

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 32 CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1938 Number 3

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Magic Mirror

By ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

*Of all the schemes to beat the bank at Monte Carlo, the method used
by this stranger from Tibet was the most fantastic
—and the most practical*

IT WAS the last night on board the *Borotania*, as she was due in New York next morning. Most of the passengers were busy packing up in their cabins, so that when I strolled into the smoking-room I found it nearly empty, with only a straggler or two lined up at the bar. Fatty, however, was sitting in his usual corner with his two inseparables, Jimmy and Baldy, whose real names I never discovered.

When I came in, Baldy was talking about systems at roulette.

"There are no systems worth a curse," he was saying. "It's all boloney to say there are. And most of the wheels are crooked, anyhow."

"I guess you're right," Fatty agreed, "though I did once come across a system that was infallible. The trouble was I couldn't work it long enough to make a real killing."

"And how was that?" Jimmy enquired.

"Just that the inventor faded away before we could clean up," explained Fatty. "Hard luck, you call it! Hard luck isn't the right word. It was a catastrophe. That's what it was, Baldy—a catastrophe!"

"Well, let's have the whole lie, Fatty," said Jimmy and Baldy together, "and we'll tell you what we think."

"It's gospel truth," came the rejoinder, "and no lie at all, though I can't blame you if you don't believe it. It was about

the strangest thing I ever ran up against—which is saying a lot. To this day I don't know what to make of it. It worked. I will say that for it. But it's got me beat just the same.

"It is some years ago now," Fatty resumed, delighted to have even what he considered a dud audience of two, "that I stayed on rather late at Monte. The season was over, and the Sporting Club, together with a whole lot of the better hotels, closed down. I had my quarters in a small pub on the Rue des Moulins, I remember, as my own joint was closed, too. The grub wasn't too good, and I used to drop in now and again at Quinto's to get myself a good lunch.

"One day, after lunch, I turned into the public gardens to smoke a cigar and look at the flowers before creeping home for a nap; and I remember that the cigar, given to me up at the golf course by a millionaire friend of mine, was particularly good. I was enjoying it, smoking away and feeling at peace with all the world, when I noticed a curious-looking figure moving along the path towards me. He was an oldish fellow with a straggly white beard, and he was wearing a funny sort of hat on his head. I had never seen a hat quite like it before, but I found out afterwards that it was called a 'terai,' or some sort of name like that, and that it was worn a lot in India.

"There were plenty of empty seats all

"They call them devil-mirrors because they bring death and riches."



round me and I prayed to God the old fellow wouldn't come and sit down within talking distance of me and my cigar. Yet that was exactly what he did. The old bozo comes tottering along till he gets to my bench, and then he parks himself bang down quite close to me. Yes, he parked himself just next door, so that I expected the next minute he would turn and ask me for a match.

"But he had his match all right—his stinking cheroot, too—and he lights up and puffs away without a spot of trouble. Now, as you boys know, if there is one thing I cannot stand, it's the smoke from one of those greenhouse bug-killers, so

as soon as he got going I was for going, too. I sort of shifted my legs before getting up, and it was just then he turns and looks at me. Did I say 'looks at me'? I can only tell you duds that there was something in his eyes that made me think of lightning. He spoke at the same time. And his first remark somehow took my breath away. I mean by that I hadn't expected it.

"'Could you tell something about the gambling here?' he asks.

"'Sure,' I says, getting my breath back a bit, 'sure I can. What's troubling you, stranger?'

"His eyes flashed that queer way again,

but all he gives me back was innocent enough. 'I understand they play a game called roulette,' he says, 'but I don't know anything about it. I'd like to.'

"The less you know, the cheaper for you,' I tells him, knowing the answer pat. For he didn't look to me like a man to play the tables, what with his 'Oxford voice' and his strange face that was half a monk and half, I guess, a scholar. 'Keep your money,' I adds, 'if you've got any.'

"'But I want to make some money,' he explains straight off the reel and quite honest-sounding. 'I've got a plan that's certain.'

"And this time I looks him straight in the eye, lightning or no lightning—though I admit there was something in his eye that made me sort of wonder.

"'Now, listen, pal,' I tells him, with a fatherly touch that I knew didn't quite come off. 'Listen to me, will you? Every train that pulls into this burg has some sucker on it that thinks he's going to make good dough, but only one in ten thousand ever gets away with it. You take my advice and beat it back to Timbuctoo, or wherever you hail from, and just forget it.' And I takes a good puff at my cigar for having given good advice for once, feeling easy in my conscience, if you know what I mean.

"'I come from Tibet, not Timbuctoo,' he corrects me slap, flashing those googly eyes my way, 'and I've got with me a magic mirror. I can't lose. It's a magic mirror from Tibet, you see.' And his stinking cheroot puffed across into my face and made me cough.

"WELL, of course, I knew then that the old boy was nuts. That Tibet-and-magic business proved it. And yet there was something about him that had me guessing. I had the feeling that he knew a thing or two I didn't know. I can't express it quite. I knew I was on

the wrong tack, anyway. He had something I'd never met before. I was under-rating him. He was child-like, crazy—if you like, but he was something else as well. I only know I let my cigar—that millionaire cigar—go out. That shows you, maybe!

"'What's the great idea?' I says, more easily than I felt. 'Are you going to flash-light from the mirror into the croupier's eye and then grab some dough? If so, I can tell you right now that those methods won't work here. Maybe they're all right back in the sticks in your Tibet, but they won't cut any ice here in Monte!'

"He gave me a sort of patient, half-contemptuous look as though I was a kid.

"'The mirror,' he says quietly, 'shows me what to play—numbers and colors, or whatever the foolishness is.' And he pulls down that awful hat over his lightning blinkers, puffs out a poisonous cloud, and looks out over the flowers in the garden. In other words, he showed me plain enough that he thought I wasn't yet born.

"Well, this had me fair flummoxed. I just didn't know what to say next. I lit up my cigar again, then threw it away as it no longer tasted good. After a bit I got going again. I asked him how he got his mirror, thinking it a fair question. And he gives me a long spiel about how he had been interpreter with a British expedition into Tibet, and how some lama gave him the mirror. Good stuff, too, right enough. He did the lama some service or other.

"'They call them devil-mirrors,' he told me.

"'For why?' I asks, wondering what he'll throw me next.

"'Because they bring death and riches,' is the answer.

"Meself, I tells him I don't fancy mirrors like that.

"'You've never seen one,' he says, knowing all the answers.

"'True,' I tells him. 'Maybe I don't want to.'

"He said nothing for a bit then. I had the feeling he thought I was a nit-wit from Kalamazoo. And that's just what I felt, without knowing why—as though he was giving me the works and I was just dumb.

"Then he gets going again.

"'I am an old man now,' he says. 'I'm over a hundred, if you care to know, and I wish to try this mirror before I die. I promised the lama I would. I must. Only, I need a helper. I cannot do it all alone.'

"Well, this flummoxed me right down to the bone. Either he was nuts or I was! Over a hundred, indeed! Why, those eyes belonged to a young man! I thought it over for a bit. 'Where was I?' I asked myself. 'In Monte or in some weird Tibetan monastery?'

"'Of course,' I says at length, 'if that's the way you look at it, I've got nothing to say. Have you got the mirror with you? I'd sure like to have a look at it.'

"'Certainly,' he agrees, and pulls out of his pocket a little chamois-leather bag and produces from it a small bronze mirror. I handled it cautiously, giving it the once-over. It had some curious figures twined round the polished surface—naked men and women, and their faces were awful. I'm pretty hard-boiled myself, but, believe me, those faces made me shudder so I could hardly bear to look at them. The old boy's mug, too, had something in common with them, it strikes me.

"'Now,' he says, watching me hard, 'do you notice anything peculiar about it?'

"I looked carefully and turned the mirror round in various directions so as to get the reflection of the gardens and the

trees. 'No,' I tells him at last, 'I can't say that I do.'

"'Have you seen your own face in it?' he asked at length, with a smile I didn't care much about. His question gave me quite a shock.

"'No,' I tell him, 'I have not.'

"'Just as well,' he says, 'for if you did you would die.'

"With that I hands him back his mirror as quick as I could, but he only laughs quietly to himself and slips it back into its bag. And then I began thinking things over to myself a bit. After all, I thought, you don't get handed devils' mirrors in Tibet for nothing. I guess the old boy had to do his stuff before the lama gave it to him—something pretty tough, too, or one of the local gorillas could have handled it. And so I came to the conclusion it was better not to ask any more questions. The only thing that really mattered was whether the mirror would work or not.

"'Go in and try it,' I says to him straight. 'Why not?'

"But he has the answer to that, too. 'I must have someone with me,' he explains again. 'When I see the numbers in the glass I can't attend to putting the money on as well. I need a helper, someone I can trust. And I trust you.'

"I HAD got this far when a wave of suspicion came over me. The old boy was a 'con' man, and he was trying to play me for a sucker. I expected every moment his confederate would come rolling up with some plausible yarn, and that they would start stringing me along to put up some dough. I kept my eyes wide open, but I saw no one. And to fill in time I asked him about Tibet. He told me plenty about the country and certainly seemed to know his stuff all right, but as I couldn't check up on it, this didn't get us very far. It sounded genuine, all

the same. He said he had been born at a mission station right on the frontier and that his nurse had been a Tibetan woman. When his parents died he had got a job with the Indian Government, and had now retired with a pension and was on his way to England. He told me a lot, too, about having promised the lama something about the mirror, but I just couldn't make head or tail of that. He wanted, anyway, to use it for getting money, and here in Monte he saw a chance. So I let it go at that.

"Sure you've never seen a roulette wheel?' I asks him.

"Never,' says he.

"Well, I'll take you right along and show you one,' I says, and I bring the old bird down the street till we get to a shop that has them in the window. Half the shops in Monte stock them, as you know, so that we hadn't far to go. I watches the old fox careful to see if he's going to do an act, but he seems genuinely interested, and he soon got wise to the numbers and dozens and all that, and how it worked. Then I asks him how the mirror's going to show him what to back.

"I shall see the numbers or the color in the glass,' says he.

"Well, if you've got any dough,' I suggests, 'let's go to the rooms and give the thing a whirl.'

"I have a thousand francs,' he says, 'if you think that will be enough.'

"Plenty,' I tell him, 'if the mirror's any good. But let's start gently with a hundred-franc stake, just to see how she goes. If we win, we go on; if we lose, we don't. How's that strike you?'

"We shall win,' he says, calm as you like, 'and half the winnings will be yours. You are entitled to them for your kindness to a stranger.'

"Well, this little spiel goes down very well with me, so I just says 'Thank you,' and takes his hand on it. Talk of a grip!

That old hundred-per-center had a fist like iron. Anyway, we wanders over to the Casino and I gets him a ticket for the *salle privée* and in we goes. And, let me tell you, the old bozo was on the up-and-up all right, for when we gets to the rooms he hands over his *mille* and asks me to do the staking while he consults his little mirror.

"Now, as chance would have it, the rooms weren't crowded, and we got a coupla good seats right at the end of one of the tables. I had changed the note into *plaques*, and we were all set. The old guy trots out his mirror and starts staring into it. I watches him close. After a minute or two his face kind of changes. His skin went whiter and his features became sort of fixed and hard. I thought at first he'd dropped off to sleep maybe with his eyes wide open, only I caught a flash of what I call the lightning in them and knew he was just too concentrated to blink. You might have thought he was a flapper going to put the lip-stick on with that mirror in front of him. It was sure a queer sight. I notice the croupier nearest to us seems kind of inquisitive and keeps looking at him, but he doesn't say anything.

"They were paying out just when we sat down, but now they spin the wheel and it is time to stake. I glance at the old crank and he mutters 'Fifteen,' hardly moving his lips. It was fifteen the time before, but all the same, my *plaque* goes on, and sure enough, up she comes—fifteen! Now that, of course, might be just luck, but it gave me confidence, all right, so when next time the old bird mumbles 'Twenty-one,' I shoves on two *plaques* to see if I can't give the bank a jolt.

"And would you believe it, boys? Up she comes as pretty as a picture, while I rakes in the dough, trying not to grin like a Cheshire cat as I does it. And so

it goes on, just as smooth and easy as I'm telling you, and we sure gave the bank a ride that afternoon. But I think it wise to stop at last, as the old fellow is beginning to look kind of petered out, it strikes me; so I take him away to the bar and give him a good slug of brandy, and we split the dough as he said, and then I take him back in a *fiacre* to his joint."

"How much did you win?" asks Baldy.

"Sixty *mille* between us up to date, and giving him back his *mille* as agreed.

"NEXT morning," Fatty continued, "I went round bright and early to see how he was making out, and I found him in rather poor shape. So I tried to persuade him to give the rooms a miss that day. Nothing doing!

"'Lead me to the tables,' he says, firm as a rock. 'It was your brandy that upset me a little, for, you see, I never touch alcohol,' and by his voice you mighta thought he was some professor at Oxford starting up his lecture.

"'Anyway,' I suggests, 'let's have a good feed first,' and I makes in the direction of Quinto's, for there was a bit of time to fill before the rooms opened. But will he eat? Not a damned swallow, I tell you! Not a single bite!

"'I shall see better,' he whispers to me, 'if I have no food. But please do not let me stop you. I will wait till you have had a meal.'

"So that's what happened. 'A crank,' I says to myself, 'must turn his own handle the way he wants,' and I left him to it while I enjoyed the best blowout ever with plenty of good liquor to wash it down, and the old boy doesn't hurry me one little bit, sitting there quiet and silent as an Indian idol. And when I'd lit my cigar we roll away in a *fiacre* back to the Casino.

"We go to the same table again, and I

notice the croupier recognizes the old guy and exchanges a quick look with another croupier, and the pair of them watch that mirror pretty close, though there's nothing they can say or do about it, for any guy can look in his pocket mirror if he wants to and see if his hair's straight. And, believe me, that mirror does its stuff again fit to beat the band. Or, I should say, beat the bank. For it just couldn't miss. Every time my pal mutters his number, up it comes, though sometimes I don't quite catch what he mumbles and so hold back and don't put a *plaque* on. And when that happens he gives me one of those sort of lightning looks that puts the blame on *me* all right. After that I watches his lips. I make no further mistakes, but start playing the dough real heavy till we'd won so much I swear I couldn't count it, and I could see that the croupiers don't like it one little bit, they don't.

"And so it goes on and on, boys, with me watching those mumbling lips like a cat watches a mouse, and making no more miss-hits, till sudden I notice that those lips of his seem kind of white. No blood in them, I mean. I give his face the once-over, and that don't look right to me, either. Made me think of a bladder with the air running out of it. Something was wrong, it seems to me, and I decided we'd had enough for one day and I'd better get him out.

"'Come on,' I whispers to him. 'Let's go. Give it a rest till tomorrow, pal.'

"'One more turn,' he whispers back, but the flash from those gig-lamps not quite so bright. 'I'm seeing better than ever before.'

"So I agrees to that. One turn more can't do us any harm, and he sure was seeing perfect.

"'Thirteen,' he mutters. And on go my *plaques*.

"Now it so happens that he can reach

the number easier than me, so I hand him the dough while I shove a maximum myself on *impair*, just to give the bank a final trimming before we blow.

"The wheel is spinning lovely when I hear a kind of gasp and a sigh from the old boy, but when I turns quick to look at him he seems okay. A moment later the ball settles nice and comfortable in thirteen, and they pay me on *impair* right enough. Then a strange thing happens. The croupier is in the act of shoving the money over to pay the old guy on his number when he stops, then pulls it back again as though the bank had won. I catches my breath and stares a moment. And everybody stares with me. The room had filled to the brim and everybody had

been watching our play. There came sudden an awful silence.

"I got my breath back.

" 'What's the matter?' I cries out. 'Pay the old man his winnings!'

"And the croupier turned to me without a smile.

" '*On ne paye pas les morts,*' he said quietly, raking the money in.

"The old boy was dead—dead as a door-nail. He had croaked while the wheel was spinning. Can you beat it for bad luck? I looks round quick to see that no one had pinched the mirror, but I'm damned if it isn't broken into a thousand pieces.

"Isn't life just plain hell?"