got out on the midnight train, and my company obligingly gave me territory on the other side of Germany.

Some time ago I happened to see a notice in the paper to the effect that a certain patient named G. Banaotovich had died suddenly in the Staatliche Nervenheilanstalt in Nuremberg. But I have met the name rather frequently of late, and I think it is a fairly common one. I didn't investigate.

