

THE FIFE OF BODIDHARMA

fantastic

MAC 6

35¢

JUNE

BLURBLE

THE LURKER

By Rog Phillips



fantastic

JUNE

1959

Volume 8

Number 6

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

Publisher

MICHAEL MICHAELSON

Editorial Director

NORMAN M. LOBSENZ

Editor

CELE GOLDSMITH

Art Editor

SID GREIFF



NOVELET

GIVE ME MY BODY!

By Paul W. Fairman..... 6

SHORT STORIES

BLURBLE

By M. G. Zimmerman..... 44

THE LURKER

By Rog Phillips..... 57

WHAT OTHER COLOR IS THERE?

By Jeanne Williams..... 67

A DESERT INCIDENT

By Will Worthington..... 77

THE FIFE OF BODIDHARMA

By Cordwainer Smith..... 85

CEDRIC

By Winston Marks..... 93

THE WORTH OF A MAN

By Henry Slesar..... 106

THE WARREN

By Richard Brian..... 109

BEDSIDE MONSTER

By Jack Sharkey..... 118

FEATURES

EDITORIAL..... 5

ACCORDING TO YOU..... 128

COMING NEXT MONTH..... 56



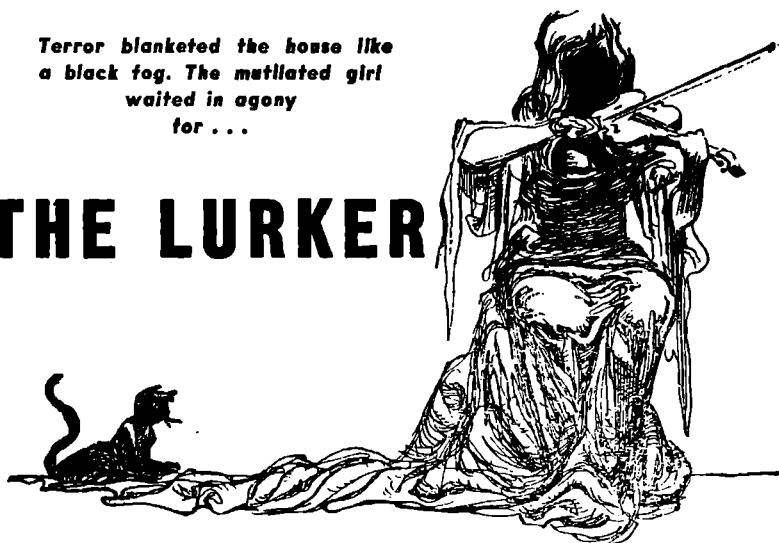
Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York, William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; H. B. Sarbin, Secretary; Howard Stoughton, Jr., Treasurer; Albert Gruen, Art Director.



*Terror blanketed the house like
a black fog. The mutilated girl
waited in agony
for . . .*

THE LURKER



By **ROG PHILLIPS**

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

THE compelling urge to go back to Freemont—to Leona Markham, really — had grown to such proportions that I was forced to obey it.

There was no reason to it. No reason, unless I wanted to admit the possibility of telepathy.

But telepathy after fifteen

years? And between a man and woman who had not seen each other since they were children? For two years I had struggled against it — and tried to rationalize it away. Without success.

I had told myself it was a distorted survival of puppy love, all in my mind, and it was true that Leona Markham had been the only thing I missed when, at eleven, my parents moved away from Freemont. I told myself again, now, that that was all it was.

I would see her, meet her husband if she had married, tell her I had “just been passing through town,” and go on my way. I comforted myself with that thought as I left the road and entered the woods. It helped to dispel the feeling that Leona Markham had reached out across the bridge of time and space that separated us in a desperate and almost hopeless plea — for help!

I had walked through town from the depot seeing every window in every house brightly lit. From the edge of town to Markham Hill was half a mile of no man’s land where houses were dark and deserted. When I reached the bottom of the hill I looked back. Freemont seemed a city under

seige, its only weapon of defense Light — brilliant shadowless light. *But defense against what?*

Overhead in the night sky a bloated moon shone down, revealing a remembered path through the woods. Soon even the moon’s light was gone, but my feet remembered the way, and the memory of Leona went beside me.

What was she like now? She had been ten then, now she would be twenty-five. A grown woman. It was impossible to think she would be other than beautiful.

Shortly I emerged from the woods at the lower edge of the Markham estate where the private road went through an archway in the stone wall and wound in a graceful curve to the mansion, bisecting the acres of sweeping lawn.

To the right of the curving driveway was the picnic area, where every summer Mr. Markham had invited everybody to come to the annual church picnic. But it was no longer a picnic ground.

Moonlight glinted in reflection from marble headstones that stood in neat rows. Here and there an ornamental tree stood outlined, a silent and motionless sentinel.

A chill went through me as a silent shadow flitted past me

in erratic flight, and for an instant two closely set dots of shining black looked down at me. Then the bat was gone.

Gravel crunched under my feet as I started along the driveway. The sound desecrated the silence. I stepped off onto the edge of the lawn, feeling as guilty as though I had been walking up the aisle in church in squeaky shoes during the moment of silent prayer.

So gradually that I was not aware of it at first, faint music crept into my senses. Even when I became aware of it I was not sure it wasn't my imagination.

It was violin music, but I had never heard anything even vaguely resembling it before. It was not so much music as a thing made of music, like ordinary things are made of atoms. It danced and ran and laughed and wept, and laughed and danced again, and all the time underneath it was lonely and lost, and filled with a yearning hunger. A hunger that drove it a little mad at times. Then it wept, and I could have wept in sympathy.

It seemed at first to come from the cemetery, but as I drew toward the mansion I became sure it originated there. At the foot of the steps going up to the porch that ran the

full front of the house I stopped and listened.

Was it Leona playing the violin? If so, she should not be wasting her life here, she should be playing to audiences over the world. I knew little of music, but I knew there had never been such music as this! It was enthralling.

I had to know if it was Leona. I crept silently up the steps and tiptoed to the window the music came through. There were filmy curtains over the window inside, but the girl standing in the center of the room playing the violin was plainly visible through them.

I knew at once it was Leona. She was far more beautiful than I had dreamed. She seemed to be looking right at me. Yet I knew she couldn't see me where I stood in the darkness.

There was something odd in her expression. A suffering, a hopelessness, that somehow did not match the mood of the music she was playing. As I watched, the bow faltered in its vigorous sawing across the strings, and a twinge of pain crossed her expression, and the movement of the bow resumed its mad rhythm.

Suddenly a feeling of horror engulfed me. I may have cried out, but if I did she

didn't hear me. Her left hand—

I had not noticed it until now, or if I did I had thought it a part of the violin itself. It was much the same color, a nut brown. Now my eyes were fixed on it while horror and revulsion dominated me.

Her left hand was shriveled, little more than bones covered with brown parchment. Her wrist and arm almost to the elbow were the same. There could be no life in that hand, yet its fingers bit with savage precision against the strings like the moving parts of a machine.

I knew in that moment with absolute conviction that the will controlling that left hand was not Leona's. The discrepancy between the emotions portrayed on her face and the mood of the music was plain now.

I watched the dead hand, trying to sense the nature of the thing that enslaved it, and the more I watched the more impossible it seemed.

My first impression of the music returned. It had seemed to me almost a *creature* of sound, a thing unto itself. Now, watching the movements of that lifeless hand, it seemed even more that it was the *music itself* that controlled those skeleton fingers, de-

manding to be expressed, to live.

But why then the sense of hopeless despair and unsatisfied longing that I felt in it? It was beautiful beyond the genius of man to create, this music, and yet it was overcome with a sense of having failed. Why?

Then I knew why, though I never knew *how* I knew. Perhaps in some way it spoke to me in the music that throbbed from the violin strings, answering my questioning thought.

Yet *what* I knew could not be expressed in words. Not yet. Not until I had learned what lay in those graves below. Not until I learned why Leona herself was not one of them—those who were neither alive nor dead, nor yet undead, nor any state the mind of man can grasp.

Knowing, I snapped out of the almost hypnotic spell the music had placed me in. *I had to stop that music.*

I rapped on the window. Leona seemed not to hear. I raised my fist to smash the window. Instead I ran to the front door and pounded with my knuckles.

The sound of my knocking echoed in the silence, and the music played on, and only the

music was aware of my knocking, for it changed subtly, with undercurrents of growing anger.

I rattled the knob. The door was locked.

I stepped back to gain enough momentum to break down the door. A finger of cold touched my spine. I looked over my shoulder.

Below, down the slope, over the granite stones of the graveyard, a blackness was forming. It was a blackness far beyond mere absence of light. It was a bottomless pit of *non-being* that gripped my very soul, drawing with magnetic force.

I took a step, then forced myself to a halt, to turn back toward the door, knowing that if I didn't succeed I would go plunging down to that hole in existence, unable to stop.

It was growing larger. I knew that in another moment no human will could withstand it. Even when my eyes had turned away from it I could see it with my mind.

Crying out my nameless fear, I threw myself violently against the door. The lock snapped. The door flew open. I leaped through the doorway and slammed the door shut, leaning with my back against it.

The music had not faltered a note in its angry dance, but now Leona turned toward me. For a moment she looked at me, then recognition animated her face. And wondering hope.

I pushed myself away from the door and went toward her, fighting a force that pressed against me, trying to drive me back. When I reached her I was sweating.

In a final surge of effort I gripped the neck of the violin and jerked it from her, throwing it across the room where it smashed against the wall.

"Ralph!" Leona cried. "It's you! I've prayed that someday you would come!"

Tears were streaming from her eyes. She held out her arms to me and came toward me. I reached to embrace her—and her left hand darted to my neck, wrapping itself around my throat, the bones of her fingers sinking in, cutting off my breath.

For an instant I was paralyzed with terror that was made all the more intense by the horrible grating sound of her hand as it moved. It was as though closely packed particles of glass were grinding against one another.

Instinctively I fought her hand to free myself, and she was helping me fight. It was a nightmare in which we two

fought a hand that had a will of its own.

Then, suddenly, I was free. I gulped in deep painful breaths of air. A chill shook me violently.

"Ralph! Ralph!" Leona cried. "You don't know how I've wanted you to come!" She was crying, and wanting to come to me but not daring to.

I tried to speak, to ask her what this monstrous thing was; but only a rasping croak escaped my lips. And I felt as though I was freezing. I went to the huge fireplace, which was already laid.

There was a glass filled with matches on the mantel. I took a dozen or so in a bunch and scraped them against the brick. When they ignited I flung them into the fireplace. Fire leaped up quickly.

Leona had followed me. I tried to speak again, and succeeded.

"What is this *thing*?" I croaked.

"I don't know," she said, "And if anyone should it would be I." She spoke hesitatingly. "After father died I was alone except for the servants. I had to have something to do, so I collected rare books. When I heard of one I didn't have that I thought I

would want, I advertised for it. In high school I found I had a flair for languages, and I studied many of them, enough so that I could translate with the use of dictionaries, even from some of the dead languages.

"One day five years ago a man came all the way to Free-mont to sell me a book. I had never heard of the book. It was a scroll, really. It was obviously very old, perhaps older than the Christian era. I bought it.

"It took me a year to translate it, and I wasn't too sure I had translated it at all. The characters were from a dozen ancient tongues, but they seemed to definitely form the pattern of meaning I got out of them. They were mostly instructions for building a shrine to some ancient god, and a magic chant that was supposed to bring that god forth from wherever he might be.

"I hired workmen and had them build the shrine in the center of the picnic grounds. Then one night I repeated the words of the magic chant in a singsong voice as I pictured those ancients doing.

"At first I thought nothing had happened. Then, in the dim light, I saw a small ball of deepest black, no larger than

a baseball. It hovered near me. I reached out and touched it with a finger of my left hand. My finger sunk into it without feeling anything. When I tried to withdraw my finger it wouldn't come out. Instead it pulled the darkness with it. I became panic stricken and ran. I think I fainted, finally, from exhaustion. When I awoke my hand was as you see it now, and from that day it has been under the control of something that is not me.

"In time I came to realize that I was its fingerhold on existence. It feeds on life force, but it dared not feed on me lest it lose its grip. It took the life from Marlow first. You remember him, Ralph? He was the gardner.

"And though he was dead, and appeared as my hand does all over, being little more than a skeleton covered with parchment, he could still rise and walk, controlled by this thing as my hand is controlled.

"More of the servants became its victims, and when the others fled, the blackness would move from the shrine toward the town in search of victims. After each victim it was larger. It grew, and grew more powerful—and more cunning. I think it knew everything that each of its

victims had known. Sometimes it sought out one marriage partner shortly after the other had become its victim.

"When the town council found it couldn't cope with the problem it built the cemetery around the shrine in an attempt to confine the thing here as much as possible.

"That's all I know, or anyone knows. I've tried to die, Ralph. It won't let me. It stays away from me because it knows that if I get the chance I will plunge into it and become like the others."

She looked surprised at a sudden thought.

"H-how did you get here without it getting you?" she asked.

"I've been wondering that myself," I said, my voice less of a croaking now. "I think it must have been so absorbed in its music that it wasn't watching."

"She nodded. "That must have been the reason," she said. "But it will never let you go. It doesn't dare come in here because of what I might do, so it will either try to draw you to it out there or raise its dead to come and get you."

Even as she said this, a footstep sounded outside and

the door was flung open. The thing that stood framed in the doorway was no more than a skeleton covered by tight brown parchment, with sunken holes where eyes should be.

It turned its head this way and that, searching for me with some sense other than sight. From it came the same sound I had heard from Leona's left hand, of fine particles gritting together. Then it had located me and was coming toward me.

I picked up the first thing at hand, the heavy fireplace poker, and advanced to meet it. Whatever animated it, it was still made of atoms.

I brought the poker down with a force that was made superhuman by my uncontrollable terror. The blow shattered the head and broke through ribs before it was stopped.

The thing that had once been a living human only paused, then came on. I leaped out of its way, dragging the poker free. It turned and came after me.

I swung the poker in a sweeping horizontal arc. The poker cut it in half at the waist. The legs, still joined at the hips, kept coming. The upper part of the body be-

gan dragging itself toward me with its fingers.

I brought the poker down again and again, until the thing was broken into a dozen impotent pieces. And when I straightened up three more had entered and were coming toward me.

My terror left me. Whether it was because I had succeeded in disposing of one of them, or because there was no time for emotion or anything other than the fight for survival, I don't know.

The room seemed to fill with these parchment encased skeletons. The rasping grate of their movements was the menacingly hiss of a thousand cobras.

I danced among them, striking, always striking, with the poker. When one got inside the poker I shoved and leaped back. More than one fell backward under a shove, only to climb clumsily to its feet and come toward me again.

One fell backwards into the blazing fire of the fireplace, and when it regained its feet its head and shoulders were blazing like a torch. Still it came toward me, its skeleton hands outstretched.

But others got in its way, and they too ignited. And the flames grew hotter and hot-

ter, blue in color, and the odor of a steel smelter bit into my nostrils.

The curtains on the window caught fire. Fire was eating at the walls and the furniture.

The movements of the skeleton figures became confused. I tried to retreat toward the door, but the burning ones stumbled into them and spread the fire to them.

I remembered Leona now.

"Leona!" I screamed. "Where are you?"

"Here!" I heard her call, but I couldn't tell from what direction.

Briefly I saw her through the flames. I fought my way toward her, dodging the fire, shoving skeletal forms out of my way. I reached her.

"We've got to get out before we burn!" I gasped.

"Go without me, Ralph," she said. "If I die in the flames it will be the end for the monstrous thing. I want to die!"

"Not yet!" I said. "I want to try something first."

I had deliberately come close to her. My eyes were on her withered left hand as I would watch a snake about to strike. When it leaped toward my throat I stepped aside and grabbed it where

the living flesh began, just below the elbow.

Before Leona had time to protest I dragged her toward the nearest flaming skeleton and thrust the hand into the flames.

Leona screamed and tried to pull back. I held on. Her screams grew louder. She was in torture. I gritted my teeth and held on.

Her hand was a blazing torch. The flames crept toward my hands but I held my vise-like grip. I could smell cooking flesh now, and I didn't care whether it was my hands or Leona's arm.

She had fainted. I didn't know when. There was nothing I could do about it, and unconsciousness was merciful for her now anyway.

After what seemed an eternity the flames on her arm burned out. It was a charred stump.

I took time to take out my handkerchief and make a tourniquet just below the elbow on her arm. Then, almost blinded by the smoke, I picked her up. It would be impossible to get across the room to the front door. I staggered to a door leading to the rear of the house.

Somehow I made it. After going through I tried to close

the door. The flames, drawn by the draft of the open door, made this impossible.

I staggered on, my throat raw from the smoke and the choking I had had. I gulped air in sobbing gasps, fighting against collapse. The fire kept pace with me and sometimes threatened to sweep past me.

Then, miraculously, I was out a side door and cool air touched my face. Stumblingly I kept on until a hundred yards separated me from the blazing inferno. There I paused to rest, and look back. The stately Markham mansion was enveloped in flames that shot a hundred feet into the night sky. Yellow flames shot with angry red.

And blackness. A sentient blackness darker than night, that filled my soul with a nameless dread. It writhed in the heart of the flames, formless, yet from its depths a *hate* reached out to touch me, and fill me with blind terror.

In my arms Leona stirred restlessly and moaned. I turned and stumbled on. Down the hill, through the woods, toward the beckoning safety of the lights of Freemont.

I didn't know when I reached the edge of the town. I didn't know of the weeks in

a rest home while I struggled back from the edge of madness. Weeks during which I relived the terror of flight, stumbling as I fled the Darkness.

Leona lived. The doctors amputated her arm just below the elbow. We were married two months later when she had recovered sufficiently.

The years have gone by since that terrible night on Markham Hill. In some ways they have been happy years.

In all those years there has been no sign of the return of that formless Dark. There is every reason to believe it has gone for good.

But has it?

If it returns, it will come in the shadow of night, waiting. Waiting to reach out, to enfold.

It could be in a darkened hallway, or just beyond a darkened doorway. It is out there, somewhere, in the night. I have sensed it many times. And more than once Leona had started to tremble, and crept into the protection of my arms.

In all those years I have never quite had the courage to turn out the lights. But if, some night, the lights go out . . .

THE END

FANTASTIC