

THE OPEN WINDOW

A Wild Yarn

By FRANK OWEN

IT WAS John Stepling who first introduced me to Lotario Pelegin. I remember the night well; a wild desolate sort of night, a night which seemed to engulf the great city in all the uncanny loncsomeness of desert and wilderness.

As our hands met in a friendly clasp, I looked into Pelegin's eyes, and as I did so I involuntarily shuddered. There was nothing repulsive about the face, and

absolutely no reason whatsoever for my action. At the moment I attributed it to the peculiarly weird character of the night which had, I believed, affected mine.

Pelegin was the type of man who balks description. To really appreciate his extreme eccentricity, one would have had to behold the furtive look of half-hidden terror in his eyes. His age may have been anywhere from fifty to seventy, for when one really lives it is possible to crowd a score of years into a single decade.

I can see him now, standing tall and gaunt before the huge open-fire, with great dark circles under his jet-black eyes, serving to make almost ghostly the yellow whiteness of his haggard, deep

sunken cheeks. His hair was straight and black, seeming to suggest an Oriental nativity. He was dressed all in black, his vest buttoning high up to the neck and his coat hanging almost to the knees, serving to give him a rather clerical appearance.

At the moment, to which my thoughts revert, we were discussing immortality.

"Only an atheist," declared Pelegin, in a soft, faintly-accented, nervous voice, "is afraid to die. Fear of death presupposes a faith founded on doubt."

"Tell me," said I, "do you fear death?"

"No," he replied, "I fear life. Death is a necessary evil. When one has experienced every emotion it is right that death should result, since life thereafter would be but repetition. One cannot repeat an emotion. To be forced to live forever would be the nearest thing to Hell to be found on earth. For my own part I have



always considered the fate of 'The Wandering Jew' the most terrible in fiction."

A sickly smile passed over his face as he spoke.

"And yet," he continued, "it is odd how tenaciously people cling to life who profess not to care for it. If it will not bore you I will relate an incident which happened in Central India several years ago."

He did not wait for our acquiescence but plunged at once into his story:

"For five months I had been in India and the frightfulness of the climate had almost torn out my nerves by the roots. Day after day passed by in a monotony which cannot be described. Rolf Simmons and I had plunged into the heart of India, he to explore and I to paint pictures. It had not been our intention to remain more than sixty days at the outset, but Rolf had broken his leg and so our stay was lengthened by necessity. . .

"The incident I am describing happened on a night following a particularly trying day spent in the bush. Tired out both mentally and physically, I threw myself upon my cot without even removing my clothes. I was worn out with fatigue. Ambition had left me. And yet I could not sleep. I rolled and tossed upon my cot, gazing with burning eyes into the mysterious blackness of the oppressive night. The air was close and lifeless. My head throbbed with pain and my body seemed possessed of a blazing fever which rendered rest impossible. . . . Toward midnight a faint sound broke the awful silence. I raised myself upon my elbow and listened, every nerve alert. The seconds sped by and all was still.

"Nerves!' I muttered in a tone of disgust, and my head slipped back to the pillow.

"But almost as I spoke, the sound was repeated and in the utter solitude it seemed weird and unearthly. Then abruptly it ceased. And now the danger, if danger it were, seemed to have increased a hundredfold, for there was no way of telling in what direction it lay. It existed. But where?

"And then, suddenly, without warning, a piercing, fiendish shriek rose upon the air and echoed wildly through the jungle. My lips went white, and, trembling in every limb, I sprang from the cot, seized a repeating rifle which lay within easy reach and rushed out into the blackness of the night. For about a hundred yards I ran, and then I tripped over something soft. I dropped to my knee and ran my hand over the object. By the khaki suit I identified the prostrate body of Rolf Simmons. A deep ghastly ridge

encircled his neck. He was quite dead. . . .

"And now the moon, which had been hidden behind a cloud, gleamed forth in all its brightness as though to make some slight amends for its previous negligence. If such were the case, it accomplished its purpose, for, outlined against the curtain of jungle, was a dark figure, presumably a man, and yet it did not seem to have a face—just two wicked eyes gleaming out of the blackness. Even as I discovered it, I darted in pursuit. This was my prey! Revenge! The word seemed written in blazing blood before my eyes.

"The next moment the form had disappeared into the jungle, behind the curtain of blackness. Desperately, insanely, I sped after it. It seemed like a return again to the dark ages when primitive man fought primitive man; where the battle for existence was waged and only the fittest survived. And so the two of us rushed blindly into the dense maze of jungle, and anon we came to the border of a swamp. The Thing did not stop, but rushed headlong into the heart of this region of sickening, gurgling mud. A damp, nauseating vapor rose from the ground which appeared to have been boiled in the sun all day and not even yet to have entirely cooled. We had traversed, miraculously perhaps, half a mile of swamp-land without mishap, when suddenly, without the slightest warning, one of my legs sank with a purling splash almost up to the knee. Instantly, as it did so, I grasped wildly above my head and succeeded in getting a grip on the overhanging branches of a huge tree.

"I could feel some kind of a slimy insect crawling over my hand, but I had no time to brush it off, for the moment I became aware of it two arms grasped my leg, the one which had sunk into the mud, and pulled down upon it with devilish strength. By the light of the moon, which flickered faintly through the branches far above, I could dimly make out the terrible, repulsive figure of the Thing. It seemed to be half dog, half man and smeared with slime from head to foot. But the chief points of repulsion were the eyes, which glittered in the semi-blackness like the eyes of a cheetah, and the teeth, which resembled the fangs of a hunger-crazed wolf.

"Such was the loathsome beast, a human octopus, which was grimly twining its arms about my knee. The mud half submerged the bloated body, and slowly, gradually, it was sinking lower and lower into the bottomless bog. And as it sank, it pulled me steadily down with it."

"I WAS in a quandary. What should I do? Ponder as I would, I could find no way out, and then finally Fate decided for me.

"The beast lowered its head and buried its fangs in the calf of my leg. As it did so the last vestige of civilization flickered from my body. I was now not only the primitive man but the savage also. Emitting a low cry, I drew back my one free foot and let drive a backward kick which struck the Thing square in the face. I laughed softly, viciously, as I heard the bones crack, and the slimy arms fell limply from my leg.

"The fight with the beast was at an end; I had now to subdue the swamp. I struggled, strained and pulled with all my strength to get my leg free. The sweat poured from my body in streams, my veins stood out on my neck like whipcord, my breath came from my lips in short quick gasps. For hours, it seemed, the grim, unequal fight went on. I grit my teeth and would not give up.

"My strength was fast running low, when suddenly it seemed as if I gained a trifle. It was not much ground to win, but it still was something. It was sufficient to rekindle hope, and I brought all my strength together for one mighty effort. The strain was terrible, but the end was accomplished. I freed myself from the swamp. One victim had been snatched from the horrible mud, but it vented its anger on the one that remained. Already the slime had reached its neck and was fast rising up to its mouth.

"A shudder passed over me as I gazed at the loathsome face, now a mass of blood. And the mud rose above the mouth, crept to the nose, the eyes, the head. Then came a series of bubbles, and all was still. In the distance an owl hooted dismally. The horrible life had come to an end. The swamp had reclaimed its own."

PELEGIN paused for a moment, then he said:

"That, gentlemen, is my story. I have simply repeated it to prove my point—that one clings to life even though one longs for death. I cannot recall ever having had a desire to live, and yet a score of times I have fought for life with all my strength. In India, especially, existing had grown distasteful to me. The monotony of heat and silence, I believed, was crushing me either toward death or insanity. I can not explain the condition. I suppose it is just another of the many complexities of earth which I have never been able to master. Even at this moment, the craving for life is dead

within me. I would welcome extinction."

As Pelegin spoke, his face blanched and he darted forward and seized Stepling's hand so tightly that the skin turned white. Never have I seen such an expression of terror on any man's face as Pelegin's at that moment.

"Why," he almost shrieked, "why did you open that window?"

For a moment, Stepling gazed on the terror-distorted face in silence. Then abruptly, he walked over and closed the window.

"Had I know that you objected," said he, "I would not have done so."

Lotario Pelegin drew himself together with a visible effort. "On such a night," he faltered, "death lurks in open windows. This is regular pneumonia weather."

But John Stepling had *not* opened the window and I was positive Pelegin knew that Stepling had lied.

LOTARIO PELEGIN was possessed of a strangely magnetic personality. He was not attractive-looking, but he was endowed with a wonderful will power. Had he cared to study mental telepathy, without a doubt he could have dominated the minds of most of the people with whom he came in contact. Whether or not he went in for this sort of thing I can not say, although there were several authoritative books on the subject hidden away on the shelves in his library.

As the weeks rolled on, an odd intimacy sprang up between Lotaria Pelegin and myself, an intimacy all the more queer because it was *not* intimate. Although we discussed many subjects, we refrained from mentioning our own personalities. I never referred to his past, because it seemed to me that a certain reticence was forced upon me even against my will. It was obvious that he desired to steer conversation away from channels which did not please him, and somehow his will prevailed over mine. Often I was on the point of questioning him point-blank, and yet something seemed to control my speech.

Pelegin lived all alone in a little old house on Thompson Street which had been the dwelling place of authors and artists for more than a hundred years. His studio was on the first-floor front and was filled with art treasures of great value, but what impressed itself most on my mind was the fact that all the pictures hung with their faces to the wall. Once, and once only, I attempted to turn one but I encountered such a look of hatred on Pelegin's face, that I immediately changed the subject; and yet no

matter how hard I tried I could not banish it from my mind. The desire to view those pictures became almost an obsession to me. And yet, as I say, I never attempted to turn any, save on that one unforgettable occasion.

One night about half past ten, as I entered Pelegin's studio, I beheld him walking up and down the room as though his soul was in prison. He seemed strangely nervous and in his eyes there lurked a wild brilliancy which suggested insanity. At my entrance, he stopped abruptly in his walk and his face showed plainly that I was welcome.

"To be alone," said he, "at times, is maddening. I sometimes think that the one mistake of Creation was giving man the power to remember past occurrences. After all, when a thing is done, it's done. There matters should rest. But the trouble is in this book of Life, the author has delayed too long writing '*Finis*.'"

Something of his cynicism found an echo in my heart.

"I agree with you," I told him. "A good many players continue to act even after the play is done."

Abruptly, Pelegin changed the subject.

"Come," he suggested, "I am going to finish painting a picture and you can sit beside me while I paint."

On an easel in one corner of the room stood a half-painted canvas. It was a picture of the desert, mound after mound of surging restless sand. Nowhere in the picture was there anything in sight save the sand and the sky. Pelegin seated himself before the picture and I slipped into a great armchair close by.

"To paint in colors by electric light," he declared ironically, "one must be somewhat of a genius."

"To accomplish, possibly," said I, "but not merely to attempt."

He made no answer, but commenced to paint. His manner of blocking in and the speed with which he worked was extraordinary. Not for a moment did he pause to choose a shade of color.

He reminded me of a man who walks down the same path time after time, until his feet have grown accustomed to the road. In his actions there was not the faintest touch of hesitancy. Under his hand, the painted desert changed. The sun died down, swallowed up in a great pall of blackness. And then it seemed as though the desert went mad. Waves of sand formed and swept wildly about like billows of soot.

I know I am describing the picture as though it were an actuality, but to me, at the moment, it seemed so. I could fairly feel the scorch of the burning dust upon

my face. My tongue and lips felt parched. Truly, Pelegin was a genius. Never before or since have I been so affected by a picture. I felt as though I would go mad with thirst.

Then Pelegin began to speak. He did not appear to be addressing me. The tone of his voice was almost lifeless.

"And while that sandstorm was raging," he murmured, "I was virtually scalded alive. It was as hot as the interior of a volcano. The tiny bits of sand seemed to burn into my face like chips of glowing steel. And then, in the grayish-yellow blackness, something cold as death and slimy brushed against my hand!"

As Pelegin uttered the last word his voice fairly broke in a shriek. He rose from his seat and stood clawing at the air. As he did so the electric lights went out, plunging the room in utter darkness.

I sat as though stunned for several moments until I could focus my thoughts on concrete things. There seemed to be a draught throughout the room as though a window were open.

Pelegin yelled, "My God!" and his voice seemed to end in a sickening gurgle as though he were being choked to death by some unseen horror.

And then, suddenly, the lights flared up again. Lotario Pelegin lay dead at my feet.

A deep, ghastly ridge encircled his neck and there was a faint trickle of crimson staining the carpet. But it was none of these things which froze my heart to ice. For what seemed to have sapped all life from my body was this: *While the room had been in darkness something damp and cold and slimy had brushed against my hand.*

I HAVE always believed that the most interesting branch of psychology is the study of how people act under stated conditions.

Had any one told me how I would have acted under the circumstances just recorded, I would not have believed them. I stooped over the prostrate body. Pelegin was dead; of this there was not the faintest doubt. What was I to do?

I realized that if I made the matter known to the police I would be accused of murder, for we two had been alone in the house. Under the circumstances there could be but one interpretation of the murder. So I determined to slink from the house like a thief, unperceived.

And the simile is true, for, before I left, I searched through the drawer of Pelegin's desk until I found his diary. Of course I was committing a crime, but I did so without a qualm of conscience.

I felt as though I could not live until the mystery was cleared. And then my eyes fell on one of the pictures which hung with its face to the wall. Pelegin no longer could protest at my looking. So I turned the picture and cagerly gazed upon it.

It was a picture of a sandstorm, a picture exactly like the one he had just painted for me. And every other picture in the room was of the same subject. Fully a hundred there were in that room. No wonder Pelegin had complained of the repetition of life!

An hour later I was in John Steppling's room at The Logue Club.

"Old man," cried Steppling, "what's the trouble? You look as though you had seen a ghost."

I told him what had happened.

"And when I left," I ended breathlessly, "I brought his diary with me. Perhaps it will help clear up the mystery."

But when we opened the diary we found that it was completely blank except for a few lines which were scrawled on the first page.

"*Guard thy secret from another,*" it read, "*entrust it not, for he who hath entrusted a secret hath lost it.*"

The papers the next morning gave several columns to the account of Pelegin's death. Suicide, they called it, for it seems that in Pelegin's pocket they found a note saying that he intended to die since life had grown wearisome to

him. John Steppling smiled as he read the story.

"Pelegin always carried that paper in his pocket," he said. "He hated to live, but he could never summon up sufficient courage to die."

And there the matter must rest. I have never been able to solve the mystery.

Lotario Pelegin was wrong when he said one can not repeat an emotion for I have lived the horror of that night a thousand times over. Sometimes I wake in the hush of the night, my forehead dank with a cold sweat, and I seem to feel a draught against my face as though a window is open. Perhaps I am developing nerves, but nevertheless I am beginning to think, as Pelegin did, that death lurks in open windows.

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