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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Passing of Van Mitten*

By CLAUDE FARRÈRE

The story of a man who passed through the death agony, to learn—what?

WHEN the priest had administered extreme unction, he went away. Van Mitten had only a short time to live, there was not the slightest doubt about that. There was no one in the room with him now but the old nurse. The poor woman, who had been on a strain for days, had fallen sound asleep in her chair. Strangely enough, although the end was so near at hand, Van Mitten was completely and lucidly conscious. He was not suffering in the slightest. His life was ebbing away, that was all. He was an old man, and his vital forces were dying out. He had lived life to the full, for as long as his physique had been able to carry him. The machine was worn out, and in a few hours or minutes the wheels would cease turning.

The dying man's eyes wandered about the room. He had spent many a night within these four walls. Twenty thousand perhaps, or thirty thousand. He tried to calculate, but what was left of his mind was too feeble. His yellowish hands lay side by side on the counterpane. He tried to cross them on his breast, but that was a task completely beyond his strength. For all practical purposes, he was dead already. There was nothing to do but lie there and wait. Wait and think.

Death.—The thing was certainly much less terrible than he had supposed it would be. He had been afraid of it in the

past, very much afraid of it. Now, now that he was coming face to face with it, the bugaboo did not seem so frightful, after all. A very small thing, to be sure. The mountain was bringing forth a mouse, as had happened so often in the course of his life. He did not feel the slightest fear of it, only curiosity. So this much-discussed hour was about to strike for him, very shortly. And after it struck—what then? There was certainly something more! Annihilation? Or another life?

He had not devoted a great deal of time to speculation during all the years of his long life. Van Mitten had never been what is called a religious man, but neither had he been what is called an atheist. He had been one of those men who take things as they come—who don't understand about the eternal matters, and who make no particular effort to do so. But the moment had come when the eternal matters had to be faced. Evasion was possible no longer. What would happen to him next. Where would he go, what would he be, after he had passed the experience called death?

"I haven't the slightest idea," he said to himself, as he lay perfectly motionless, unable even to open his lips. "I don't know, and nobody knows, and no living person has ever known. But I shall know very soon—I shall know what no living person has ever known!" But at no

* Translated by Roy Temple House from the French.

moment in all the period of waiting, he was sure of it, had there been the slightest sensation of fear. Van Mitten wondered at this, passively and coolly. Then he wondered at another thing—at a strange, regularly recurring sound which had suddenly penetrated his consciousness, and which seemed to be somewhere very near him.

He thought: "What extraordinary rhythm is this?"

But in a moment he understood. The sound was in his own body. It was in his own throat, in his own breathing. It was a phenomenon which he had read about, which he had even heard once or twice before, himself. It was the death-rattle.

"Well now!" he thought calmly. "So the death-agony has begun?"

The more he thought of it, the more surprised he was. He had supposed that the death-agony was invariably something very painful. But search through his consciousness as he might, he could not discover that he was suffering in the slightest.

In the meantime, the old nurse had awakened. Several other persons had come in—relatives and friends. The little bedroom was crowded with them. The dying man was still able to see, but he saw everything and everybody with perfect unruffled indifference. He was not clear about who all these visitors were. A sort of fog seemed to be coming over his vision. But he had no particular desire to recognize any of them. In this last moment of life, he was interested only in himself. One curious question held all his feeble attention, to the exclusion of all other thoughts and feelings: What was coming to him next? Nothing? Something? What?

His lips made a vague effort to frame the assurance, for himself alone:

"I shall know very soon—I shall know

certainly—I shall know everything—*everything*——"

But the only visible and audible effect of his effort was an increase in the violence of the death-rattle. Someone who stood beside him murmured:

"Ah, how he is suffering!"

Van Mitten heard the words and would have been glad to make a sign that the speaker was mistaken; but he had not the power to move a muscle. His eyes grew dimmer and dimmer. And he noticed that his hearing was dulling.

SOME time passed. Minutes. Many minutes. The dying man no longer saw anything at all, no longer heard anything. Then he had the sensation that he had made an entirely involuntary motion; it seemed to him that his hands had stirred as if to draw the bed-clothing up toward his face. His thoughts were full of confusion, but he remembered one thing distinctly:

"Ah, yes! my hands lay on the counterpane—in front of me——"

He felt a resurgence of curiosity, and he began again to study his sensations and emotions. No, there was no doubt about it; he was not afraid. But his interest in his situation, in spite of the tenuous and as it were muted condition of his thinking faculties, seemed to grow keener and keener, as he felt that he was approaching nearer and nearer—it could only be a matter of seconds now—to the supreme moment. It was all very strange, almost unbelievable. For a moment, he felt a flash of incredulity that it could be he, and not someone else, that lay here on this bed, on the point of passing out of life. Well, his life had had a beginning, and it had to have an ending—that was logical, wasn't it?—Logical? *Was* it logical, after all?—Perhaps it wasn't so inevitable!—Was it true that his life had

had a beginning? What did he know about it?

He was conscious that someone had held a mirror in front of his mouth. Someone, the physician no doubt, said solemnly:

"He's gone!"

And Van Mitten knew that the person was right. He knew that an eternally valid change had taken place, that he was now what men call dead. He said to himself—and he realized perfectly well that he no longer had any voice, any lips, to say it with—he repeated to himself: "Now I shall know! Now I shall know everything!" But he was filled with an immense astonishment to discover that he did *not* know. He did not know anything at all! Death had torn away no veil. The mystery of things remained intact, impenetrable—just as it had been before!

He was bewildered, baffled, helpless with perplexity.

"What is this?" he said to himself. "What is this?—I am dead. There is no doubt about that. I am completely, thoroughly, irrevocably dead. I am not annihilated—I am still *I*, just the same—I still have being, I am immortal—but what a strange sort of being it is! I can't see, I can't hear, I can't feel, I can't remember.—What is this, what is this?" What am I?—What was I? Where did I come from?"

He was plunged into an ocean of ignorance. He tried hard to think, he had the power of effort and he made use of that power, he seemed to himself like a bird fluttering against the bars of his cage. Then it seemed to him that he saw the reason for his helplessness.

"My memory—my memory was left behind—so of course—well, even if *it* is gone, I am still a person, I am still myself."

Now he realized that it was impossible,

that his speculations could arrive nowhere. He surrendered, completely. He understood that it could not be otherwise. His memory belonged to his past, to his completely separate past, his past which was in no sense he any longer. He should never be able to remember his past life, he should never be able to know that he had been something before, something different—a thing, even a person—in the past that was past for ever and ever.

All of a sudden he discovered that he was very, very tired. He relaxed and let himself sink, physically as well as mentally. And under him, he had a confused feeling that springs were yielding, the springs of a soft bed. Was he dead no longer? Dead? What did the word mean? Nothing, nothing at all. He reached out his hands—by what miracle did he have hands, and could he thrust them out?—he felt clumsily of smooth, braided willow work, to the right, to the left, braided osier walls—he tried to speak, but could not—he had no words—he had no thoughts, even—he could remember nothing—he knew nothing—it was all strange to him, all new, prodigiously new and difficult.

Yet he had a voice. He could make a sound. His voice sounded like:

"Wah! . . . wah! . . . wah!"

Someone came to him. A voice called, hopeful, troubled:

"Is he all right? I thought I heard him crying."

And another voice replied:

"He's hungry, that's what's the matter with him! He's fit as a fiddle, bless his heart! I'll bring him to you so he can get his dinner!"

And the person who had been Van Mitten, who had grown old and died and been born again, sucked down his fill of mother's milk and went to sleep again.