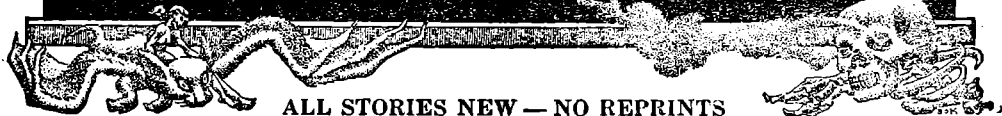


# Weird Tales



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Cover by Matt Fox

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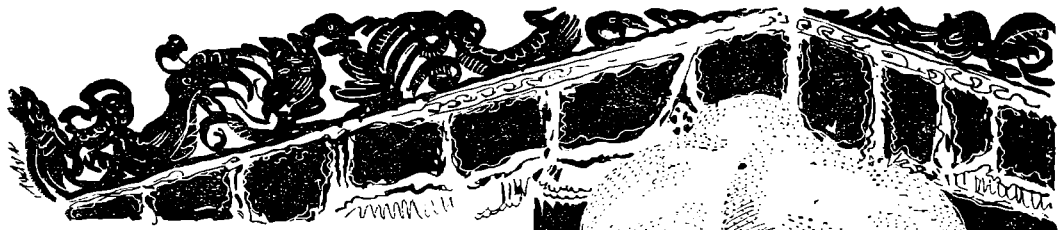
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# The Mask of Don Alfredo

BY MAL BISSELL

**L**A CHISPA was the most dilapidated mine I ever saw in South America. The mill buildings were roofless shells against the desolate yellow and purple mountains of the Bolivian Cordillera. The Indians said there was a curse on the mine, that Alfredo Gutierrez was the Devil's son and that it was a good place to stay away from.

I finally located the main building, a big U with the open end of the cobblestone courtyard facing the mountains. As I climbed off my mule an Indian woman appeared, her several dirty petticoats showing beneath her filthy red flounced skirt.

"Is Don Alfredo here?" I asked.

"*Momentito,*" the Chola woman replied. She turned and mounted a stairway that led to the balcony and disappeared. While I waited I studied the half timbered house. It looked like an eighteenth century German inn. Over a doorway the date 1797 stood between the bas-relief figures of what appeared to be two Hessian grenadiers.

Through the open end of the courtyard the sun was setting, and the mountains and



Heading by Vincent Napoli

mud huts of the Indians stood out like polished copper.

"Truly it does look like gold," said a soft voice behind me. When I turned I saw a slight man of at least seventy-five. His thin hair was white. A patriarchal smile, gracious and suggestive of cunning, marked the thin lips. As the last rush of sunlight died out from the huts and the hills he turned to me. "I am called Don Alfredo Romo y Gutierrez," he said. "Here you are in your own house." The formalities of the Spanish greeting sounded perfectly natural when he spoke them.

I told him I was looking over mining properties for the Southern Metals Company. Don Alfredo gestured easily and called the Indian woman who stood respectfully under the balcony. I untied my sleeping bag and the woman led my mule away.

The old man led the way across the balcony and into a room in the wing of the house. Straw and dust littered the floor and filled the corners. Cardboard and gunny sacks had been stuffed into the holes in the windows. We sat down at an ancient mahogany table and Don Alfredo produced a bottle and two glasses. The old man nodded toward the label, Otard 1892, as he poured the liquor into my glass. "You don't see this any more." Again he smiled with the same odd mixture of graciousness and cunning, almost an old woman's smile. "*A su muy buena salud,*" he said easily as he raised his glass.

"*A la suya,*" I replied. The brandy was rich and warm.

**D**ON ALFREDO talked about the mine. The tin and tungsten ore came from an open pit on the mountainside. Mules carried it down to the site of the old flotation mills. The Indians ground and screened it by hand before it was loaded on mules again and carried to the railroad, thirty miles away.

"Here time goes backward," Don Alfredo concluded, his glass in his fingers.

"With machinery, some trucks and a good road to the railroad you could produce ten times as much," I pointed out.

The old man looked at me intently, a

trace of suspicion mixed with contempt on his dried and wrinkled face. "A hundred years ago this mine was producing more than any other mine in Bolivia," he said. "It is still rich. I want no machinery, no trucks."

"You wouldn't have to do anything," I insisted. "Southern Metals would lease the mine and your royalties would pay you far more than the mine does now."

Don Alfredo reached for the cognac bottle and poured me another glass before refilling his own. He was silent for a while. Then he raised his glass to finish the last of the liquor with a gesture of finality. "You can sleep in this room tonight," he said. "Then you go on in the morning. There are other mines in the Cordillera to interest you."

It had grown dark. The Indian woman came in with an oil lamp. Don Alfredo pushed his chair away from the table and rose. "I am sorry I cannot offer you anything better than this room," he said as he left.

The bathroom was as ruined as the rest of the house. The fixtures were museum pieces, the old lead pipes corroded and covered with hardened dust. I washed myself, took the lamp back to the other room and went down into the courtyard.

A light shone through the doorway flanked by the figures of the two Hessian soldiers. Inside a young Bolivian was seated at an ancient roll top desk. He smiled as I entered and introduced himself as Castillo, the foreman. The office was filled with samples of ore, a few scattered tools and piles of old account books.

"How do you like our mine?" he asked quietly. He was tall for a Bolivian and his copper face was smooth.

"You don't see many like this," I answered.

"It works better than it looks."

"I should think you would want milling machinery," I said.

Castillo was obviously embarrassed. "That is a question for Don Alfredo," he answered.

I wanted to change the subject. "This is an unusual place. The architecture is certainly not Spanish."

Castillo smiled. "No. It was built by a German for Don Alfredo's great-grandfather. For a hundred years it was the greatest house in the Cordillera. Then Don Alfredo's father went to live in France and the building began to go to pieces. When Don Alfredo came back it was ruined."

"It's a pity it hasn't been kept up," I answered.

The foreman fingered one of the old account books. "*Los tiempos cambian,*" he said; the times change.

The Chola woman opened the door and announced that Don Alfredo and supper were waiting.

It was while we were smoking with our chairs pushed back from the supper table that I first noticed the painting on the wall. It was a large oil portrait of a woman about thirty. "That was my wife," Don Alfredo said quietly, his wrinkled black suit hugging his narrow shoulders. "It was painted in Paris just before she died."

"She must have been a beautiful woman," I answered.

"She was the most beautiful woman in Paris and Paris then was a city of beautiful women. She died of typhoid." The old man fell silent for a moment, then he leaned slightly toward me. His voice became more intense. "Without my wife there was no reason to stay in Paris. When I came back I brought everything that had been hers." He said nothing, studying the picture.

The woman had been beautiful. Her features, like Don Alfredo's, were fine and sharp. I guessed that like the old man across from me she had been small.

**D**ON ALFREDO stood up and took the lamp in his hand. "I want to show you something," he said, his voice heavier and more vibrant. I followed him into his bedroom. Faded red velvet curtains hung from the high ceilings. Three heavy wardrobes stood against the wall. Don Alfredo opened the doors of one of the wardrobes and held the lamp so that I could see the long gowns that hung in it. "They are exactly as she left them," he said. He ran his thin hand along the line of dresses with a passionate tenderness. "It is a comfort to know that they are here."

He closed the wardrobe and moved toward a huge four poster canopied bed. "That, too, was hers," he said. He stood holding the lamp, transfixed, as though remembering the bed in Paris.

Beside the bed was a small table and the light fell for an instant on a box of cosmetics that stood out incongruously in the decayed room.

"I remember the day my wife died as though it had been yesterday," the old man said after we sat down again in the other room. His voice rose in pitch and took on a slightly hysterical tone. The richness of his Spanish added to the melodramatic atmosphere of the house. "I was mad with grief. For weeks nothing would comfort me. I wanted to die: Then I realized that my wife was still with me."

"I understand what you mean," I said.

The old man's hands clenched the edge of the table. "I don't think you do," he said. "I'm more than eighty years old. I've lived here nearly fifty years and yet I have never been alone, not for one minute. My wife is here."

There was a terrific tension in the old man's voice. I wanted to say something to calm him. "Yes," I said slowly, "some rare persons leave so much behind that it seems they have not really gone."

Don Alfredo shook his narrow head jerkily, as though restraining an impulse to scream at me. The huge ruined room seemed too small. "No! No!" he said in a high screaming voice. "I don't mean that. La Señora de Alfredo Romo y Gutierrez left nothing behind her because she never went. She lives and breathes in this room!"

He half rose from his chair as if in anger then slowly he sank back into it, his long thin fingers clutching at the tabletop. After a moment he spoke again. "It is possible to die in one sense yet live in another. My son lives in England. My daughter is married to a countryman of yours, an American. To me they are both dead. My wife is not. You will never understand."

"Perhaps you are right," I said. I wanted to burst out of the room. Don Alfredo seemed to be trying to explain something that only he could understand, something unreal. The veins in his forehead stood out

against the wrinkles and his mouth twitched. I stood up.

Don Alfredo walked to the outside room with me, breathing heavily in the agonies of some emotion that only he understood. The lamp was still burning on the table where we had drunk the cognac. "I shall say goodbye to you now," he said. The thin hand he gave me was cold and it trembled. "You will be leaving early in the morning, and the one luxury I allow myself in this deserted place is the privilege of lying in bed in the mornings. It was a habit of my wife's."

After he left I crawled into my bedroll. I lay in the sleeping bag wishing I weren't so close to Don Alfredo's room. The old place had a disturbing quality about it and the Altiplano wind whistling around the house didn't help the dead, empty feeling of the building. I finally dropped off to sleep thinking about the cosmetic box beside the old man's bed. There was a woman in Don Alfredo's room.

I DON'T know what woke me. When I sat up in my bedroll the luminous hands of my wristwatch read 2:47. A light was moving in the room where I had eaten with Don Alfredo a few hours before. I felt for my flashlight, slid into my trousers and walked in my bare feet to the door.

Inside the room a woman was standing in front of the picture of Don Alfredo's wife. Her back was turned to me and she was holding the little lamp that had been on the table next to the old man's bed. She was dressed in a long black gown I was sure I had seen hanging in the armoire. A black shawl covered her head and shoulders. I watched her for a moment. Then I flashed the light and said, "Who are you?"

The woman turned quickly, and I could see her face in the circle of white light. It was heavily made up. The lipstick glared brightly and the eyebrows were solidly penciled in black. She stared at me for a moment as though in defiance.

Then a hideous smile spread out over the painted face. "I am the chatelaine," she said in a crackling falsetto, "the señora of the house. And who are you?"

Her question surprised me. I couldn't believe she was real.

She stood still for a moment and then came toward me, taking mincing affected steps. Her black eyes were brilliant in the paint that made a caricature of her face. She laughed again and raised her right hand to my face. "You may kiss my hand," she said.

Something prompted me to obey. My own hand seemed to rise without volition to grasp the cold fingers. Shivers of fear and horror ran through me as I slowly touched my lips to the icy skin. She sighed and withdrew the hand. "You are a gentleman," she said. "The first I have seen in long years. Let us talk."

She brushed past me and led the way to the table where I had sat earlier with Don Alfredo. I had not said a word. The whole thing was too unreal to understand. The old woman set the lamp on the table beside the cognac bottle and stood beside a chair. Mechanically I walked to the table and held her chair while she sat down. My knees were weak as I sank into the other chair.

The woman indicated the bottle and the two glasses, untouched since Don Alfredo had poured me a drink in the afternoon. "*Su servidor*; your servant," I mumbled weakly as I raised my glass to my lips. The brandy warmed my throat and gave me a feeling that at least it was real. Across the table the ancient painted face watched me seriously.

"Now," she said, "have the grace to tell what you are doing in this forgotten place."

I hesitated, wondering what to say. Then I explained that I was trying to lease the mine for an American company, that the owner would not hear of it and that I would leave in the morning.

The old woman was silent for what seemed a long time. "You cannot be right," she said at last. "I alone decide what is to be done with the mine."

I wanted to get out of the house, to find my mules and start for Oruro, sixty miles away. "Then who is Don Alfredo?" I asked.

"Don Alfredo was my husband, but he has been dead for fifty years."

"Then I have been mistaken," I said.

"All life is illusion," the old woman answered. Again she was silent, then her manner became more sympathetic. "Now, explain to me how you would lease my mine."

I felt unreal. All I wanted was to be rid of the old woman and to be on my way with the first break of daylight. "Let us talk in the morning," I answered weakly.

"No!" she said sharply. "Tomorrow will be too late."

**I** MOVED my hand in a gesture of hopelessness and briefly explained the lease.

"I will sign your lease on one condition and on that I insist," the old woman said tensely. "And it shall be that while I live the mine will be unmolested. When I die your company may work the mine and shall pay royalties to my children."

I agreed. I would have agreed to almost anything. I felt that I could not stand the strain of unreality much longer.

"It must be done at once." The old woman's voice was shrill and close to hysteria.

I took a printed agreement from my pack and added the condition demanded. She signed two copies with the name Graciela Vidal de Romo y Gutierrez and immediately rose. Once more she held up her withered hand and again I touched my lips to it. She picked up the lamp, turned and walked rapidly to the door of Don Alfredo's room, her long silk skirts making a swishing noise as she moved. The door closed behind her and the bolt clicked.

At last I went back to my bedroll. Sleep was impossible and I lay in the dark smoking cigarettes and listening to the wind rattling the old house. There was no other sound.

As soon as it began to dawn I rolled up my bedding and carried it down into the courtyard. The Indian woman had a fire going in the kitchen and offered me eggs and coffee.

I was loading the mule when Castillo came out of the little office across the courtyard. "You rise early," he said, studying the mule.

"I have a long way to go." I turned and looked at him. "Tell me," I asked, "is Don Alfredo insane?"

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "He keeps to himself. They say he lived a great life in Paris before his wife died."

"It must have shaken him."

The foreman did not answer but nodded

in silent agreement, and I finished tying up the mule's load. I had a feeling that I had forgotten something and remembered the contract I had produced to humor the spectre. I wanted to take it along with me as evidence of a night that I could not believe was real. I excused myself and went back to the room where I had slept.

The papers were still lying beside the cognac bottle. The wavering signature of the old woman was still there, although I half expected to find the line blank. As I stuffed the papers into my pocket and started from the room, a groan came from beyond the old man's door.

There was no answer to my knock. The door was bolted. Another groan, half sigh came from inside the room. With a sense of panic I went to the balcony and called for Castillo.

We broke the door down. The old man was lying in the big canopied bed. His face was sunken, but the eyes moved imploringly. Castillo glanced at me. "It looks like a stroke," I said.

We gave the old man some brandy and laid his head back on the pillow. I glanced around the room but saw no evidence of the macabre woman. The box of cosmetics was gone. The faded black suit was laid neatly over a chair.

"There's nothing we can do," I told Castillo. "I'll ride down to the railroad and telegraph to Oruro for a doctor. There's one at the company mine, but he can't get here before afternoon."

**I** TOOK me three hours to reach the railroad and another two to get the doctor down to the little station in the old Ford fitted with railroad wheels.

The doctor took my mule and headed for La Chispa. There was nothing for me to do but take the Ford back to Oruro. The doctor would telegraph for it in the morning and we could send down any medicines he wanted to send up to La Chispa.

In Oruro I told the company office that Don Alfredo would not lease his mine but decided to say nothing about his masquerade.

I saw the doctor the next day. He told me Don Alfredo had died the night before. He was silent for a moment, then he looked at

me. "We don't have time for problems of that sort around here," he said slowly, "but for fifty years apparently two persons have been tied up in one at La Chispa. I don't think either ever knew of the existence of the other. These things seem unreal until you actually come up against them with a case."

I nodded. "I suppose that when Don Alfredo's wife died he refused to recognize reality by keeping her alive in his own mind." The doctor looked at me quizzically, and I told him about the appearance in the night of Don Alfredo dressed in his wife's clothes.

The doctor was silent when I finished. He knocked out his pipe and began to refill it, then he looked up at me. "If you still have that lease you'd better turn it over to the company," he said slowly.

"No," I answered, "I'd like to keep it. After all, it has no significance to anyone but me."

The doctor lighted his pipe and flicked the spent match into a wastebasket. "You don't understand. Don Alfredo and his wife are both dead, but it was Don Alfredo who died in Paris. Doña Graciela died last night but for fifty years she lived in the guise of her dead husband."

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