

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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## *A Night of Horror in the Mortuary*

# THE MADMAN

By HERBERT HIPWELL

PETER STUBBS has snow-white hair, and he is only twenty-eight. He mutters to himself as he pursues his lowly task of sweeping the streets in our little university town. Children gibe at him and goad him to rage and tears.

Peter once had raven black hair and was as fine and strong a young fellow as ever led the town forces in their frequent battles with our students. That was before the one night he spent as caretaker of our medical school. Only two of us know the real story of that night and why Peter was taken from the building next morning, a gibbering and white-haired idiot.

We have remained silent for various and selfish reasons, but I can no longer keep to myself the story of that awful night.

Our medical college is a lonely, ramshackle old building. The town has grown away from it. It is surrounded by musty old junk yards and infrequently used railway sidings, and it is miles from the fine old group of buildings which form the rest of the university.

There has always been difficulty in getting a suitable caretaker for it. None of the many engaged could be relied on to come early enough to get the fires going properly and to keep the walks clear of snow. Our new dean, Dr. Towney, thought he had solved the problem by deciding to have a caretaker live permanently on the premises.

Peter Stubbs, on learning of this, applied for the post and had no difficulty in obtaining it. The dean showed him around the building and explained the duties required of him. A more imaginative man might have been a little chilled by the gaunt skeletons arranged in the cases of some of our classrooms. Certainly he would not have been pleased with the sleeping quarters picked out for him. The only room available was a closetlike place directly connected with our mortuary.

Frequently, bodies would be there overnight, awaiting the purposes of the college. Most persons would not wel-

come these as night-time neighbors, but Peter scoffed and said he would as soon sleep there as in a brightly lighted hotel.

Chic Channing and I heard his foolish boast, and Chic and I had old scores to pay with Peter.

His sturdy fist had left a blue circle around my eye for a week, and Chic was minus a tooth as a result of a hot encounter between Peter's followers and us freshmen.

Chic jumped at this brilliant opening for reprisal.

"Are you game for a little ghost-walking?" he whispered to me, as Peter and the Dean passed to another part of the building.

I asked for details.

"It's the chance of a lifetime if we have the nerve," he declared. "Let's sneak back into the building tonight, crawl on to a couple of slabs in the mortuary and cover ourselves with sheets. We'll look enough like corpses to fool Peter if he looks in. Then, when Peter goes to bed and it gets good and lonely, we can come to life with a few gentle moans, get Peter aroused, and then do a little ghost dance for his benefit. After we have him frightened stiff we can take off the sheets and give him the laugh. The story will get around quick enough, and poor old Peter won't be troubling us freshies any more."

I could scent trouble in the wild scheme, and I hastily began to offer objections.

"Peter knows there aren't any bodies in there now," I said.

"That's all right," Chic replied. "I heard the dean tell him that a couple might arrive late today. In fact, I know there will be one there for certain. One of the inmates at the government hospital for the insane died today, a poor beggar who was so wild they had to keep him locked up tight all the time. He had no friends, so the body is to come here and the undertaker has already gone for it."

I was still unconvinced, but I had no plausible excuses. I felt my eye, which was still sore from Peter's bruising, and I assented to the crazy plan.

CHIC was right about the body. The undertaker's car drew up to the college just as we were leaving. We were the last students to go, and the dean was the only other person there.

He asked our aid in bringing the body to the mortuary, and we laid it on a cold marble slab. Peter arrived from supper, to begin his first night's stay, just as the dean and we were leaving.

True to my promise, I met Chic near the college about ten o'clock and we prepared to carry out our plan. My courage was oozing already. One of those wan yellow moons was the only light around the dreary building, and every rustle of a leaf or a disturbed pebble began to send shivers up my spine. But I couldn't turn back.

Silently, we pried open one of the loosely locked basement windows. Then we crept up dark stairs and through the classrooms, where I imagined I could see the skeletons standing out like white patches in the murky darkness.

We reached the mortuary room and groped our way in. I almost cried out as my hand suddenly came in contact with the dead maniac, but I recovered myself. Chic groped in the corners until he found two immense white sheets.

We climbed upon adjacent slabs, and stretched out on our backs and pulled the coverings over us. I managed to keep a small corner raised so that I had a partial view of the room as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness.

The stillness grew intense. We heard the long, dreary hoot of a freight engine. I shivered involuntarily and thought of the real corpse a few feet away.

Footsteps echoed in the building. Peter was making a round of inspection before retiring. He switched on the lights in the mortuary and gave a little whistle of surprise at the three still, white figures lying there.

Then he began to whistle again, a little tremulously. Evidently he was not feeling as bold as when he accepted his post. He went to his little room, but was soon back again.

In his hand he held a small coil of rope, apparently a clothesline. He un-

wound it, and then, very gingerly, he approached the slab on which I lay.

I felt a light blow as one end of the rope fell across me. Peter was going to take no chances on midnight ghosts. *He was going to tie us all firmly to the slabs!*

Whistling to keep up his courage, he proceeded with his task. In a few minutes I was firmly bound. I could not have moved if I dared.

Then he cut away the remaining piece of rope and proceeded to truss up Chic in the same way. He had to struggle to make the two ends of the cord meet.

There was none left for the real corpse, and, though he hunted diligently in all parts of the room, he could find no more.

He surveyed the two of us, bound firmly to the slabs, and evidently felt reassured. He decided to take a chance on the third body remaining still and retired to his room, closing the door and leaving us alone in the creepy, moonlit mortuary.

How I cursed Chic as I lay there unable to move, listening to the gradually deepening breathing of Peter as he dropped into a sound sleep. What if he should leave us bound until the professors arrived in the morning? What a fine row there would be!

These, and other unpleasant thoughts running through my mind, were suddenly checked by a slight sound which turned me cold from head to foot. Horrified, I gazed through the small chink in my covering. I could not believe my eyes.

*The corpse of the maniac had moved!*

**T**HERE came a faint rustle of his covering shroud, and the body moved again ever so slightly. I wanted to shriek in terror, but I was paralyzed.

The shroud moved again, this time more noticeably. My scalp tightened, and I could feel the gooseflesh rising all over my body.

Then, with one sudden motion, the maniac sat bolt upright and threw the shroud from him.

He was clothed only in a long, hospital nightgown. His thin hair stood up in tangled wisps, and his eyes blazed like those of a cat in a dark room.

Slowly he surveyed his surroundings, and then burst into the most hideous laughter I have ever heard. His big, yellow teeth seemed like the fangs of a wild animal. I could imagine them rending my flesh.

The echo of his hideous mirth had hardly died away when Peter burst from his room, clad in his night clothes. His knees almost gave way as he took in the dreadful scene. Horror was apparent in every line of his body, and I had an inexplicable desire to laugh. But by a supreme effort I fought off this hysteria.

Quite calmly the madman swung his legs down from the slab and sat there on its edge, transfixing poor Peter with his terrible gaze. He chuckled.

Peter commenced to back toward his room. In an instant the madman was at him.

Then commenced a wild chase around the room, of which I could only catch fleeting glimpses as they passed on one side of my slab. Once the maniac rested bony hands on my body as he prepared for a new rush at Peter, whom I could hear breathing near by.

Bound hand and foot, Chic and I were unable to make a move, even if terror had not prevented us.

Untiringly, cunningly, the madman pursued his prey. Peter dodged and squirmed in terror. Perspiration poured from his face. But his efforts were futile. He was penned in a corner, at last, where a door led directly to a stairway in the corridor.

Step by step, the madman approached him, his long fingers outstretched like talons, and a low, gleeful laugh came from his lips. Peter backed desperately away from him, as though he hoped to press through the great oaken door. The maniac's fingers were almost at his throat, when the door swung back suddenly and Peter tumbled from the room, his body bumping and thudding on the stairs outside.

Startled by the sudden disappearance of his victim, the madman halted a moment. The door automatically swung shut again, firmly this time. Apparently, it had not been tightly closed before.

The insane creature flung himself at it. It repelled him. He shrieked and tore at it, but to no avail, and he finally turned away.

His eyes, now wilder than ever, swept the room. They rested on our bound figures. Swiftly, he passed over to where I lay. The rope puzzled him, and he was still for a moment.

Suddenly he grasped it and snapped it as though it had been thread. I was free, but I did not move. I waited for him to seize me, but his footsteps shuffled away. He was beside Chic now. I heard the rope which bound him snap.

In desperation, I rolled from the slab and rose trembling to my feet. The noise attracted the crazed being. He turned and faced me.

His features were distorted, into a horrible grin. His sharp, cruel teeth gnashed as if in expectation of a bloody feast. He leaped at me, clearing the slab, on which I had lain, at one bound.

I was too weak to dodge, but I tried grimly to clinch with him, as I had seen groggy boxers do when they were sparing for time. I was in his arms. His eyes blazed not a foot from mine. Foam flecked his mouth. His weight pressed against me. It grew heavier and heavier.

Then my overwrought nerves gave way, and I became unconscious.

**W**HEN I awoke I was outside in the cool night air. Chic was bathing my brow with muddy water from a roadside pool. The madman had collapsed at the same moment as I had. In a daze, Chic had laid him again on the slab and had dragged me from the building.

Poor Peter we forgot, until he was found the next morning, haggard, white-haired and unable to utter an intelligible word.

Too vivid an imagination, wrought into a frenzy by the uncanny surroundings, was the way the doctors diagnosed his strange case. Chic and I were too dazed to shatter the theory.

As for the madman, he had really died, after the short spell of suspended animation and temporary revival. I know this because his gaunt skeleton was one of the principal decorations at our graduation dance.

But, even with this assurance, I sometimes wake at night in a cold sweat, and feel for the butt of the revolver under my pillow.