

SHOCK

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FINAL PERFORMANCE by <i>Robert Bloch</i>	6
THE WITCH by <i>Ralph E. Hayes</i>	18
OPEN HOUSE by <i>Charles Beaumont</i>	25
THE MAN WHO KNEW EVERYTHING by <i>Edward D. Hoch</i>	35
THE SKELETON by <i>Ray Bradbury</i>	41
COLD CASE by <i>Ed Ritter</i>	57
SKIN by <i>Roald Dahl</i>	62
CHANCEYVILLE by <i>John Anthony West</i>	78
JOHNSON LOOKED BACK by <i>Thomas Burke</i>	85
BEAUTIFUL DREAMER by <i>R. A. Lafferty</i>	90
A BOTTOMLESS GRAVE by <i>Ambrose Bierce</i>	97
MOON-FACE by <i>Jack London</i>	104
THE KENNEL by <i>Maurice Level</i>	110
PRISON BALL by <i>John Rublowsky</i>	116
CAT KILLERS by <i>Donald E. Westlake</i>	124

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*A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Everybody knows that.
But too much knowledge is more dangerous—it's often fatal.*



THE MAN WHO KNEW EVERYTHING

by EDWARD D. HOCH

THE FIRST TIME I EVER MET HIM was in France, just before the war. I was attached to the *Tribune's* Paris office then, and the sleepless virility of youth often led me to the dimness of the Left Bank

cafes when night had drifted over the city.

It was in one of these places that I saw him, doing an act as part of a third-rate floor show that barely managed to keep the audi-

ence awake. He came on just after the sequined, nearly-nude girls, and quite often only a handful of drunks stayed around to watch him.

He was billed then as *Mantayna, The Man Who Knows Everything*, and it was a pretty fair memory act as such things went. One night over a drink I got talking to him, and I realized with a bit of a start that he was really an educated man. He knew a lot more than just the population of India or the Kings of England or the velocity of a falling object. And we'd sit there by the hour sometimes, talking of the war that was then almost upon us, and of what might follow it.

"My friend," he'd say, sipping at his glass of wine, "I sometimes think that an educated man—a really educated man—is the greatest evil in the world today."

"Evil? How can intelligence and knowledge ever be evil?"

"Haven't you ever realized that evil—at least in its principal forms—is founded upon knowledge? A poor ignorant fellow can practice the simpler forms of sin, but the more advanced vices are unknown to him."

At the time it was just conversation, and I never thought too much about it.

It wasn't until some sixteen years later that our paths were destined to cross again. I was older, and perhaps a bit wiser—

though I was still a foreign correspondent. The place this time was Cairo, in the middle of the Suez trouble, and my mind was on far different things when I came upon the mention of a Professor Mantayna in a news dispatch.

He'd been living in Egypt, apparently for a number of years, and teaching at the University of Cairo. I was happy to hear the news, and one night after the excitement of my current assignment had died down, I hired a car to take me to his house on the outskirts of Cairo.

"Well," he welcomed me with a familiar smile, "my old friend from Paris!"

"Your memory is as good as ever, Professor."

He led me through a pink painted arch and down a wide curving flight of stairs to a lower-level living room.

"Memory and knowledge are my business," he answered.

"I know—*Mantayna, The Man Who Knows Everything*. But really, I'm glad to see you're teaching now. It's a bit more respectable—and profitable, too—from the looks of this house."

Mantayna smiled, a thin, tired smile. Perhaps it was only an older smile.

"More profitable, but more tiring, too. I sometimes feel completely drained of all energy. Would you care for a drink?"

I accepted his offer and he poured a single glass of wine.

"Aren't you joining me?" I asked.

"No, I've given it up."

I sipped the warming liquid with unconcealed pleasure.

"Well, it certainly tastes good. But tell me, what have you been doing in Egypt besides teaching?"

"Learning. Always learning."

"I thought you knew everything already."

He closed his eyes and leaned back on the pink-cushioned couch. "There are always new things to learn. Things buried and forgotten by the passage of time. That was the main reason for my coming to Egypt. Here, more than anywhere else on earth, is the burial ground for the mysteries of the distant past."

I puzzled a bit over this. "Mysteries of what kind? Certainly we've discovered everything important about ancient civilizations, if that's what you mean."

"Ah, but we haven't! Take Egypt, for example. We know the names of their rulers, and the location of their tombs. We know that women often shaved their heads and wore colored wigs. We know that they worshipped cats and sacred birds like the ibis. But what do we know of the intimate details of their private lives? Do we know their particular virtues . . . and their vices?"

This last was spoken almost in

a whisper, and I had to lean toward him a bit to catch it.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I said once, long ago, that knowledge and evil often go hand in hand. I, for example, have increased my knowledge of the world's good, only to learn also of its evil. I know things . . ."

His voice trailed off into nothing.

"Are you well, Professor?" I asked, not without a bit of alarm.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, nothing. Stay with me, though, old friend. Stay, and I will give you a story bigger than Suez."

Professor Mantayna rose slowly to his feet and led me deeper into the confines of his house. We passed down a long hall, subdued in lighting and lined with bookshelves. The titles, many of them, were strange to me—*Fountainhead of Knowledge, Mysteries of the East, Before Adam*. The books stood in neat, dusty rows, many of their spines old and faded, showing the ravages of time.

Presently we reached another room, which I supposed to be Mantayna's bedroom. But the walls were covered with a strange writing that seemed to my untrained eye like some sort of hieroglyphics.

"What is this place?" I asked him.

"You noticed that we went

downstairs when we entered my house? And the hallway out there also is slightly graded. We are now some thirty feet below ground, in a room over four thousand years old”

“You found this? Was there a mummy or something here?”

“Nothing. Only the writings you see on these walls of stone. But they told me the last secret—the final bit of knowledge.”

He gestured toward the walls and I studied them for a moment, but the ancient markings meant nothing to me.

“What does it say?” I asked.

He sighed, the sound of an old man. “Today there are only a certain number of actual vices known to man—sex, drink, drugs, gambling Here, from long ago, is the record of another way toward pleasure—a vice lost in the pages of history.”

“An unknown vice,” I said. “It seems impossible. What is it?”

Mantayna only shook his head. “By our Twentieth Century standards it would be unspeakable. Yet I believe it was once the major vice of half the known world.”

“An ultimate vice,” I mused, “lost to mankind and now rediscovered. I think there’s a story in it, all right.”

He nodded slowly. “A story that can never be printed in full, of course. A vice that helped destroy Egypt, Greece and Rome—and could be just as fatal to the

modern world.”

“You mean you don’t intend to publish your findings?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“But you said you had a story for me.”

“I have, but no details. You may report as much as I’ve told you. No more.” Even as we talked Mantayna’s face seemed to grow more tired and wrinkled. It was almost as if he were fighting off a great sleep that threatened to envelop him at any moment.

“Listen, Professor,” I persisted.

“Civilization has progressed a great deal in four thousand years. How do you know that modern men and women would even find pleasure in this long-lost vice of your ancient Egyptians?”

He looked at me for a long moment before he replied. “I know,” he said simply. “I know.” And then he was silent, his eyes slowly closing as the great sleep seemed about to overcome him again.

“I’d better be going, Professor,” I said gently. “Perhaps I can come again tomorrow?”

“Perhaps,” he mumbled. “You can find your way out.”

“Of course.”

As I left the ancient stone room and started back along the dim hallway he seemed to stagger to his feet. I left the house and went into the cooling night air, and breathed deeply of its fresh, unmusted smell

For two days I was busy at the port, watching shiploads of troops moving in and out with a decreasing sense of urgency. The worst of the Suez crisis was over now, and finally I had time again to remember my strange conversation with Professor Mantayna. On Friday I returned to my hotel room to find a letter from him awaiting me.

It was a single sheet of paper, one of his old letterheads from the Paris days.

"Dear friend," it began, "I must write to you just once after our conversation. You must have noticed that I seemed to tire as the evening wore on, and I feel that I must tell the horrible truth you must already suspect. I, Mantayna, am in the grip of the ultimate horror—the most vicious form of degeneration ever practiced by man. It is now too late for anything to save me. Already death is very near, the same hideous dissolution that has claimed millions all through history. The ultimate pleasure, horrible as it is, is beyond human resistance. I only pray that the few to whom I have entrusted the secret will never attempt its practice."

The letter ended there, without even a signature, and that last sentence sent a brief chill through my bones.

I left the hotel at once and headed for Mantayna's house on the edge of the city. When I reached

it, all was silent, and only the movement of the warm desert air through the date palms reminded me that life still existed here. I pushed the buzzer and waited, but no one came. Then I tried the door and it opened at my touch—he must have known I'd come after receiving his letter.

I went in, and down the steps to his living room, then down the long hallway he must have cut from the ancient rock. Down the hallway, lined with books that held all the world's knowledge. To the room at the end.

And there I found Mantayna, what was left of him, in ancient splendor. He had draped his body in a flowing robe of many colors, and with his last breath of life he had covered his face with a wicker basket.

I lifted it, and saw the wrinkled, eternally old face of a mummy. But in the glazed eyes, there was a look of indescribable ecstasy. Even through the horror I recognized it. . . .

After the funeral I went back to the house, and I searched among the mountains of personal documents for some further clue to this strange vice. What was this pleasure that drove Mantayna to destroy himself so completely—and to whom had he revealed the secret?

I found the answer on the sec-

ond day of searching, among his notes for the classes he taught at the university. His students! They had been the "few" he'd told. And in turn they might have told others...

I looked further, and presently I came upon Mantayna's secret, the instructions written in a neat, flowing hand. It is before me now as I put down these facts on paper.

Mantayna died because he knew too much, because he knew everything. Now, as the months have passed since his funeral, I see frequently in the Cairo papers the

little boxed items reporting still another death—the victim's wrinkled body with the dreadful glazed look of unutterable joy. The knowledge is spreading, and the evil.

But when I remember the look in Mantayna's eyes, I know that it will not be long before I pick up the sheet of instructions and follow in the fatal footsteps of The Man Who Knew Everything.

And I am still among the first. Soon the whole world will know it again—the pleasure...and the pain...and the terrible, terrible end. ■ ■

