



Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Man Who Saw Red

By J. WILMER BENJAMIN

A strange tale of murder and an incriminating red necktie

LOCKE'S playful little puppy bounded into the room. Barton sent it yelping as he aimed a kick in its direction. The line of Locke's lips tightened.

"Why can't you play square?" he asked contemptuously. "It was your own idea to sign the confession for security and replace the money as you were able. It was your own mistake when you took it for speculative purposes. And now you're welshing."

All of Barton's long-suppressed hatred for this man welled up within him. He clenched his fist beneath the table.

"You're a weakling, Barton. You never can see anything through."

"Yes, I took it to buy stocks, and I got caught. But I'm not so sure you weren't behind the move that sold me out."

"Your imagination runs in peculiar channels," said Locke evenly. "If it weren't for Bernice, I'd have you thrown into jail."

Barton's fist smashed down on the table with a force which threatened to split the wood.

"You leave Bernice out of this! You stole her from me——"

"You're a fool, Barton. You must have been drinking——"

Barton pushed the heavy table a little to one side. A red mist seemed to swim before his eyes, a red mist which centered

on that scarlet cravat Locke always affected.

"I'm going to get you, Locke," he said distinctly.

"Barton! Stop where you are!"

"You, and your mangy little pup, and your damned red tie. Like a red flag in front of a bull. I hate the sight of you, Locke. And I'm going to kill you!"

Locke retreated slightly. He put out an uncertain hand. "Stay where you are, man. You're mad!"

"Mad, am I? Maybe so. I've wanted to—now I will!"

"One step more, Barton, and I'll shoot you dead!"

Barton laughed at that.

"You're unarmed, and we're alone," he said, advancing slowly.

Locke dived suddenly for the table drawer. Barton smashed his jaw with a hard right and clutched his neck with strong fingers.

They crashed to the davenport, rolled to the floor. Barton's grip tightened. Locke's tongue protruded. He gurgled, struggled fiercely. His body stiffened, then went limp.

Barton still held that bulldog grip. After a long time, he released it. Locke's body was limp and heavy. It slipped from against him, lay grotesquely on the floor.

Barton sat and stared at it. For a moment the room swam before his eyes. Then things became normal again. Not

quite normal. He was breathing easier now, but he seemed to be sitting in the air, and the furniture was floating in space. He felt completely detached from everything.

But he knew that he wasn't. He jerked himself back to reality. He knew that he was in Locke's library, in the deserted house. He knew that he had murdered Locke.

He stared at the vivid red cravat, hanging awry where his clutching fingers had pulled its flaming length out of the vest. He recalled that he had once bought one himself in an effort to rival the handsome Locke. But he had never even worn it. What was that saying about seeing red? Well, he had seen red, all right—literally, and once too often.

Locke was out of the way. Locke, with his Puritanical carping on honesty and fair play, with his hints of advice and references to gambling.

He snapped back from the stupid torpor into which he felt himself slipping. That confession was still in Locke's private safe. But the safe was open. . . .

No need to slave for freedom now!

He stepped across Locke's body. No need to fear it now. He smiled at the thought, kicked it contemptuously, as one kicks an old rug over which he has stumbled.

He turned as a low growl came from the adjoining room. The stupid little puppy stood there. He shouted an oath, and the dog retreated with angry, ineffectual growls.

At once he pulled out the contents of the safe. There were many papers, a few bonds. The typed "contract" in which he had confessed his theft and promised to repay it to the firm was on top, where Locke had placed it midway of their talk.

BARTON pocketed the paper, scattered others on the floor. The bonds he burned carefully, watching to see that no telltale pieces remained and scattering the ashes so that they would not be noticed. It would look like a funny kind of robbery if nothing was missing, and a routine check-up of Locke's affairs would lead to the discovery that the bonds were gone.

He turned over a table, upset a chair. The big clock struck nine. He remembered stories he had read. Stopped clocks weren't always accepted as proof of time, but it would help. So he moved the hands ahead to indicate seven minutes before ten, sent the clock crashing to the floor, and grinned as it stopped running.

He had wasted no time, although he felt perfectly safe in this deserted old house set back in its yard. No one would find Locke until the housekeeper came in the morning. He took a last look at the body as he stood beside the door and sneered as his eyes were drawn to the torn red tie. He straightened his own tie, brushed his coat sleeves fastidiously, opened the door, turned off the light, and walked out—a free man for the first time in months.

Barton saw to it that he was in his club talking to Billingsley by half past nine. He flattered himself that his hand was steady as they played billiards for a half-hour. From ten until ten-thirty he read the evening paper. And it was then, when he first had time to think over what he had done, that he began to be afraid.

It was utterly foolish, he knew. Locke was dead, definitely out of the way. They had both been single, with no family responsibilities, when they had begun their partnership, and Locke, in spite of his intended marriage, had made no change in the partnership papers. The entire assets of the firm were now his. His alibi was

airtight. No one had seen him go to Locke's house. On the contrary, he had been in the club ever since half past nine. And the clock in Locke's study indicated nine fifty-three. Yet he was afraid.

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his damp forehead. He felt suddenly conspicuous, and glanced around to make sure that he had not been observed. He had a feeling that someone was standing just behind his chair.

He hurried to his locker and mixed a stiff highball. He followed it with another. And when he clicked shut the locker door he almost jumped at the sound.

He decided that the place for him was in his apartment, asleep. Everything would be all right as soon as he stopped this alibi-manufacturing and went to bed. It was the fact that his presence in the club was part of his plot that was working havoc with his nerves. Once in his apartment, he would be through with the whole matter.

But it did not end that easily. Barton felt as if someone were following him in another taxi. He caught himself stealing surreptitious glances through the rear window.

He paid the driver hurriedly, looking down the street they had traveled. No other car was in sight, but he hustled into the apartment hotel as if he had an appointment.

When he left the elevator on the fifth floor and the cage descended, he felt horribly alone. He cursed himself for a fool, but he could not get rid of that fear. His mind's eye was looking at that red cravat, twisted awry, on the dead Locke. He stood before the door to his bachelor suite and hesitated to open it. He had a premonition that there was someone waiting for him behind that wooden bar-

rier. He tried to persuade himself that it was the cocktails.

With a muttered oath, he inserted his key and swung open the door. Swiftly his hand found the wall switch, and the room was flooded with light. Everything was as he had left it. He closed and locked the door, threw his hat into a chair.

It was when he turned toward the windows that he first saw Locke.

"HELLO," said Locke with a grim smile, "I've been waiting for you."

Barton stood rigid, moving not a muscle, waiting for Locke to vanish.

"Late, aren't you? Have a busy evening?"

Locke spoke quite casually, as if his presence there were the most normal thing in the world. And somehow, with Locke's voice, Barton's senses took the cold plunge into rationality again. He actually experienced a kind of relief.

He even started forward. He had expected this. He had fought against the thought, out there in the hall, but he had known all along that Locke would be waiting for him.

Locke put out a restraining hand.

"Stop where you are," he ordered in his confident voice. And Barton obeyed as of old.

In the silence, he was afraid again. His heart hammered against his ribs. The blood rushed through his veins and his head was hot and heavy. There was a roaring in his ears. His voice, when he spoke, was high and shrill.

"What are you doing here?" he cried.

Locke laughed. His face seemed gray and drawn. He was immaculately dressed, except for his red cravat, which was hanging loosely around his neck.

"I'm not," said Locke. "You just think so."

"I just think so!" sneered Barton.

"Don't be an ass, Locke. You came to after I left. You got up, somehow, and came here to wait for me. I'm not crazy!"

Locke fingered his red necktie. "But you will be," he said calmly. "You won't be able to get away from me. *You* know very well I'm here. You will always know. But people won't believe you, Barton. They won't see me. Because I'm *not* here—except to you. I don't exist. You let me into your mind, you fool, and so I'm real to you. I'll always be real to you!"

"No! No!" cried Barton wildly. "You're trying to drive me mad, Barton. You can't do that to me!"

But he was afraid—terribly afraid. Sledge-hammer blows were pounding within him. He felt weak, nauseated.

"You can't get by with it, Locke!"

He meant to speak calmly, sneeringly. He heard only a wild shrieking, and realized that it was his voice. He shivered, cringed back against the wall.

Locke fingered that red necktie. He smiled, and took a step toward Barton.

Barton's hand slid down the wall, found support against the writing-desk. He backed hastily away, knocked over the telephone.

Locke took another step forward.

Barton's nerve broke completely. He clutched his hair, hid his face in his arms.

"Help!—murder!—help!" he screamed wildly. "Locke—get away! For God's sake, stay away from me!"

When he looked up, Locke was again standing beside the dresser near the windows.

"You're acting like an awful ass, Barton," he said. "You can't get rid of me that way. You must stop thinking about me—and *you can't!*"

Someone was hammering on the door. "What's all the trouble in there? Open up. I'm the house officer."

"There's no trouble, Cunningham," said Barton.

The pounding continued. "Open up! Hurry it up!"

Barton turned the key. Cunningham came in. He motioned with his head and another man entered.

"Just happened to have detective Burns with me in the pool room, Mr. Barton," he explained. "Operator swears she heard you yelling murder, and your phone's signaling. What's the row?"

He replaced the telephone instrument and glanced around suspiciously. He paid no attention to Locke, but centered his interest on Barton.

"No trouble here, officer—it was in my library," said Locke.

Barton silenced him with a desperate gesture.

"He's a liar, Cunningham!" He pointed an accusing finger at Locke. "Keep quiet!" he bellowed. "You're just drunk, Locke. We don't care about your library. You let me handle this."

"Who's a liar?" asked Burns curiously.

"Locke," explained Barton. He invented rapidly. "My partner and I both had a couple too many drinks. You know how it is. He passed out, and I guess the girl must have heard him scream when he came to just now. There isn't any trouble in his library."

Locke merely fingered his tie and smiled. "Only murder," he said quietly.

Barton shrieked and started toward him.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed. "I'll choke you to death!"

Locke put out a hand, and Barton stopped. The two officers watched him closely.

"You're a consummate ass, as usual, Barton," taunted Locke suavely. "These men don't believe I'm here. I told you

people wouldn't see me. You're acting just like a crazy man. You *are* crazy!"

"I'll show you who's crazy!" threatened Barton. He sprang forward.

Cunningham grabbed him around the waist. Barton tried to twist loose, but Burns held his arm behind his back.

"Who'll you kill?" asked Cunningham. He spoke aside to Burns. "Crazy as a loon, Dan. Don't let him plunge through the window. Looks like a bad case of D. T's."

Barton relaxed in their grasp. Maybe he could throw them off guard. Locke had not moved. Now he spoke again. His voice was clear, triumphant. Barton wondered that the others did not seem to hear.

"Now you've done it!" Locke gibed. "You let me sneak into your mind, and now—you're crazy!"

Barton hurled an oath at him. "You came here to make a fool of me! I'll get you, Locke, if it's the last thing I do!"

He broke loose from his captors, started toward Locke again, a snarl of rage twisting his lips, his fingers clutching convulsively.

"Let him alone," said Cunningham. "Watch what he does."

Locke did not move. He stood there and smiled. It was then that Barton saw himself in the dresser mirror. Locke stood in front of the glass, but his reflection was not visible. Barton saw only his own image, his own distorted face—and one other thing. A red cravat!

Fear laid heavy hands on his heart, but his rage kept him going. He crouched low, moved slowly, purposefully, toward Locke. His hands crept out after that gray throat. Locke still smiled, placed a hand on his tie.

"Don't tear this, Barton," he said. "I'm quite fond of this red cravat."

With a maniacal snarl, Barton grabbed

for his throat. As he sprang forward, Locke's figure eluded his grasp, faded slowly into the wall. He heard only a faint mocking laugh.

Barton was pulling and tearing at a red tie hanging on his tie-rack beside the dresser—the red tie which he had bought but never worn. His nervous fingers tore it to shreds. And as he tore it he swore horribly in a dreadful senseless monotone.

HE CAME out of it in a few minutes. Cunningham had led him to a chair and Burns was bathing his face with cold water. His mind made a valiant effort to work normally.

He gave an uncertain laugh.

"Sorry, gentlemen," he explained with a sheepish smile. "Too much dissipation lately, I guess. Anyway, how about a little drink?"

He procured glasses, mixed cocktails. The officers smacked their lips appreciatively. But Burns was not convinced.

"What was that about your partner, Mr. Barton?" he asked bluntly.

"My partner? Did I mention Locke, Cunningham? I must have been off balance!"

"You mentioned him, all right," agreed Cunningham dryly. "You said you were going to kill him!"

"Kill him!" Barton didn't have to force his nervous start. "Kill Locke? Why, you must be crazy."

He took a long drink. He must think fast. They would suspect him now, of course, but he had nothing to worry about.

"It was a nightmare," he said, refilling his glass. "There was a man—he was after Locke and me—and I tried to stop him——"

His voice rose in horror at the memory, a horror which was not entirely simulated as he remembered Locke's figure fading into the wall.

"I'll just call Mr. Locke and see if everything's all right," decided Burns. "Maybe you've got second sight or something, sir. Funny things happen sometimes." His tone was apologetic, but his glance was shrewd. "You don't mind?"

"Go right ahead," offered Barton cordially. "Good idea. It's Vanderbilt—one-one-five."

While Burns was calling, he sipped his drink and threw his mind into high gear. He could see it all now. His damned imagination had got the better of him. Hadn't Locke—hadn't that figure—*told* him that it existed only in his mind? What an ass he had been, truly enough! They couldn't prove a thing.

He put a hand into his inside coat pocket to draw out his cigar case. His fingers encountered a folded paper. That confession! He must get rid of that somehow.

"No one answers," reported Burns. "What say we run out there, Cunningham?" He shot a keen glance at Barton. "Would you drive us around, sir?" he asked. "Save lots of time."

He mustn't muff it now. Be nonchalant. "Glad to," he replied, cursing to himself. No chance to get rid of that revealing document now. But what of it?

On the way to Locke's home, he took hold of his nerves. So Locke had said he couldn't see anything through, eh? And Locke had been almost right. But he was safe enough now. He was seeing this through, all right. He could brazen it out. That clock, with the hands at nine fifty-three, would be sufficient. Billings would swear to billiards at the club from nine-thirty on. And there were other witnesses. This fellow Burns was clever, and suspicious. He might surmise that the clock was a plant. But let him try to prove it.

Of course, plenty of people knew that

he and Locke had disagreed over Bernice, that they had been none too friendly lately even in a business way. But the whole affair would easily stand up as an amazing coincidence. With a shrewd lawyer—

They were at the door. Cunningham pushed the bell button.

Barton knew he could play his part perfectly now. He would even enjoy it. He remembered how Locke's hated body had looked as he had kicked it on his way to the safe. He remembered the vivid red cravat, twisted and crumpled. He knew just what he would do and say.

"Let's go on in," he suggested, taking the initiative.

THEY entered the quiet hallway. No sound came from the rooms beyond. Cunningham groped with the knob of the first door on the right. As his fumbling fingers found a wall switch, the library sprang into view.

"It's true," said Cunningham instantly. "Murder!"

Burns drew his gun and turned to cover Barton.

"I'll have to arrest you on suspicion, Mr. Barton," he said matter-of-factly.

Barton opened his mouth to speak his carefully thought-out words of surprize and protest. His eyes were fixed on the body sprawled on the floor.

Suddenly his pose deserted him. He covered his face with his hands, looked again.

"It's gone!" he whispered hoarsely. "It's gone! It's gone!"

"Off his nut again," said Cunningham. "Keep your gun on him, Burns."

But Barton didn't care about the gun now.

"It's gone!"

Over and over he screeched it, his voice

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The Man Who Saw Red

(Continued from page 640)

rising to a wild scream. "It was you, Locke, damn you! I didn't imagine it! You came and got it, Locke, damn you—that red tie's gone!"

He swayed for an instant, pitched headlong to the floor, groveled there gibbering to himself.

Cunningham bent over Locke's body. Burns watched while he examined the bruised and swollen throat. Burns pointed to the soft white shirt, open at the collar.

"No tie there," he said. "Something phony about all this, Cunningham. Better frisk this bird for a gun—he may be acting."

Cunningham didn't find a gun, but he took out the folded paper which Barton had removed from the safe. He was holding it in his hand when they heard a slight noise in the adjoining room.

Both men turned instantly.

"Just his mutt," said Burns.

Into the library bounded an awkward, friendly little puppy, stubby tail wagging excited greeting. It dropped its plaything at the feet of Burns, who stooped to pick it up. Then, with an air of having happily finished that particular game, it turned to stiffen and growl in ludicrous anger at the sight of Barton.

Barton sat on the floor, the light of understanding struggling slowly back to his eyes. He was staring in fascination at officer Burns, who held in his hand the tattered well-chewed remnant of a once vivid red cravat.