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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Nightmare Road

By FLORENCE CROW

*A startling, sensational story of a vampire-infested region in the Hartz Mountains of Germany, and a blood-chilling adventure*

THE wind moaned dismally around the eaves of the hunting-lodge and the cold rain beat against the windows, making us all grateful for the cheer and warmth of the big, open fireplace.

There were five of us who had come up to J. P. Draper's lodge for a little holiday. Draper was a genial man in his middle thirties, well educated and widely traveled. He knew good liquors and told a story well—quite the ideal host. He was of distinguished appearance; with a broad streak of perfectly white hair drawn straight back from just above his right eyebrow to a little below the crown of his head in the back, where it became intermingled with the black and finally was lost. He had an odd mannerism of caressing the white streak when in deep thought, which, of course, drew attention to it.

We had all been in a reminiscent mood and telling some tall tales. Somehow our talk had turned to things occult and supernatural. I think the loneliness of the lodge and the dismal rain, with the tapping of the ends of the limb of a tree on the window-pane, like ghostly finger-tips, had something to do with it.

Finally some one asked J. P. to tell us some experience he might have had that was touched with the occult. J. P. was stroking his white streak in that absent-minded way of his, but he looked up at the speaker and said,

"I shall tell you about something that

happened a couple of years ago when I was in Germany.

"I was on a hiking tour through the Hartz Mountain district. As you know, the more elevated portions are rough and dreary and the soil is sterile, but the scenery is very interesting, with the rounded and graceful form of the Brocken towering above all the other mountains. The Rosstrappe, which stands near by in the same group, is not so tall but is far more rugged in aspect than the Brocken, and it was in this district that the events occurred which I shall relate.

"I had been enjoying it all immensely until the night of All Hallows Eve. The goal I had set for the evening was the town of Goslar, situated on the Gose at the base of the Rammelsberg. There are some public buildings there I wished to see which were erected in the Fifteenth Century: the imperial palace, in part a ruin, and the Gothic church, the treasure of which is a number of Luther's manuscripts.

"The people of this town, and indeed of the whole district, are hard-working and God-fearing. The more ignorant are, however, very superstitious, believing in all sorts of witchcraft, charms and magic. Several friendly persons had mentioned that it was All Hallows Eve, that vampires, witches and other cohorts of the devil would be abroad that night and it were well that all good folk should be indoors with a holy cross on the door to protect them.

"I paid no attention to their talk, of course, and the day itself was uneventful except that toward evening, when I realized that it would be after dark before I could reach Goslar, I stopped for refreshments. The good woman who served me offered the hospitality of her home for the night and warned me against being abroad after sundown. I thanked her but said I would press on, as I would surely arrive in Goslar in time to secure lodging. She appeared troubled that I insisted on departing and at the moment of my departure thrust a crude, wooden cross into my hand, saying,

"'All who are abroad tonight will be in great peril and will surely need the protection of the holy cross. Keep it with you. They will try to get it away from you, but don't let it go a minute. They will try all sorts of tricks, but don't let them have it. Don't let them fool you.'

"I felt foolish, but I thanked her for her kindness, and thrusting it into my pocket, forgot all about it until later.

"As the sun neared the horizon that evening an air of expectancy seemed to hover over the land, and the long shadows cast by the strange rock formations took on weird shapes. A queer, coppery glow covered the sky and the whole earth appeared to bask in the reflected glow from some vast devil's pit. The wind blew cold and chill and moaned as it rushed by, as though it fled in fear of something.

"**W**HEN the sun sank from sight I looked toward the west, and a long line of birds or bats was streaming across the sky. With that infernal glow behind them, it created a most uncanny effect. I could well understand how an ignorant and superstitious person might imagine them to be vampires, bats and witches flying to some unholy tryst.

"I was swinging along at an easy pace but still covering the ground in good time, when I heard a feeble hail. It came from a little distance from the road, and I stopped and listened. It came again from the direction of a mass of rocks, and I turned my steps toward them. As I neared the rocks I saw a poor, feeble old man lying in a twisted position as though in pain.

"'Are you hurt, my good man?' I asked as I bent to raise him from the ground.

"'Yes, but do not touch me, I am badly hurt. I think I am dying. All day I have lain here waiting for help, and now I fear it is too late. Before I die I should like to see the holy cross. Do you have one?'

"I remembered the one I had in my pocket and drew it forth and was about to place it in the old man's hand when he spoke in a voice astonishingly loud and strong for one dying,

"'No, no! Put it on the rock here beside me, so that it may be the last thing my eyes behold.'

"I was astonished at his vehemence and the look which crossed his face; almost one of terror, I should say. I was nonplussed for a moment and stood holding it rather uncertainly in my hand. Again the old fellow repeated his request in the weak and whining voice in which he had first spoken. I had stooped over to do as he asked when I happened to glance at his face again. Such a fierce look of exultation and triumph crossed it that I thought of what the old woman had said,

"'They will try all sorts of tricks.'

"Still it was not with real seriousness that I thought of it, but it occurred to me that he was probably fevered and did not quite know what he said. Therefore, I reasoned, I would place it to his lips, as

would be pleasing to the pious man if his mind were clear.

"I made the move to do so and had almost touched him when a horrible shriek burst from the creature's lips and he leaped up and beyond my reach as though propelled by some mighty force stronger than human muscle and sinew. In an instant he was gone, but the sound of his shriek still trembled on the air.

"Hurrying back to the road, I started off rapidly toward Goslar, thinking to myself that he was probably a robber, but superstitious nevertheless about kissing the cross in the very act of committing a crime. Then I wondered why he had mentioned the cross in the first place. And again the words of the old woman rang in my ears,

"They will try to get it away from you.'

"Just a coincidence, I decided; he was merely trying to throw me off guard by pretending to be dying, so that I should be unprepared for an attack. Still, highwaymen were not common in the district.

"At that moment a great night-bird swooped down with an unearthly scream. I almost jumped out of my shoes. Then I laughed as I thought how amusing it was that strange surroundings, loneliness and an unusual experience work on one's nerves till the cry of a harmless bird could throw one into a momentary panic.

"I had gone but a little way when something round and white rolled from behind a large rock. It had grown much darker, and the dim light seemed to play tricks with my sight, for it looked like a skull. I gave myself a mental shake for being such a fool. It couldn't possibly be anything but a rock that some small animal had loosened and it had rolled down an incline.

"I was about to move on when I heard a noise from behind the rocks. I thought

of the highwayman and prepared for another attack. Sure enough, something was coming. I could hear someone running over the stones. Suddenly there burst from behind the rocks a skeleton—a hideous, headless human skeleton running after its own skull. The skull kept rolling while the skeleton ran after it and disappeared from sight.

"It was almost too much for me and I muttered aloud, 'I must be crazy, or else they are right and this is the devil's night.'

"There was nothing to do but go on and try to reach Goslar before my imagination should play any more grim jokes on me. I was still holding the wooden cross in my hand, and somehow, imagination or not, I was glad I had it.

"I HAD been hurrying and was somewhat breathless when I saw a light in the distance. It was a welcome sight, and I slowed my pace somewhat, as I did not wish to rush up like a small boy frightened of the dark. As I came nearer I noticed many figures milling about a big fire. Some travelers camping out, I thought; maybe gipsies, I decided, as wild shouts of laughter reached me and I noted that the figures were all moving about quickly in what was undoubtedly some sort of dance. However, I welcomed the thought of being among even so villainous-appearing a lot. I came to within a few hundred feet and halted to look them over before making my presence known.

"My eyes first fell on the bonfire, for so strange a one I had never seen. It burned with a strange, bluish light intermingled with bursts of crimson sparks. It was so remarkable that I scarcely saw the rest of the scene for a moment. Suddenly my fascinated gaze fixed on something moving in the fire. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. The fire was not burning ordinary sticks of wood, but

snakes. Serpents, large and small, squirmed and twisted as though executing some devil's dance of their own as the flames mounted higher.

"A particularly bright flare occurred, lighting up the whole company, and I looked at the people. What people! Their eyes all glowed like the red stop-light on an auto, and their visages were demonic. They shouted in wild bursts of laughter in which there was no mirth, only echoes of dead curses and groans.

"I tried to turn and slip away, but I could not. I seemed rooted to the spot. I raised my eyes and saw that grimmest of all structures—a gallows. At the end of the rope hanging from the scaffold dangled a human figure.

"My chest suddenly felt as though it were bursting from the horror and pity of beholding a hapless human so murdered by the fiends that made such terrible sport. Even as I watched, the hanged creature began to wave its arms and dance on the air. As it danced, shriller, wilder laughter rang out. Suddenly the rope parted and the creature floated to the ground and joined in the wild revelry.

"My senses were reeling. I thought I had surely gone mad and this was the hell of insanity. I don't know whether I laughed or began to pray . . . I think I tried to pray, and I must have made some noise which attracted the attention of that terrible host, for they all turned at the same instant and rushed toward me. Red light flashed from their fiendish eyes, and clawed hands stretched out to grab me. Instinctively I raised my hands, as one does in trying to ward off a blow, still holding the cross.

"They stopped as though transfixed at sight of what I held in my hands. Suddenly they set up a terrible howling and screeching as they danced and flew about me, but did not come any closer. I per-

ceived that they would not touch me so long as I was thus protected by the cross, and so holding it extended before me I stepped forward. Those directly before me moved aside, leaving a gap, and I passed through.

"Numbers of the awful things followed me and I could hear their screams and wails and the sound of great wings thrashing the air. I stumbled on and on, feeling that I had been on this awful road for ever. I was breathing in great, sobbing gasps; grasping the cross with a strength that numbed my fingers, I tried to pray, but all I could say was, 'Oh God!'

"**F**AR in the distance I again saw a light. I almost feared to approach it, but there was the chance that it was a house, a human habitation. There was ever a rustling behind me and I felt a cold wind on the back of my neck, like an icy blast from the lowest, frozen pit of hell.

"I stumbled along, and as I came closer to the light I could see that it was shining from the window of a house. Nevertheless, not to betray myself again into the presence of another such company as I had just escaped, I approached the window and looked within.

"There on his knees, I saw the dark-garbed figure of some saintly man of God, his white head bowed in prayer. I knocked on the door and heard the good priest move. I called aloud for admittance and he answered me, asking,

" 'Who is there?'

"I do not know what I answered, but the door was opened and I fell across the threshold, noting as I fell that the mat just within the entrance was made in the design of a cross.

"When I opened my eyes, the glorious mountain dawn had flooded the world with light and I was resting on the good

man's own couch and he sat in a great chair close beside me. He smiled and placed his hand on my forehead, saying,

"'You are less fevered now, my son. I think you will soon be all right.'

"I felt very grateful to the good priest, but my eyelids were heavy, and I slept.

"After a while the fever left and I was entirely recovered, but since that time this streak of white has marked my otherwise youthful head."

Our host smiled as he stroked the white streak across his head and looked at his guests.