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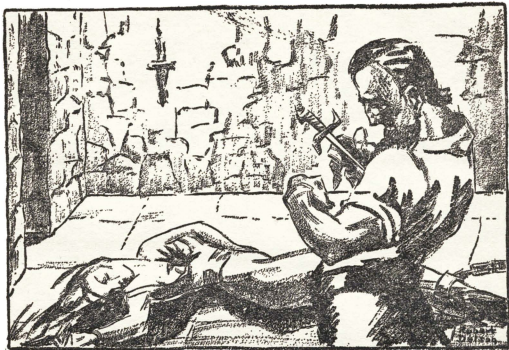
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"A knife ripped into his chest."



The Man With the Blue Beard

By HAROLD WARD

'A grim story of a weird murder—a mystery story full of strange surprises and vivid action

1. Lamontaine

LAMONTAINE, sweltering in his cubby-hole of an office, a jug of rum at his elbow, a book on the desk before him, gazed through the open window at the collection of shacks that composed the sleepy village of La Foubelle and cursed in his shaggy red beard. The sound of his rumbling voice awak-

ened the green and yellow parrot, clinging to a perch beside him. It blinked its bleary eyes an instant, then shrieked noisily.

"Rum! Rum!" it croaked. "Good Jamaica rum. Awr-r-r-rrk!"

Lamontaine filled a battered tin cup from the jug on the desk and lifted it to where the bird could reach it. The parrot

drove its hooked beak into the fiery liquor and, lifting its head, swallowed greedily.

"Rum!" it screamed. "*Jamaica rum! Hotter'n bell! . . . botter'n bell!*"

Placing the cup to his own lips, Lamontaine doffed the contents at a gulp. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hairy hand, he filled and lighted his pipe and turned back to his book.

He was a great hulk of a figure, this Doctor Hugo Lamontaine, soldier of fortune and dabbler in the occult—a man with the build of a Viking, his hair a brilliant auburn with a touch of gray above the temples, his whiskers a tangled red mass extending almost to his waist. He was clad in a pair of rusty white trousers, the suspenders hanging down over his hips, his bare feet thrust into aged, though comfortable, carpet slippers. His undershirt was unbuttoned at the neck, revealing a gorilla-like chest covered with sandy hair. His bare arms, thick as posts, hairy like those of an ape, ended in hands which, while massive like the rest of the man, were spatulate—the hands of an artist.

He was in La Foubelle for a purpose. Sleeping at the very edge of the fetid Louisiana swamp, its inhabitants still clung to the customs and superstitions of their ancestors. For three months he had remained there, surrounded by his books, his vials and his bottles, endearing himself to the natives, winning their confidence, delving deeply into their hyperorthodoxies and beliefs. And now, his work not yet completed, the place was beginning to pall on him. He longed for action—for the crash of sabers, the smell of powder, the shouts of men. . . .

AN ASTHMATIC Ford came to a wheezing stop just outside the battered gate. Then the sound of hurried footsteps on the graveled walk.

"Hell! A patient!" Lamontaine growled to the parrot.

He laid his book down and glanced through the open window. Then he leaped to his feet, and hurling the litter of papers and magazines from the operating-table, gave it a quick shove into the center of the room. The parrot, drowsing, opened its filmy eyes and shrieked raucously:

"Oh, when I die, don't bury me at all; Just pickle my bones in alcohol."

It ended its bacchanalian outburst with an ear-splitting "*Aur-rr-rk!*" as Pierre Le Front, the village constable, staggered through the open door, the form of an unconscious man in his arms. He deposited his burden on the table and turned to Lamontaine, his black eyes glittering with excitement.

"I fin' him far, far from here at ze edge of ze swamp," he explained hastily. "He has been in ze water and swam to shore. Zere was a track where he dragged heemself up ze bank. He ees a powerful man, doctaire, for he was mos' assuredly thrown into ze swamp to die. See?"

With a dramatic gesture, he jerked aside the shirt which clung soddenly to the unconscious man's chest. There was a vicious knife wound in it just over the heart.

Lamontaine was already at work cleansing and swabbing the wound. Even the illiterate native noted the extreme delicacy of his touch, the deftness of his spatulate fingers. Reaching for the tin cup on the desk, he emptied a bit of rum into it from the jug and, forcing the wounded man's mouth open, poured a small quantity between the bloodless lips.

The injured man choked, swallowed, then opened his eyes and glared at them wildly.

"The man with the blue beard!" he muttered thickly. "The man with the

blue beard! . . . de Laval! . . . Oh, Vera, don't you understand? . . ."

His voice died away in a low, gurgling moan. He closed his eyes again and sank back into unconsciousness.

Lamontaine turned to the constable.

"De Laval?" he questioned reminiscently. "Isn't there a family by that name somewhere in the vicinity?"

Constable Pierre Le Front crossed himself hastily.

"Five-ten mile from here, on ze peninsula, ees ze house of which you spik," he answered. "Eet ees old—so old zat eet has ze haunt—eet ees hexed. At night, sometimes, zere ees ze weird light in ze window or in ze forest around eet. Ze family, zey are dead."

His voice dropped to a low whisper.

"Eet was zere," he said in a low, awed tone, glancing around as if fearful of being overheard, "zat Jean La Fitte, ze pirate, haff hees headquarters when he was on ze mainland. Eet ees said zat he built ze ol' house an' zat he brought hees captives zere sometimes for ze torture. Eet ees zey who haunt ze place, wailing an' moaning, an' ze lights are carried by zem as zey search for ze gol' zat La Fitte stole from zem."

Lamontaine's red beard dropped to his chest and he laughed softly, the light of mischief dancing in his keen eyes.

"Poppycock!" he snapped. "La Fitte was a decent pirate—as pirates go. He didn't torture his victims."

Le Front shrugged his scrawny shoulders and crossed himself again.

"Every man to his own belief," he said finally.

LAMONTAINE stooped over the wounded man and, lifting him without apparent effort, carried him through the little door that led to the rear of the house where he had his living-quarters. Placing him upon the bed, he removed

the sodden clothing and bandaged the wound.

The injured man opened his eyes and glared about wildly again. Then he babbled. Lamontaine ceased his labors and, bending his head until his long, red beard dragged upon the other's brawny chest, listened intently.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Le Front, who had followed the physician into the room, exclaimed. "What does he say?"

Lamontaine held up a warning finger. The wounded man babbled on. Finally he dropped into a troubled sleep.

"He will live," Lamontaine said quietly. "He needs sleep and rest now. Much sleep."

He walked to the medicine cabinet and mixed a potion.

"Get your nigger and come over and take care of him tonight," he growled, placing the glass on the table by the bed. "Give him a spoonful of this every two hours and a sip of rum if he wakes up."

Le Front looked at the big man inquiringly.

"And you?" he said.

Lamontaine was already pulling on his shoes and stockings. Stepping over to the table, he opened a drawer and, taking out a gun, twirled the well-oiled cylinder with eyes that glistened ominously.

"I'm going to investigate this haunted house of yours," he said quietly.

Le Front glanced apprehensively through the open window. The sun was slowly sinking, throwing long, grotesque shadows over the countryside. From the distance came the barking of a dog, the merry voices of children at play.

"Eet weel soon be night," he said, crossing himself again. "Wait until tomorrow, my fren', an' I weel go weeth you. But tonight—*mon Dieu!*"

Lamontaine, in the act of pulling on his shirt, grinned cheerfully. Filling the tin cup from the rum jug, he doffed its

contents, then tossed the cup to Le Front. "Drink?" he inquired. "Jamaica rum. Good liquor hurts nobody."

Constable Le Front filled the container with fingers that trembled.

"At night," he said, half to himself. "You will go to zat place—at night?"

"When graveyards yawn and tombs give up their dead," Lamontaine misquoted lightly. "There's danger there, Le Front. The man's been stabbed, half killed. And it's danger that I crave right now. The devil's in me tonight, my friend. I must have excitement or—or I get drunk. . . ."

"Eet ces far bes' zat you get drunk," Le Front said sagely. "Zey may keel you, zese devils zat I tell you about."

"If I die, all that my humble abode contains is yours," Lamontaine chuckled.

The parrot, opening its eyes drowsily, shrieked raucously:

*"Oh, when I die, don't bury me at all;
Just pickle my bones in alcohol. . . ."*

It stopped its bacchanalian ribaldry and glared at its master sleepily.

"Rum!" it croaked. "Good Jamaica rum. . . ."

Lamontaine, his long, red beard resting against his broad chest, laughed rumblingly.

2. In the Dark

THERE was a touch of storm in the air as Lamontaine, walking, approached the old house on the peninsula. The moon was hidden by the black and swollen clouds; the night was very dark. He could just make out the outlines of the building through the trees as he approached it from the western side, the stagnant swamp into which the land jutted, surrounding it on the other three sides, drawing closer and closer with the passing of the years. Once, according to tradition, Lamontaine had heard, there

had been no peninsula; the swamp had eaten into the land like a festering sore until now it was within a few hundred yards on either side.

There was something sinister and malignant about the pile of ancient masonry. Lamontaine sensed it as he stood there, his eyes attempting to pierce the gloom. He shuddered as if an icy hand had been pressed across his brow, and his fingers sought the butt of the gun that nestled in his coat pocket. Then he moved a bit closer, dodging from tree to tree and from bush to bush.

Even in the darkness he could note the peculiar construction of the building. It reminded him of a bat with wings outspread. As he drew closer he saw what caused the illusion; the main building reared itself like a tower, three stories in height. On either side was a wing, nestling close to the ground. Both wings appeared to have fallen into decay, the windows broken and boarded over, the crumbling walls covered with ivy and parasitic growths, the leaves of which tossed and shook with every vagrant breeze. The central portion, however, was apparently in good repair.

His inspection completed, he started forward again, only to come to a sudden stop with an exclamation of astonishment.

In one of the tiny basement windows appeared a light. It moved fitfully to another . . . stopped . . . moved on again as if carried by someone who halted occasionally. It was a strange light, elusive, flickering.

Lamontaine grew more cautious, his eyes never leaving the tumble-down house. Not a glimmer of light showed in any of its innumerable windows save that ghostly, shadowy flicker in the basement.

Again he stopped, rooted in his tracks. From somewhere in the house came a scream—a harrowing wail of terror. It was the voice of a woman.

Lamontaine darted forward. The scream was repeated. He snatched the gun from his pocket, and broke into a run.

His ankle came in contact with something that tripped him, hurling him to the ground. He struck upon his face, the gun falling from his hand. He sprang to his feet and groped about for the weapon. He finally found it in the tall, dank grass.

Then his inquisitive fingers touched something else. Stooping, he touched it again. He straightened up, his brows puckered thoughtfully.

It was a thin piano wire stretched almost knee-high. Holding it between his fingers, he followed it to a near-by tree; it ran through a staple fastened in the trunk and on to the next one.

It was the wire that had tripped him. He had no doubt that it extended from one side of the peninsula to the other. That it was connected with some sort of alarm within the house was apparent. The instant he came in contact with it, the scream had been abruptly cut off in the middle. He glanced quickly toward the old mansion. The subtle, lambent light was gone. The basement windows were as dark and eery as the remainder of the place.

Lamontaine moved forward cautiously again, his gun held ready for action. A movement among the bushes to the right arrested his attention. For an instant the moon came out from beneath the cloud; he caught a glimpse of a figure crouching in the shadows—of wolfish green eyes glaring at him malevolently.

Hugo Lamontaine was a man not given to fear; yet cold, stark panic swept over him now as the thing cowered in the darkness, ready to spring. He pulled the trigger of his gun. The flash showed him a wild, maniacal face, a tangled thatch of hair. Then it was upon him.

In spite of Lamontaine's tremendous

strength, he was hurled to the ground by the smashing impact. The weapon was knocked from his hand. Muscular fingers sought his windpipe. His fist shot out at random, landing against flesh and bone with a crushing, smacking thud. The other grunted. Lamontaine, seizing the momentary advantage, hurled his adversary backward and leaped to his feet, the joy of battle surging through his veins.

There was a crackling of twigs as the thing crashed through the bushes a little distance away. Lamontaine lost a few seconds searching for his weapon. Finding it, he leaped in pursuit.

Only silence greeted his ears. The monster had disappeared.

Lamontaine stopped short and ran his fingers through his long beard in bewilderment. Brief though the flash of light from his gun had been, his quick eyes had noted the face of the man who had attacked him.

The other's tangled beard had been blue!

WALKING warily, putting his feet forward cautiously to avoid contact with other possible wires, Lamontaine approached the house. Somewhere within was a woman. He had heard her scream of terror, cut off suddenly in the middle as he touched the alarm wire. And, too, the wounded man had babbled of her. Who was she? And what was it that she feared? Lamontaine intended to find out.

He was within a dozen yards of the house when the front door was suddenly thrown open. A woman, holding a candle in her ivory-white hand, peered anxiously out into the darkness.

For a moment Lamontaine stood there, his gun covering the slender form of the girl—for girl she was—tall, bewitchingly beautiful. She was wrapped in a dressing-gown of some kind of fleecy material,

a twisted girdle about her waist which revealed every line of her perfect shape. The lighted candle, held aloft, showed the terror in her dark eyes, the delicate contour of her oval face.

Then, as her glance fell upon Lamontaine, she stepped forward a pace.

"For God's sake, leave!" she whispered hoarsely, her breast rising and falling with emotion. "There is danger——"

She stopped suddenly, glancing back over her shoulder apprehensively. The tall figure of a man appeared in the doorway beside her, blinking painfully as he peered out into the darkness.

"What is it, Vera?" he inquired. Then, as his glance fell upon Lamontaine, his face—dark, saturnine, emaciated—twisted with sudden emotion.

"God in heaven! A stranger—and armed!" he exclaimed. "I thought I heard the report of a gun a moment ago. Have you—have you been attacked?"

Lamontaine nodded grimly as he strode forward. The man appeared to be trembling with fear.

"And you, Vera? What in the name of heaven induced you to open the door?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"I—I heard a shot," she answered. "I——"

The thin man beckoned to Lamontaine imperiously.

"Come in!" he growled. "God knows that you are far from being welcome here. But I cannot allow you to remain outside exposed, as you are, to the most hellish danger. Come in. Perhaps we can make you comfortable until morning."

He extended his thin, muscular hand.

"I am Charles de Laval," he went on. "And this is my niece, Vera."

Lamontaine bowed gravely without taking the proffered hand. The man appeared not to notice the oversight. Taking the candle from the girl's trembling fingers, he stepped aside and allowed the

newcomer to enter. The girl, standing back in the shadows—for the hallway was unlighted—whirled as de Laval turned to close and bolt the door.

"Go before it is too late!" she whispered hoarsely. "You are in danger—horrible danger. Oh! . . ."

Lamontaine spun on his heel as the girl screamed. A figure loomed beside him in the darkness—a man with tangled, matted hair and a shaggy blue beard.

He leaped backward, but too late. Something crashed against his head. He heard a peal of wild, malevolent laughter as he dropped to his knees. Again the blow descended. Then darkness enveloped him.

3. *Blood of Bluebeard*

CONSCIOUSNESS returned to Lamontaine slowly. He heard a voice calling to him from a great distance . . . someone was shaking him, begging him to wake up. His head was splitting. He raised his hand and felt of it gingerly. There was a lump on it the size of a walnut.

The effort brought on a spasm of pain. He dropped back with a little grimace.

"Wake up! Wake up!" the voice continued to implore.

Suddenly recollection swept over him. He opened his eyes with an effort. The girl was kneeling beside him, her face heavy with terror. There was a candle sticking in a rude sconce on the wall; its flame flickered lamently.

She was working at an iron shackle attached to his ankle. To the shackle was a chain, fastened to a staple set in the masonry. Her fingers trembled as she tried to insert the key in the lock. Finally she succeeded and the jaws sprang apart.

"Thank God! Thank God!" she exclaimed fervently. "And now you must

go—before he comes back—before I forget myself or he finds you——”

“Meaning—what?” Lamontaine demanded, raising himself to his elbow.

Her eyes dilated with terror.

“The man with—the blue beard,” she said in an awed whisper. “It was he who attacked you. He is on friendly terms with—my uncle. Sometimes I—I wonder. . . .”

“Where is your uncle now?” Lamontaine asked.

“I—I do not know,” she answered after a brief pause. “I think that he went outside to look after the alarm wire that you broke.” Then, as if to change the subject: “You can go out the back way and, by skirting the edge of the swamp, avoid them.”

Lamontaine pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. He was still dazed and groggy, but his head was clearing rapidly. He made out, in spite of the dimness of his prison, that he was inside a small, stone-lined room, windowless; the only opening was that through which the girl had entered. Another sharp twinge of pain shot through his head as he turned; he grimaced a bit and leaned against the wall for support. The girl watched him anxiously. Her eyes gazed into his own questioningly, the haunted look still on her face.

Finally she leaned forward and touched him on the arm.

“Please go!” she whispered again, her dark eyes glittering like those of a trapped animal. “Go before he attacks you—before the blood-lust comes to me again and I—I kill you.”

“You?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“You cannot understand,” she said. “Please go—send officers here. Tell them to take me—to lock me up. Tell them to pay no attention to what my uncle says—what I say or what I may do. Tell them

to put me in a safe place—to keep me locked up so that I will harm no one else. . . .”

She buried her face in her hands in a fit of sobbing.

Lamontaine ran his fingers through his tangled red beard.

“You are Vera de Laval?” he questioned.

The girl shuddered at mention of the name.

“Yes—God help me!” she answered with a sudden show of passion. “And now, please go.”

She turned her head away from him. Lamontaine touched her on the shoulder. She drew back almost angrily.

“Who is the man with the blue beard?” he demanded.

The girl laughed hysterically.

“Why you came here is beyond me,” she exclaimed. “Nor have you told me who you are. In any event, you are a brave man thus to linger. Perhaps it will hasten your progress a bit if I tell you his identity.”

She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper.

“Gilles de Laval!” she said.

Lamontaine took a step backward.

“Gilles de Laval!” he exclaimed.

“Baron de Retz—the man who cannot die—the man who belongs to hell!”

She nodded.

“And I am of his hellish breed,” she said bitterly. “His blood flows through my veins.”

She was fumbling with the front of her dressing-gown. She tore it open, exposing to view two rounded white breasts. Between them and just above them was the mark of a hand—a blue hand, the fingers outspread.

“My heritage from the blue demon who was his wife,” she went on, her voice vibrant with passion. “It was only a few weeks ago that I discovered it. I

was at school—in New Orleans. One morning a child was discovered dead close beside the convent walls. I had been depressed for several days before; the finding of the body seemed to fill me with a strange exhilaration. And, that morning, when I took my bath, I discovered—*this!*

"Yet I did not understand the meaning of the hellish thing and I—I was fearful of telling the Mother Superior about it. For I had never been informed of the awful heritage that had been passed on to me. But he—my uncle knew. That day he came to me after reading of the murder of the child. He told me the truth—revealed to me the damnable curse—the thing that has made our family an abomination throughout the centuries.

"This old house belonged to my father. It has been in the family for years. My uncle brought me here secretly—we slipped away from the convent unobserved. Here I have tried to fight the battle within myself. But in vain—"

Again she stopped and buried her face in her delicate hands.

"And you believe?"

"It is true—true, I tell you!" she said bitterly. "Again and again I feel the surge of his blood racing through my veins—I, who am a descendant of the offspring of that union between a demon from hell and Gilles de Laval. I have tried to throw it off. It is impossible. My uncle has succeeded in battling it down, but he has been unable to help me.

"I never know when it is coming on," she continued. "Nor can I remember afterward what has happened. I only know that, while I am sleeping, *he* gains possession of my body. Then I go forth and kill—rend—destroy. He followed us here, did Gilles de Laval, the better to gloat over me. . . ."

She stopped suddenly, a spasm of pain flashing over her face.

"For God's sake, go!" she said quickly. "Again I feel it coming over me—the desire to kill. . . ."

LAMONTAINE, leaning against the wall, seemed to have lost the power of motion. His faculties were clear, but his head was a thing apart from his body . . . he was two separate entities.

The girl, too, was changing. She appeared to be growing—to lengthen out into unheard-of proportions. A mad, wild light was in her eyes. Her red lips were drawn back over her white teeth in a snarl of feline rage. She crouched almost on all fours, as if about to spring. Then she crept forward slowly. Her hand darted to her bosom. It came forth, a sharp-pointed dagger clasped in the slender white fingers. . . .

The blue patch that was upon her breast was sweeping upward. It covered her neck—crept over her face like a hideous mask, through which only her black eyes gleamed like those of a fiend from hell.

Ages passed. . . . From her breast crept other hands—blue hands. They surrounded her like an aura, dancing, gyrating. The air was filled with them. Through them Lamontaine dimly made out the slender form of the girl. Knife upraised, she was creeping stealthily toward him. He sought to avoid her. But his head—the head that was separated from his body—had no power to send the command to his laggard limbs. Yet he was not frightened. He reasoned with himself, watching her interestedly, the physician in him noting every fleeting change that came over her.

"*Hasbish!*"

The word seemed to leap from his mouth in a solid chunk. Then it dissolved. . . . He saw the letters floating all around him. The blue hands caught

them in midair, tossing them about as a child toys with a gas-filled balloon.

He regained control of himself with an effort. His brain told him that somewhere in the room was a tiny vent through which the fumes of the burning drug were filtering. And he—he who had tasted the power of narcotics in every port of the Seven Seas—had allowed himself to become a victim to them.

He laughed harshly. The sound of his own voice startled him—made him angry at himself. With a mighty effort, he threw off the lethargy that was overpowering him. He was still dazed and bewildered, yet he knew that he had won.

The girl leaped. The knife swished through the air as Lamontaine side-stepped. It missed him by inches. He roared gleefully. Seizing her slender wrists, he gave a sharp twist. The weapon clattered to the stone floor.

She snarled angrily. The blue mask had dropped from her face, revealing features from which every particle of blood seemed to have drained. Her red lips were parted; from them flecked drops of bloody foam. She scratched at Lamontaine like an angry cat. He spun her around, twisting her arm behind her back. She screamed with passion as, holding her, he stooped and snapped the iron shackle about her slender ankle. She picked the knife from the floor and lunged at him again. He side-stepped out of reach until the chain brought her up with a sudden jerk.

A sudden premonition of danger swept over him. He whirled. Then a Berserker rage swept over him, fanned into flame by the drug that was still filtering through his brain.

Just outside the door, creeping toward him, knife in hand, was the man with the blue beard.

4. *A Dead Man*

LAMONTAINE charged like an angry bull. The man with the blue beard danced nimbly aside and threw the knife. It missed Lamontaine's head by a hair's breadth and embedded itself in the door-casing with a dull *plop*. Lamontaine jerked it out of the wood and leaped forward into the shadows where the other had disappeared. A door slammed in the distance. Then there was silence.

He turned back into the cell and picked up the candle. The girl looked up at him apathetically and said nothing. Her frenzy seemed to have disappeared, leaving her dulled and stupid.

Lamontaine grinned down at her.

"It's best to leave you as you are for the nonce," he told her. "As long as I've got the key to the shackles, you'll not be sticking me in the back."

He waited an instant for her to reply. Then, as she closed her eyes as if to sleep, he wended his way through the dark corridors and mounted a narrow flight of stairs which led upward to the door through which the blue-bearded revenant had disappeared.

He stopped, the hair rising on his head, the goose-pimples forming on his flesh. From the other side of the door came a scream of mortal terror—a harrowing wail of anguish followed by the sound of a fall. Then came a low, gurgling moan, a chuckle of wild, hellish laughter.

Lamontaine's shoulder crashed against the door, but it withstood his assault. There was a small landing at the top of the stairs. It gave him an opportunity to take a step backward and charge forward again. The impact of his huge bulk against the panels caused the ancient hinges to creak protestingly. But they held. For the third time he stepped back, stopping for an instant to listen.

Again that blood-curdling moan . . . the patter of running feet . . . a door closed softly somewhere in the distance. Then silence.

He hurled his body against the door once more. His feet slipped and he fell. His fingers came in contact with something sticky . . . something that smelled sweetish. The candle had dropped from his fingers and, extinguished, rolled down the steps. He groped in his pockets for a box of matches. Finding it, he struck one against the side of the box. It flared up for an instant . . . flickered . . . went out. . . .

Yet the momentary flare had been enough to show him that his hands were wet with blood; its dampness had extinguished the match.

Cursing in his beard, Lamontaine dried his hands on his trousers and, scratching a second match, located the candle at the bottom of the stairway. Picking it up, he relighted it and climbed the steps again.

The little landing was covered with blood. It was trickling under the door in a tiny crimson stream. He had stepped in it in his mad assault against the door and, stumbling, had smeared it on his hands.

The moaning had ceased. Lamontaine, holding the candle aloft, located the knob on the door and measured the distance between it and the edge of the stair-well with his eye. Placing his broad back against the wall, he stood on one foot; extending his other leg, he placed it against the knob and, bracing himself, gave a mighty heave.

The door shrieked as the screws tore through the ancient wood. Then it gave. Lamontaine caught himself in time to avoid a bad fall. Knife in hand, the candle held before him, he leaped through the opening.

He almost stumbled over the body of a

man sprawled upon the bare, uncarpeted floor, arms outflung, the face buried in a pool of blood which was constantly growing larger.

He took a quick glance around. The room, which had evidently been used as a kitchen at some distant period, was unfurnished, the mildewed paper hanging from the walls in shreds, the rough board floor covered with dust, save where a pathway had been worn by feet from the door through which he had just emerged to another, now closed, at the other side.

In spite of his medical training, a feeling of repugnance swept over him as he knelt beside the still figure on the floor and, seizing it by the shoulder, rolled it over. A single glance was enough. The man's throat had been slit from ear to ear. The blood was still boiling through the severed jugular. He touched his hand to the chest. The heart had ceased to beat. Even as he gazed, the blood slowly coagulated . . . stopped flowing.

THE face, upturned to his, was that of a man of middle age, filled with a sort of low cunning, the mouth thick-lipped and weak. The eyes were wide open; over them the film of death had begun to form.

Lamontaine, about to rise to his feet, stopped suddenly, his keen eyes staring down at the clenched fist of the murdered man.

The dead fingers were twisted about a tuft of blue hair!

Lamontaine pulled himself to his feet, his brow pursed in thought; the words of Vera de Laval flashed kaleidoscopically through his brain. The man with the blue beard! Gilles de Laval—the Baron de Retz—the most infamous murderer of all time—the man who had married himself to a demon and wedded himself to hell!

It had been only a few days earlier

that Lamontaine, running through some of his books on demonology and witchcraft, had refreshed his memory on de Laval. Famous in the wars of Charles VII, the man had returned home, only to develop a streak of cruelty which led him to entice hundreds of innocent children to his castle. There, at the altar of Satan—for de Laval was a devil-worshipper—he had sacrificed them one by one, howling with glee at their shrieks, laving his hands in the blood that flowed from their tiny veins. . . .

One after another, his seven wives, too, had met with horrible deaths. Then love had come to him. He had led a beautiful Breton girl to the altar. At the last minute she had expostulated. De Retz, madly in love, had offered her all his possessions to go through with the ceremony. Still she refused. As a last resort, he had dropped to his knees and, seizing her slender white hands in his own cruel talons, had promised her his soul and body. She had accepted. The ceremony had been performed. And, at the altar, the bride had suddenly transformed herself into a beautiful blue demon—at least, such was the legend. Stretching forth her hand, she had touched his beard, changing it from a brilliant red to the blue of hell's smoldering embers, sealing him to the devil for ever—sending him forth a scourge upon the world.

Could it be that the girl spoke the truth—that de Laval was, as she had said, here in America? Was this house his habitat, its inhabitants members of his accursed brood? Lamontaine had delved too deeply in mystic lore to look at such stories askance. In many such tales there was more than a tincture of the truth; not all of them were the imaginings of perverted brains.

Then he laughed harshly to himself.

"Ghosts do not need to resort to *hashish*," he growled grimly.

The uncanny sensation of being watched crept over him. He turned. The room was empty, yet the feeling persisted. He knew that someone was peering at him through the dust-covered window.

He cleared the room at a bound. Jamming his palm beneath the sill, he gave a mighty heave. The window stuck. Finally it shot upward.

Something—a dark body that appeared to walk on all fours—dodged through the darkness to the shadow of a near-by bush.

Lamontaine turned and, picking up the candle, leaned out of the window. A vagrant breath of wind caused the flame to flicker, then suddenly leap high. A pace to the right a twig snapped. He turned his head.

He caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes gleaming at him with malignant ferocity—eyes that glared at him through a tangle of hair and matted blue beard.

Then the candle went out.

5. *The Only Way*

DRIPPING the stub of the candle into his pocket, Lamontaine leaped through the open window and hurled his huge body at the ghastly thing that had peered up at him. His outstretched fingers touched only empty space. There was no noise, no movement. Yet the man with the blue beard had vanished, apparently melting into thin air.

Off to the right a dozen paces came a burst of wild laughter, then silence again, unbroken even by the rustling of the dry twigs.

Doctor Hugo Lamontaine was a man with an absolute disregard for danger. His brain was racing lightning-fast now, as he stood for an instant, his body tilted forward, peering through the darkness in the direction from which the sound came. Then a sudden idea flashed over him. Turning, he raced like a man possessed—

or frightened—in the direction of La Foubelle.

Close to the edge of the forest of stunted, moss-covered trees and scraggly bushes which surrounded the old house, Lamontaine came to a sudden stop. Crouching on his heels, he turned his head back in the direction from which he came. For a moment he listened intently. Satisfied that he had not been pursued, he skirted the edge of the forest and, dropping almost to all fours, dodged from tree to tree and from shadow to shadow until he reached the swamp. Following its course, he made a wide detour and, at the end of ten minutes, the ghostly old mansion loomed up before him again, black and sinister.

At the edge of the narrow clearing before the open window he stopped and listened again. Certain that he was not observed, he cleared the distance at a bound and pulled himself through the opening.

Back inside the bare room, he halted, his every faculty alert. Then he groped his way across to where the murdered man lay. The body had not been disturbed. He tiptoed across to the closed door and, laying his hand on the knob, turned it carefully. It opened noiselessly. He slid through. Closing the door behind him, he pressed his back against it and listened once more with bated breath. He heard no sound.

He felt in his pocket for the box of matches. Striking one, he relighted the candle and took a hurried glance around. He was inside the main part of the house. The room, though plainly furnished, showed evidence of female occupancy. On the other side was a second door. Lamontaine tiptoed across to it, negotiated another room and opened a door at the opposite side. He found himself at the foot of a flight of stairs leading upward. He climbed to the second floor. Here, hallways branched off in three directions,

one to the right, one to the left and one straight ahead. The corridors were uncarpeted, showing every evidence of disuse. Yet as he gazed downward, he saw the prints of many feet in the dust. All led in the same direction—straight ahead.

Lamontaine followed them cautiously. They ended in front of a door at the end of the corridor. Hand on the knob, he stood listening, his eyes glancing narrowly at the row of closed doors on either side. Then he slowly opened the door and glanced inside.

The room was a huge one. All of the north wall had been torn out and replaced with windows, now boarded over. That it had been used as a studio at one time was apparent; a number of dust-covered pictures, several of them half finished, were scattered here and there against the walls.

A little to one side was a dresser. Piled high on it were jars of cold cream, grease paint, eyebrow pencils—all of the paraphernalia for hasty make-up.

On the wall just above the mirror was a picture. He stopped and examined it closely. It was the face of the man with the blue beard.

Lamontaine chuckled. He believed that he was beginning to see everything clearly now. Something about the painting—the way the flickering light from the candle struck it—appealed to him. He wet his finger with his tongue and rubbed it across a corner of the picture. It came away smeared with paint. Again and again he repeated the process until the marks of writing appeared to view.

He glanced at it curiously. Then, chuckling to himself, he cut the canvas from the frame and, folding it, placed it in his pocket.

Turning, he went down the stairway again, finally ending in the empty room where the dead man lay. The black, threatening clouds had turned into a fine,

misty rain. Extinguishing the candle, Lamontaine leaned out of the window and, opening the canvas, allowed the moisture to fall upon the picture. When it was thoroughly soaked, he wiped it off with his coat sleeve, repeating the process again and again. Satisfied, he folded it and placed it in his pocket once more.

Groping his way through the darkness, he stepped over the body of the murdered man and again entered the cellar. At the bottom of the narrow flight of stairs, he relighted the candle and negotiated the gloomy corridors until he reached the cell where he had confined the girl.

She appeared to be sleeping. He laid his hand on her shoulder and shook her gently. She opened her eyes and looked up at him dully, then dropped back into her lethargy.

Lamontaine placed the stub of the candle on the floor and, squatting beside it, spread open the canvas and studied its painted surface for a moment. He folded it again and stuck it inside his open shirt.

He released the shackle from the girl's ankle and stooped over once more. Placing his thumb to her eyelid, he pressed it back and gazed deeply into the dull eye. Satisfied that she was not drugged, he rose to his feet, cursing softly.

He was about to lift the form of the unconscious girl when again that sudden premonition of danger flashed over him. Straightening up, he took a step outside the door. A knife ripped into his chest. He staggered backward. Again he caught a glimpse of fiendish eyes glaring into his own.

Then he dropped with a little groan.

SOLDIER of fortune that he was, skilled in the rough-and-tumble school of fighting, his gigantic body a mass of scars received in conflicts all over the world, Lamontaine realized the advantage of taking an adversary off guard. Now as he

sprawled on the floor, he lay quiet. His eyes were apparently closed. Yet his lids were raised sufficiently for him to peer under them as he furtively watched the other's every move.

For an instant the man with the blue beard seemed of two opinions. He stood over Lamontaine, his keen-edged knife upraised as if to strike again. Then, changing his mind, he turned away with a sinister chuckle and bent over the form of the unconscious girl, evidently convinced that his knife had struck true and that Lamontaine was dead.

A spasm of rage swept over Lamontaine as he noted what the monster was doing. Placing the knife in the girl's fingers, he wrapped them around the handle. For an instant, he stood gazing at her contemplatively. Satisfied with his diabolical handiwork, he straightened up and extended his long, bony hands toward her. She stirred uneasily. Rising unsteadily to her feet, she stared at the other with eyes filled with wonder and terror.

"For God's sake, what have I done?" she exclaimed excitedly.

She glanced at the knife in her hand. The weapon dropped from her nerveless fingers and she took a step backward, her slender hands pressed against her heaving breast.

Then she saw Lamontaine.

"Another?" she shrieked.

The man with the blue beard nodded. "Upstairs—in the room at the head of the stairway—lies the body of a second man, his throat cut from ear to ear. There is blood—blood over everything. I heard a sound down here. I came down and found—him. You were bending over him, the knife in your hand. You killed him, just as you killed the others, fiend!"

The girl shuddered.

"Is he dead?" she asked dully.

"Quite dead," the man with the blue

beard responded coolly. "Vera, my kinswoman, this cannot go on. There is only one way out of it—one solution."

"Suicide," she muttered. She buried her face in her hands in a fit of sobbing. "First the man I loved. Now—these strangers."

For a moment there was silence. Then the man's bony fingers stole to his pocket. They came forth with a small phial filled with dark liquid.

"There is no other way," he said. "It is the way your father took to escape the curse. I will throw the bodies into the swamp, just as I disposed of—the other—the man you loved."

"Oh, God! Don't recall that horrible thing to me!" she screamed.

He looked at her sadly.

"My poor, poor girl," he whispered. "It is sad. Yet there is no other way out. Your father would have wished it."

She nodded dully, stifling her sobs.

"It is the only way," she said in an awed whisper. "Death. . . ."

The man with the blue beard extended the poison phial to her.

"It is tasteless," he said. "The same potion your father used. Its action is instantaneous."

She stretched forth her slender, white fingers. They closed about the bottle.

6. Aaron Kronk

THE fingers of Lamontaine's extended arm closed slowly about the chain. Now he suddenly hurled it. It wrapped around the ankle of the blue-bearded man. He gave a quick jerk. The other went down, his head striking against the stone floor with stunning force. Lamontaine snapped the shackle about the unconscious man's leg and leaped to his feet.

Vera de Laval screamed wildly. The

bottle fell from her hand and smashed on the floor.

"You?" she exclaimed. "Not dead?"

Lamontaine pulled the folded picture from beneath his shirt and showed her the slash made by the knife.

"Thanks to the weight of the canvas, the force of the thrust was stopped and I received only a slight scratch," he told her. "Meanwhile, let us talk fast, Miss de Laval. We must be prepared to know where we stand before the devil on the floor recovers consciousness. There is much that is not yet clear to me. How long have you known this man who calls himself Charles de Laval?"

She looked at him queerly.

"As a matter of fact, only a few weeks," she said finally. "He came to me the day after the child was killed near the convent. He introduced himself and told me the horrible story of my heritage."

"Bosh!" Lamontaine snapped. "Like-wise poppycock! And your father?"

"I knew him little better. My mother died when I was born. My father, who must have loved her dearly, took his bitterness out on me. I was raised by an old couple. He supplied the money for my care and, when they passed away, he had me placed in the convent. He seldom wrote to me—and then only from foreign ports. He apparently kept on the move a great deal. I never saw him."

"This young man who loves you?" Lamontaine interrupted.

A spasm of pain crossed her face.

"Dexter Ross," she said bitterly. "He was a young lawyer. We were—engaged. Do you wonder that I want to die after—what happened?"

"Rest easy on that score," Lamontaine growled. "Ross is alive and will recover."

The girl's eyes lit up with fresh hope.

"What?" she exclaimed. "Then I——"

"Didn't kill him? Of course you didn't," Lamontaine said kindly. "You didn't even touch him."

She staggered back a pace as from a blow.

"I—I don't understand you!"

"Of course you don't. Here's the story in a nutshell, Miss de Laval. Your father was, as you have probably surmised, a fairly wealthy man. Among his other holdings was this old house. Following your mother's death and your birth, he wandered over the face of the globe trying to forget his grief. He finally came here where he could be close to you. It was his intention to go to you, beg your forgiveness and become the father that he should have been long before.

"An artist to his finger-tips," Lamontaine went on, "he rigged up a studio in one of the upstairs rooms and occupied himself with his painting. His health was bad and he had grown more and more to rely on a man who served him as sort of a secretary and companion—a man named Aaron Kronk. To Kronk, your father told his plans. Kronk appeared to agree to them. In reality, given the handling of your father's money, he had embezzled a large part of it. The reunion of your father and yourself meant a show-down. And that was something Aaron Kronk did not want."

Gazing down at the form of the man on the floor, Lamontaine filled and lighted his battered brier thoughtfully.

"Kronk had been named the executor of your father's will," he finally went on. "With the assistance of a boon companion who served as your father's valet—a man named Wilkins, who had been an actor at one time—he poisoned your father. The latter learned of the hellish plot too late. There was no way for him to get away from here, guarded as he was by the two men. He had never left the house, and Kronk had worked on the

superstitions of the natives hereabouts. They gave the old place a wide berth, thinking that it was haunted. So he could not get a letter out to you.

"Nevertheless, your father managed to leave word behind him before he went to the grave. He wrote it all down—the whole plot—on a bit of canvas. Over it, almost with his last breath, he painted a picture of Gilles de Laval, the bluebeard of the Breton legend. He knew that, of all the pictures he left behind, it would attract attention quicker than any of the others."

Spreading out the canvas, he showed the astonished girl the hastily written scrawl on the smooth surface.

"We have not the time to go into details," he went on. "Suffice to say that instead of oil paints, he used what is called *tempera*—an opaque water-color paste which can be removed with water. I accidentally discovered the picture in your father's old studio where Kronk, or Wilkins—whichever played the part of Bluebeard—used it as a model to make up by—"

"Which you will now hand over to me!"

Lamontaine whirled. The man with the blue beard was covering him with a revolver.

"Aaron Kronk!" Lamontaine exclaimed.

The other chuckled. The gun still menacing the physician, he half turned to the girl.

"Unlock the shackle!" he commanded.

SHE did as she was bidden. Kronk took a step backward until he stood in the doorway.

"The picture!" he snapped.

Lamontaine tossed the folded canvas to him. He caught it in midair.

"You are clever," he said with a sinister chuckle. "You surmised a great deal

I will supply what you omitted, since you are both to die. I am a bit of a hypnotist; at one time Wilkins and I did a vaudeville act together. I implanted the idea in Vera's brain that there was a blue hand on her breast—"

"And, with the aid of hashish fumes, you did the same for me," Lamontaine growled. "You caused her to attack me, thinking that she would kill me. You were lurking just outside the door intending to awaken her after she had stabbed me—just as you called her out of her hypnotic state a moment ago after you had, as you thought, killed me."

The other nodded.

"When the time was ripe for me to tell her the story of Gilles de Laval—I got the idea from the picture her father painted, and the similarity of the name made it easy for me—she fell into my trap.

"I brought her here with the intention of killing her as I killed her father. Unfortunately for my plans, Wilkins fell in love with her and stayed my hand. So I continued the deception, keeping her under the influence of the hashish a great deal of the time—continually planting in her mind the thought that she was of the blood of Gilles de Laval, the monster. It was fairly safe here. We had the house 'bugged' to warn us should visitors come. You ran into one of the wires, and Wilkins, who was a bit cracked and delighted in prowling about the grounds in his disguise, attacked you. That was just after Vera, whom I had kept doped all day, went into the basement and found that her snooping lawyer-sweetheart was gone. You heard her scream.

"It's a mystery to me how he located her here," Kronk went on. "In some manner he learned the truth—or guessed it—and came here to warn her. Wilkins stabbed him before she had a chance to talk to him. I convinced her that she had

killed him while in one of her supposed trances brought on by hashish. Later I threw the body into the swamp. I've had the handling of the de Laval money too long to give up without a fight."

"Nevertheless, the youngster got away and is now well on the way to recovery," Lamontaine said coolly.

"There are ways of getting him," Kronk snarled. "I had intended killing Vera tonight anyway. I've already killed Wilkins. It's he who has been playing the part of Bluebeard. He's been getting out of hand, demanding the girl and a share of the plunder, too. That's why you find me in disguise. I donned it after killing him."

He chuckled sinisterly.

"My plans are completed," he went on. "There will be four bodies in the smoldering ruins of the building when they make a search—if they ever do. For de Laval, too, is buried here—under the stones of this cellar. . . ."

He leaped backward and slammed the door. They heard the bolt shoot home.

Lamontaine hurled his bulk forward. The door withstood his assault. He stepped back to the other side of the room and, taking a run, leaped high into the air, driving his feet against the panels with the force of a catapult. It crashed outward as the bolt was torn from the wood.

He turned to the frightened girl.

"Come!" he said quickly, picking up the candle.

She took a step toward him. There was a dull roar. The house shook. The walls seemed to leap upward and then in at them, covering them with falling masonry and debris. . . . Smoke filled the cellar. . . .

PIERRE LE FRONT, the village constable, hovering over his patient in the rear of the doctor's bachelor quarters,

heard a roar like that of a wounded bull.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he ejaculated, leaping to his feet.

Lamontaine stood swaying in the doorway. His clothes hung in rags about his burly form. His face was a mass of contusions and burns, his eyebrows singed, his long, red beard shriveled by the heat to half its length. He was carrying the slender form of an unconscious girl. He limped painfully as he staggered across the room and laid her beside the man on the bed.

"'Twill be a happy reunion when they awaken," he growled, half to himself. "Did you give him the medicine, Le Front—the medicine and the rum as I ordered?"

The wondering constable nodded.

"An' you, my fren'," he exclaimed. "Ees eet ze battle weeth ze ghost zat you have had?"

Lamontaine dropped into a chair and heaved a deep sigh.

"It was a wonderful fight!" he chuckled. "It kept me from getting drunk, Pierre. He got away. But, by heaven! I'll get him before I die! I swear it. And now get me some rum—Jamaica rum. Give the girl a spoonful, too."

The parrot swung on its perch and blinked owlishly.

"*Aur-r-r-rk!*" it croaked. "*Rum. Jamaica rum! Hotter'n hell! Hotter'n hell! Die! Die! Oh, when I die, don't bury me at all. . . .*"

Lamontaine leaned back in his chair and laughed, happily.
