

Weird Tales

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THE MAN-TRAP

by
Hamilton
Craigie



Author of "Midnight Black," "The Jailer of Souls," etc.

THE laboratory of Professor Pordenone was a strange and curious place. Entering it, you were immediately sensible of an odor that was like an emanation, rising, head-high, in an almost overpowering perfume, sickish-sweet; it was like the close smell of a hot-house, but magnified, as if a giant had dealt there in his strange garden of distorted smells.

For it was a place of giants: out of the loam, that was like a thing of life, there rose, gigantic, plants that towered to the height of a tall man, and beyond it; in the green gloom of a perpetual twilight they rose up, monstrous, misshapen, like a forest of fantastic shapes seen in the dim shuttle of a dipsomaniac's dream.

And there was this about it: you could hear the silence, if you were there to hear it, for it was like the silence of a vault, a singing silence, a silence as of waiting, heavy, like a weight upon the ears, until—you opened the door.

Then—as if at the quick whisper of a sudden wind, there would come a rustle, a murmur, a *movement* in that greenish gloom—but there would be no wind, although the sound followed always upon the opening of the door.

Now, with the opening of the door, there was revealed a grinning, hairless head, three-pointed; the eyes chill, with a fixed, unwavering, unwholesome brightness, like a painted flame. A moment it peered and grimaced in the doorway; then, sidling inward like a crab, Professor Pordenone surveyed his grim garden with a mirthless smile.

And now, as he stood there, the forest of viscid green seemed welcoming him; it swayed and rustled; head-high, at the height of a tall man, the giant fronds writhed and twisted as in a wind invisible, bending and swaying as in a dance of death.

But there was no wind. The air of the place, dead, heavy, lifeless, seemed brooding in a changeless calm as Professor Pordenone stood smiling and rubbing his palms. In the humid air the flame from the lighted taper in his hand rose upward in the dimness like a painted sword against that dim green background to right and left; like a licking, hungry tongue, it forked upward now as the professor turned, lean head thrust forward like a pointer at gaze.

Now his face seemed touched with a sudden, sly malevolence: his thin, spatulate fingers, reaching, had ex-

tended the taper with a little, flicking motion against a tall plant at his right.

Upon the instant, as if it had been a thing alive, the trifoliate frond had bent as a steel blade bends double; then, as a bayonet thrusts, soundless and swift, its spike-tipped lance had sprung level with his eyes.

Professor Pordenone chuckled, moving as a cat moves, for all his bulk. An inch—and the great spur had reached him, thrust in carte. The plant—*Ilecate triformis*—was a hypersensitive, of course; heat acted upon it as the needle to the pole; but for a moment, fantastic as it might have been, it seemed as if it had been almost humanly endowed with motion, malevolent and swift.

The professor, moving forward, the taper still in his hand, halted now before a row; gigantic, dark-green they were, shading almost to black; ugly, as a toadstool is ugly, ten feet in air rearing their crested hoods like cobras—and, like sleeping cobras, nodding their heavy heads with a slow, swinging motion, to right and left.

The professor, taper held in his fingers like a baton, seemed like a man who walked now with wariness and care. Still with that secret smile edging his thin lips, he faced forward now, bowing as an orchestra leader bows before the curtain.

"My children!" he whispered, low. "Your time will come—even now is it at hand! I, Udolfo Pordenone, have promised you! And then—ah, then, we shall see!"

One, peering inward at that curious chamber, would see, but he would not have believed. For, indeed, as might be seen in any hot-house, there were foxglove, starwort, narcissus, orchis, crane-fly and cripidium—but hideous, distorted, monstrous beyond all imagining, thrusting aloft with filaments that had grown to cables, stamens that were like writhing col-

umns, pistils that were like gigantic swords.

The thing that had become a bayonet was fantastic and dangerous enough, but it was before a curious monster that seemed a cuttlefish rooted in black loam that the professor paused and gloated.

Beneath its soaring antennæ, quivering like the sentient fingers of a giant squid, there was a flat, white disk, a dead white, like the belly of a snake. Now, as the professor halted before it, this curious disk quivered, shook—moved of a sudden like a hungry mouth, subsided, as the professor, stepping backward a pace, extended the thin taper's flame, like the flicking of a whip, which in effect it was.

"Ah—not yet, my friend!" the low voice murmured. "Not yet awhile—but—patience—and it shall be a fact accomplished."

2

PROFESSOR PORDENONE was in his way a genius, though a perverted one. That plants could feel, that they could even see, he was aware, just as a schoolboy is casually conscious of the inevitableness of two and two. The East Indian sage who had, by an almost miraculous devising, been able to observe with his super-delicate instruments, the death throes of a flower,* stood merely at the threshold, where the professor had passed onward through the door.

Now, as he went outward from his laboratory, he smiled thinly as if in anticipation: an indwelling, secret smile that lingered as he closed shut the heavy door with its patent spring lock.

He stood now in a lofty, dark corridor leading to his bachelor quarters, a study and a bedchamber, where, alone, he slept and ate, poring over his formulæ like another Faustus, delving in the dark secrets of life and of death.

*A fact; featured in the newspapers of May, 1923.

Passing, with his swift, silent step, into his study, and to an elaborate es-critoire in the corner, he snapped on the light, for it had come on to evening, and took up a small vial from the desk. In a large, square tub to the right of this desk there was a plant; it was little more than a seedling; but even to its infinitesimal, flat disk, it was a perfect replica of that Gargantuan horror in the dim garden just beyond.

The professor, holding the vial to the light, shook it gently from right to left, removing its glass stopper, in his eyes a queer, greenish light seeming to be mirrored in the contents of that vial, milk-pale. One drop—a milligram of that candescent liquid—and, as he was wont to say, he could grow trees from grass-blades. That seedling now—well, in the morning he would—give it new life. Meanwhile. . . .

Propping the vial against a corner of the desk, he took from a cellaret at his elbow a goblet of old Faience, and with it a decanter. He drank, once, and again. . . . The vial, unheeded, tilted sidewise, so that, unseen, perhaps three drops of its potent liquid spilled over upon that Lilliputian seedling in its tub. Tomorrow—ah, tomorrow, as he had planned it from the first, he expected a visitor: Gammage, the orchis-hunter—Gammage, who had laughed at his assertions, laughed at him, Udolfo Pordenone, the great, cited innumerable precedents for his confounding, snapped his fingers at him, belittled him, scoffed at him times without number.

And tomorrow Gammage—would pay.

But first he would show him the proof; after that his enemy would disappear, and by an agency that was neither beast nor human; an agency terrible in its swift, silent vengeance that would indeed leave no trace.

Stopping the vial with fingers that trembled in their eagerness, he rose, stumbling against the seedling in its tub. A large green-bottle fly, its motion swift as summer lightning, its drone loud in the stillness, evaded the slow sweep of his hand to dip in a bewildering, swift spiral downward across the tub.

Upon the instant there came a furious, frantic buzzing, and then—silence. The fly was gone. But the windows and doors were closed; it could have had no egress from the room. But if the professor had glanced downward at that tub he would have seen that that flat, white disk had strangely broadened two diameters even as he had sat there at the desk.

But he did not look. Those giant monsters in that garden of grim shapes had once been seedlings, some of them, indeed, scarce older than from sun to sun. . . .

The professor, snapping out the light, moved slowly, with a slow, noiseless chuckle, outward to his bed-chamber, while behind him as he slept, separated from his bedroom by the width of a single door, there grew and continued a slow, stealthy rustle: Life, hideous, malformed, rising like a dim tide ceilingward, there in the murmurous dark.

3

PROFESSOR PORDENONE, awaking at his usual hour, dressed in a queer, fumbling haste, departing presently upon an errand which was to occupy the best part of his day.

He had been upon the point of returning to his study when, upon an impulse, he had wheeled, his hand upon the doorknob, in a curious, sudden indecision, which, if he had been superstitious, he might have called a presentiment—a premonition of a something felt but unseen, hidden yet half-revealed. The liquor that he had

drunk had been potent; that must be it; and his errand could not wait.

And so he had turned backward, striding from the house, to return at evening, an evening, after rain, of windy dark, with the wind like a lost soul wailing among the trees, the road like a ribbon of pale flame between black walls of ebony, along which his tall, dark figure with its flapping coat-tails went onward to that rendezvous with death.

The house of Professor Pordenone stood alone on a little rising ground about which was the marshland and the river. Now, as the lean scarecrow, with its veiled glance like a cobra's searching in the dust, went forward, there sounded close at hand the brool of the rushing river, like a sound heard in dreams; the cry of a loon sounded from the marshland; the melancholy boom of a bittern answered it.

The traveler's shadow in sable silhouette cut sharp beneath the soaring splendor of the moon that was like a leoprous-silvered finger beneath the low-hung curtain of the dark; a little wind, pattering in the dust like the feet of an invisible army of the dead, followed him forth upon the way; it seemed to voice, a whisper, a summons, a command—but the dark figure was oblivious.

And then, between the nightfall and the night, he beheld a black shadow in the door.

It was Gammage.

THE orchis-hunter moved forward as the Italian came up.

"Ah, professor!" he said. "You are on time, I perceive. I was a little early. I've been waiting . . . five minutes . . . but—no matter; we've time, and to spare."

Professor Pordenone observed his visitor under lowered brows.

"Ah, yes," he made answer, with a precise, hissing sibilance. "Quite so,

my friend: you have—all the *time* there is."

The accent upon the word was of the faintest. He paused, his face a white, glimmering oval against the background of the night.

"What is it your Shakespeare says?

Time hath, my Lord, a wallet on his back In which he puts alms for oblivion.

"Is it not so, my friend?"

His dark, Italian face, with its high cheek-bones, showed in a darkling glimmer beneath the tall, shapeless hat; with his wide, foreign cloak, and the white, slender hands moving against the black, there was about him a sinister air, a something hooded and malign, his glance upon his visitor as if the very soul of the man had arisen, deep down, to peer for a moment out of his cold eyes in a sudden, sardonic flicker of unholy mirth.

The orchis-hunter may have been aware of it; perhaps something of this may have been reflected in his look, his tone. Moving outward from the doorway, he shivered slightly in the humid air, for it was not cold. Yet it was as if a bleak wind of the spirit had touched him, and passed on.

"Ugh! Someone's walking over my grave!" he muttered, turning aside as Professor Pordenone moved forward to unlock the door.

The wind, rising, clamored at eave and shutter as the door fell open with a slatting clatter; it shrieked in the chimney on a rising note as the two men, the professor in the lead, went inward to the house.

Here in the bedchamber all was darkness and silence, save for the measured ticking of the hall clock, like the beating of a heart; the squeak and scurry of rats in the wainscot; else was it a silence upon which these empty sounds beat and were lost as rain-drops upon velvet.

The professor, his finger upon the wall-switch, snapped on the light,

pointing forward to the closed door leading to his study.

"In there, my friend," he said, "I have a surprize for you; it will take but a moment; through the study, and into my garden; for you must see—you must—ah—*feel* before you will believe. But—*che sara sara*—what will be will be, my friend; is it not so?"

He ceased, and the long, wild laughter of the winds fled past the dripping eaves. Under the lights his face, with its high-arched, broken nose, showed in a Rembrandtesque shading of high light and shadow, like a Savonarola debased.

Then, with his hand upon the door-knob, he paused. Under the light his face, stripped for a moment of its mask, showed for a fleeting instant, like the face of a satyr, satanic in its ultimate suggestion of sheer, feline malevolence; the words purred in the silence like a cat's:

"Now—my friend—in a moment now—you will see. Have I not promised you?"

He flung wide the door to a black velvet wall of Stygian dark, out of which there came on a sudden a rustling as of invisible pinions, and with it an odor, strong and almost fetid; it swept out upon them in a dim tide of soundless flood.

The professor hesitated, wrinkling his nose with a delicate pinching of the thin nostrils, an odd look of surprize upon his face. But the darkness was like a wolf's throat; the single light but emphasized it; it was smothering, opaque, like the thick darkness of a vault.

Then—he disappeared into that velvet black even as Gammage, following, heard his quick foot-falls padding in the dimness of the study just ahead.

THE orchis-hunter froze suddenly in motion. There was a light-switch at the door; his fingers were reaching for it even as, from that midnight black, there came a sound inhuman, beastlike, such as nothing he had ever heard, or would hear, by God's grace, while he might live. Once, on a stricken field, he had heard that sound, or something near it: the scream of a horse in its last agony; it rose now even as he fumbled for the light-switch—died to a choked gurgle, a long, shuddering sigh.

Then—he snapped on the switch, and as the light sprang to full flower, at what he saw or thought he saw a weakness seized upon him, and a quick horror turning his bones to water. For there, towering to the lofty ceiling, uprose a thing, monstrous, unbelievable, a thing that, with its waving tentacles of viscid green, stood like a giant squid, rooted in black loam. And then, beneath the flat white disk that was its mouth, the orchis-hunter saw, and seeing, fled outward, trembling, blind and dumb, to the clear air of heaven.

For the thing that he had seen, agonized, contorted, ere it disappeared forever, sucked downward in that insensate maw, had been—the face of Professor Pordenone!

The Fly-Trap, magnified ten thousand diameters; the seedling, grown overnight to the monster that it had become; the fleshless Frankenstein had found its victim.

The Man-Trap had made its kill.

