

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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Otis Adelbert Kline, Author of "The Thing of a Thousand Shapes," Spins Another "Spooky" Yarn for the Readers of WEIRD TALES

The Phantom Wolfhound

DOCTOR DORP reluctantly laid aside the manuscript on which he had been working, capped and pocketed his fountain pen, and rose to meet his callers.

He was visibly annoyed by this, the third interruption of the afternoon, but his look of irritation changed to a welcoming smile when he saw the bulky form that was framed in the doorway. He recognized Harry Hoyne of the Hoyne Detective Agency, a heavy-set, florid-faced man whose iron gray hair and moustache proclaimed him well past middle age.

The doctor was conscious of a cold, clammy sensation as he took the hand of the stranger and acknowledged the introduction. Was it the contrast between those chill fingers and the strong warm ones of the detective that had caused this feeling? He did not know; but somehow, instinctively, he disliked Mr. Ritsky.

"I've got a queer case for you, Doc,"



The slender, stoop-shouldered individual who accompanied him was a total stranger. He had pale, hawklike features, small snaky eyes that glittered oddly from cavernous sockets, and long, bony fingers that suggested the claws of a bird.

"Hello, Doc," boomed the detective genially, crushing the hand of his host in his great, muscular paw. "Meet Mr. Ritsky."

said Hoyne, taking a proffered cigar and inserting it far back in his cheek, unlighted. "Just your specialty—ghosts and all that. I told Mr. Ritsky you'd be the only man to unravel the mystery for him. Was over to his house last night and the thing got me—too unsubstantial—too damned elusively unreal. And yet I'll swear there was something there. I heard it; but it got away and didn't leave a trace. When it comes to finger

prints and things like that you know I ain't exactly a dumb-bell, but I gotta admit this thing, whatever it is, had me hopelessly horn-swoggled."

Ritsky declined a cigar, saying he didn't dare smoke because of heart trouble. The doctor selected one with care, lighted it slowly, puffed it with a relish, and settled back with a look of eager anticipation in his eyes.

"What happened last night?" he asked.

"Maybe we better begin at the beginning," said Hoyne. "You see, there's quite a story goes along with this case, and Mr. Ritsky can tell it better than I. Don't be afraid to give him all the dope, Mr. Ritsky. The doctor knows all about such things—wrote a book about 'em, in fact. Let's see. What was the name of that book, Doc?"

"Investigations of Materialization Phenomena.'"

"Right! I never can remember it. Anyhow, Mr. Ritsky, tell him your story and ask him all the questions you want to. He's headquarters on this stuff."

Ritsky studied his clawlike hands for a moment, clasping and unclasping the bony fingers. Suddenly he looked up.

"Do animals have immortal souls?" he asked, anxiously.

"I'm afraid you have sadly overrated my ability as a recorder of scientific facts," replied the doctor, smiling slightly. "Frankly, I do not know. I don't believe anyone knows. Most people think they haven't, and I incline toward that belief."

"Then such a thing as a ghost of a— a hound could not be?"

"I would not say that. Nothing is impossible. There are undoubtedly more things in heaven and earth, as Shakespeare said, than we have dreamed of in our philosophy. However, I would consider a materialization of the disembodied spirit of a canine, or any of the other lower animals, as highly improbable."

"But if you saw one with your own eyes—"

"I should probably be inclined to doubt the evidence of my senses. Have you seen one?"

"Have I *seen* one?" groaned Ritsky. "Good Lord, man, I'd give every cent I own to be rid of that thing! For two years it's turned my nights into hell! From a perfectly healthy, normal human being I've been reduced to a physical wreck. Sometimes I think my reason is slipping. The thing will either kill me or drive me mad if it is not stopped."

He buried his face in his hands.

"This is most strange," said the doctor. "You say the apparition first troubled you two years ago?"

"Not in its present form. But it was there, nevertheless. The first time I saw it was shortly after I killed that cursed dog. A month, to be exact. I shot him on the twenty-first of August, and he, or it, or *something*, came back to haunt me on the twenty-first of September.

"How vividly I remember the impressions of that first night of terror! How I tried, the next day, to make myself believe it was only a dream—that such a thing could not be. I had retired at eleven o'clock, and was awakened from a sound sleep some time between one and two in the morning by the whining, yapping cry of a dog. As there were no dogs on the premises, you can imagine my surprise.

"I was about to get up when something directly over the foot of my bed

riveted my attention. In the dim light it appeared a grayish white in color, and closely resembled the head and pendant ears of a hound. I noticed, with horror, that it was moving slowly toward me, and I was temporarily paralyzed with fright when it emitted a low, cavernous growl.

"Driving my muscles by a supreme effort of will, I leaped from the bed and switched on the light. In the air where I had seen the thing hanging there was nothing. The door was bolted and the windows were screened. There was nothing unusual in the room, as I found after a thorough search. Mystified, I hunted through the entire house from top to bottom, but without finding a trace of the thing, whatever it was, that had made the sounds.

"From that day to this I have never laid my head on a pillow with a feeling of security. At first it visited me at intervals of about a week. These intervals were gradually shortened until it came every night. As its visits became more frequent the apparition seemed to grow. First it sprouted a small body like that of a terrier, all out of proportion to the huge head. Each night that body grew a little larger until it assumed the full proportions of a Russian wolfhound. Recently it has attempted to attack me, but I have always frustrated it by switching on the light."

"Are you positive that you have not been dreaming all this?" asked the doctor.

"Would it be possible for some one else to hear a dream of mine?" countered Ritsky. "We have only been able to retain one servant on account of those noises. All, with the exception of our housekeeper, who is quite deaf, heard the noises and left us as a result."

"Who are the members of your household?"

"Other than the housekeeper and myself, there is only my niece and ward, a girl of twelve."

"Has she heard the noises?"

"She has never mentioned them."

"Why not move to another apartment?"

"That would do no good. We have moved five times in the last two years. When the thing first started we were living on the estate of my niece near Lake Forest. We left the place in charge of care-takers and moved to Evanston. The apparition followed us. We moved to Englewood. The thing moved with us. We have had three different apartments in Chicago since. It came to all of them with equal regularity."

"Would you mind writing for me the

various addresses at which you have lived?"

"Not at all, if they will assist in solving this mystery."

The doctor procured a pencil and a sheet of note paper, and Ritsky put down the addresses.

Doctor Dorp scanned them carefully.

"Villa Rogers," he said. "Then your niece is Olga Rogers, daughter of millionaire James Rogers and his beautiful wife, the former Russian dancer, both of whom were lost with the *Titanic*?"

"Olga's mother was my sister. After the sudden death of her parents, the court appointed me her guardian and trustee of the estate."

"I believe that is all the information we need for the present, Mr. Ritsky. If you have no objection I will call on you after dinner this evening, and if Mr. Hoyne cares to accompany me we will see what we can do toward solving this mystery. Please take care that no one in your home is apprised of the object of our visit. Say, if you wish, that we are going to install some electrical equipment."

"I'll be there with bells," said Hoyne as they rose to go.

II.

SHORTLY after his guests' departure, Doctor Dorp was speeding out Sheridan Road toward Villa Rogers.

The drive took nearly an hour, and he spent another half-hour in questioning the care-takers, man and wife. He returned home with a well-filled notebook, and on his arrival he began immediately assembling paraphernalia for the evening's work. This consisted of three cameras with specially constructed shutters, several small electrical mechanisms, a coil of insulated wire, a flash-gun, and a kit of tools.

After dinner he picked up Hoyne at his home, and they started for the "haunted house."

"You say you investigated this case last night, Hoyne?" asked the doctor.

"I tried to, but there was nothing to it, so far as I could see, except the whining of that dog."

"Where were you when you heard the noises?"

"Ritsky had retired. I slept in a chair in his room. About two o'clock I was awakened by a whining noise, not loud, yet distinctly audible. Then I heard a yell from Ritsky. He switched on the light a moment later, then sat down on the bed, trembling from head to foot, while beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Did you see it?" he asked me.

"See what?" I said.

"The hound."

"I told him I hadn't seen a thing, but I heard the noise all right. Between you and me, though, I did think I saw a white flash for a second beside his bed, but I can't swear to it."

"We won't trust our eyes tonight," said the doctor. "I have three eyes in that case that will not be affected by hysteria or register hallucinations."

"Three eyes? What are you talking about?"

"Cameras, of course."

"But how—"

"Wait until we get there. I'll show you."

A few moments later they were admitted to the apartment by the housekeeper, a stolid woman of sixty or thereabout. Ritsky presented them to his niece, a dreamy-eyed, delicately pretty school girl with silky golden curls that glistened against the pale whiteness of her skin.

"If you don't mind," said the doctor, "we will look things over now. It will take some time to install the wiring and make other necessary preparations."

Ritsky showed them through the apartment, which was roomy, furnished in good taste and artistically decorated. The floor plan was quite simple and ordinary. First came the large living-room that extended across the front of the house. This opened at the right into the dining-room and at the center into a hallway which led through to the back of the building. Behind the dining-room was the kitchen, and behind that the servant's room. Ritsky's bedroom was directly across the hall from the dining-room. Then came his niece's bedroom, a spare bedroom and a bathroom. Each of the three front bedrooms was equipped with a private bath and large clothes-closet.

The doctor began by installing the three cameras in Ritsky's room, fastening them on the wall in such a manner that they faced the bed from three directions. After focusing them properly, he set the flash-gun on a collapsible tripod and pointed it toward the bed.

The room was lighted by an alabaster bowl that depended from the ceiling and could be turned on or off by a switch at the bedside. There were, in addition, two wall lights, one on each side of the dresser, and a small reading lamp on a table in one corner. These last three lights were operated by individual pull-cords.

Ritsky procured a step-ladder for him, and, after switching off the drop light, he removed one of the bulbs from the cluster and inserted a four-way socket. From this socket he ran wires along the

ceiling and down the wall to the three cameras and the flash-gun. By the time these preparations were completed Miss Rogers and the housekeeper had retired.

Hoyne surveyed the finished job with frank admiration.

"If there's anything in this room when Ritsky turns the switch those three mechanical eyes will sure spot it," he said enthusiastically.

"Now, Mr. Ritsky," began the doctor, "I want you to place yourself entirely in our hands for the night. Keep cool, fear nothing, and carry out my instructions to the letter. I suggest that you go to bed now and endeavor to get some sleep. If the apparition troubles you, do just as you have done in the past—turn on the light. Do not, however, touch the light switch unless the thing appears. The photographic plates, when developed, will tell whether you have been suffering from a mere hallucination induced by auto-suggestion or if genuine materialization phenomena have occurred."

After closing and bolting the windows they placed the step-ladder in the hallway beside Ritsky's door. Then they obtained a duplicate key from him and asked him to lock himself in, removing his key so they might gain entrance at any time.

When everything was ready they quietly brought two chairs into the hall from the spare bedroom and began their silent vigil.

III.

BOTH MEN sat in silence for nearly three hours. The doctor seemed lost in thought, and Hoyne nervously masticated his inevitable unlighted cigar. The house was quiet, except for the ticking of the hall clock and its hourly chiming announcements of the flight of time.

Shortly after the clock struck two they heard a low, scarcely audible moan.

"What was that?" whispered the detective, hoarsely.

"Wait!" the doctor replied.

Presently it was repeated, followed by prolonged sobbing.

"It's Miss Rogers," said Hoyne, excitedly.

Doctor Dorp rose and softly tiptoed to the door of the child's bed chamber. After listening there for a moment he noiselessly opened the door and entered. Presently he returned, leaving the door ajar. The sobbing and moaning continued.

"Just as I expected," he said. "I want you to go in the child's room, keep quiet, and make a mental note of everything you see and hear. Stay there

until I call you, and be prepared for a startling sight."

"Wh—what is it?" asked Hoyne, nervously.

"Nothing that will hurt you. What's the matter? Are you afraid?"

"Afraid, hell!" growled Hoyne. "Can't a man ask you a question—"

"No time to answer questions now. Get in there and do as I say if you want to be of any assistance."

"All right, Doc. It's your party."

The big detective entered the room of the sobbing child and squeezed his great bulk into a dainty rocking chair from which he could view her bed. She tossed from side to side, moaning as if in pain, and Hoyne, pitying her, wondered why the doctor did not awaken her.

Presently she ceased her convulsive movements, clenched her hands, and uttered a low, gurgling cry, as a white, filmy mass slowly emerged from between her lips. The amazed detective stared with open mouth, so frightened that he forgot to chew his cigar. The filmy material continued to pour forth for several minutes that seemed like hours to the tense watcher. Then it formed a nebulous, wispy cloud above the bed, completely detached itself from the girl, and floated out through the half-opened door.

"Doctor Dorp, standing in the hallway, saw a white, misty thing of indefinite outline emerge from the bedroom. It floated through the hall and paused directly in front of Ritsky's door. He approached it cautiously and noiselessly, and noticed that it grew rapidly smaller. Then he discovered the reason. It was flowing *through the keyhole!*

In a short time it had totally disappeared. He waited breathlessly.

What was that? The whining cry of a hound broke the stillness! He mounted the step-ladder in order to view the interior of the room through the glass transom. He had scarcely placed his foot on the second step when the whining noise changed to a gurgling growl that was followed by a shriek of mortal terror and the dull report of the flash-gun.

Leaping down from the ladder, the doctor called Hoyne, and they entered the "haunted" bed chamber. The room was brilliantly lighted by the alabaster bowl and filled with the sickening fumes of flash-powder.

Hoyne opened the windows and returned to where the doctor was thoughtfully viewing Ritsky, who had apparently fainted. He had fallen half out of bed, and hung there with one bony arm trailing and his emaciated face a picture of abject fear.

"My God!" exclaimed Hoyne. "Look there on his throat and chest. *The frothy slaver of a hound!*"

The doctor took a small porcelain dish from his pocket, removed the lid, and with the blade of his pocket knife, scraped part of the slimy deposit into the receptacle.

"Hadn't we better try to bring him to?" inquired Hoyne.

After they had lifted him back in bed the doctor leaned over and held his ear to the breast of the recumbent man. He took his stethoscope from his case and listened again. Then he straightened gravely.

"No earthly power can bring him to," he said, softly. "*Ritsky is dead!*"

IV.

THE DETECTIVE remained in the house, pending the arrival of the coroner and undertaker, while Doctor Dorp hurried home with his paraphernalia and the sample of slime he had scraped from the corpse. Hoyne was puzzled by the fact that the doctor searched the house and the clothing of the dead man before departing.

The detective was kept busy at the Ritsky apartment until nearly ten o'clock. After stopping at a restaurant for a bit of breakfast and a cup of coffee, he went directly to the doctor's home.

He found the psychologist in his laboratory, engrossed in a complicated chemical experiment. He shook a test tube, which he had been heating over a small alcohol lamp, held it up to the light, stood it in a small rack in which were a number of others partly filled with liquid, and nodded cordially to his friend.

"Morning, Doc." greeted Hoyne. "Have you doped out what we are going to tell the coroner yet?"

"I knew the direct cause of Ritsky's death long ago. It was fear. The indirect cause, the thing that induced the fear, required careful examination and considerable chemical research."

"And it was—"

"Psychoplasm."

"I don't get you, Doc. What is psychoplasm?"

"No doubt you have heard of the substance called ectoplasm, regarding which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has delivered numerous lectures, or an identical substance called teleplasm, discovered by Baron Von Schrenck Notzing while attending materialization seances with the medium known as Eva.

"While the baron was observing and photographing this substance in Europe, my friend and colleague, Professor James Braddock, was conducting similar

investigations in this country. He named the substance psychoplasm, and I like the name better than either of the other two, as it is undoubtedly created or generated from invisible particles of matter through the power of the subjective mind.

"I have examined and analyzed many samples of this substance in the past. The plate I now have under the compound microscope, and the different chemical determinations I have just completed, show conclusively that this is psychoplasm."

"But how—where did it come from?"

"I learned something of the history of Ritsky and his ward yesterday. Let me enlighten you on that score first:

"The man told the truth when he said he was appointed guardian of his niece, and also when he said that he had shot a dog. The dog, in question, was a Russian wolfhound, a present sent to the girl by her parents while they were touring Russia. He was only half grown when he arrived, and the two soon became boon companions, frolicking and playing about the grounds together or romping through the big house.

"Some time after the death of Olga's parents, Ritsky, then editor of a radical newspaper in New York, took up his abode at Villa Rogers. The dog, by that time full grown, took a violent dislike to him and, on one occasion, bit him quite severely. When he announced his intention of having the animal shot the girl wept violently and swore that she would kill herself if Shag, as she had named him, were killed. It seemed that she regarded him as a token of the love of her parents who had sailed away, never to return."

"*Shag!* That's the name!" broke in Hoyne, excitedly. "After that white thing floated out of the room she made noises like a dog and then answered them, saying 'Good old Shag,' and patting an imaginary head. She sure gave me the creeps, though, when she let out that growl."

"The vengeful Ritsky," continued the doctor, "was determined that Shag should die, and found an opportunity to shoot him with a pistol when the girl was in the house. Shortly after, the faithful creature dragged himself to the feet of his mistress and died in her arms. He could not tell her who had taken his life, but she must have known subjectively, and as a result entertained a hatred for her uncle of which she objectively knew nothing.

"Most people have potential mediumistic power. How this power is developed in certain individuals and remains practically dormant in others is a ques-

tion that has never been satisfactorily explained. I personally believe that it is often developed because of intense emotional repressions which, unable to find an outlet in a normal manner through the objective mind, find expression in abnormal psychic manifestations.

"This seemed to be the case with Olga Rogers. She developed the power subjectively without objective knowledge that it existed. One of the most striking of psychic powers is that of creating or assembling the substance called psychoplasm, causing it to assume various forms, and to move as if endowed with a mind of its own.

"Olga developed this peculiar power to a remarkable degree. Acting under the direction of her subjective intelligence, the substance assumed the form of her beloved animal companion and sought revenge on its slayer. We arrived a day too late to save the object of her unconscious hatred."

"Too bad you were not there the night before," said Hoyne. "The poor devil would be alive today if you had been on hand with me the first night to dope the thing out."

"We might have saved him for a prison term or the gallows," replied the doctor, a bit sardonically. "You haven't seen this, of course."

He took a small silver pencil from the table and handed it to the detective.

"What's that got to do with—"

"Open it! Unscrew the top. Careful!"

Hoyne unscrewed it gingerly and saw that the chamber, which was made to hold extra leads, was filled with a white powder.

"Arsenic," said the doctor, briefly. "Did you notice the sickly pallor of that girl—the dark rings under her eyes? Her loving uncle and guardian was slowly poisoning her, increasing the doses from time to time. In another month or six weeks she would have been dead, and Ritsky, her nearest living relative, would have inherited her immense fortune."

"Well I'll be damned!" exploded Hoyne.

Doctor Dorp's laboratory assistant entered and handed a package of prints to his employer.

"Here are the proofs of last night's photographs," said the doctor. "Care to see them?"

Hoyne took them to the window and scrutinized them carefully.

All showed Ritsky leaning out of bed, his hand on the light switch, his face contorted in an expression of intense horror—and, *gripping his throat in its ugly jaws, was the white, misshapen phantasm of a huge Russian wolfhound!*