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# THE PURPLE CINCTURE



by  
H. Thompson Rich

*Author of "Little Island," "The Crimson Crucifix," etc.*

**I**T WAS a day in midsummer, I remember. I had been tramping over the densely wooded and desolate hillside the greater part of the morning, getting with each mile farther and farther from the tawdry haunts of man and nearer and nearer the rugged heart of nature.

Finally (it must have been after noontime) I paused and made a light lunch of the sandwiches and cold coffee I had brought with me from town, sitting on the edge of a great slab of granite rock, swept clean and smooth by ages of winds and rains and snows.

All about me was a veritable garden of great projecting rocks, jagged and broken, flat and polished, needle-like, giant flowers of earth in a thousand different forms.

Here and there a short, dwarfed pine or spruce tree struggled for a footing amid its rocky friends, and the resistless undergrowth surged up through every crack and crevice, while energetic mosses and lichens clutched at the granite walls and crept bravely up. One had a feeling of awe, as if in the presence of elemental, eternal forces. Here, I thought, if anywhere, one might commune with the voiceless void.

W. T.—2

Suddenly my eyes chanced to fall upon a fissure in the rock to the left, and I sprang up with a low exclamation. What I had beheld was to all appearance a human skeleton!

Advancing reluctantly, yet with that insistent inquisitiveness which surrounds the dead, I bent, and peered into the fissure. As I looked, a cry escaped me. The object I beheld was indeed a skeleton—but what a skeleton! The head, the left hand, and the foot were entirely missing, nor was there any sign of them at first sight.

Thoroughly fascinated by the morbid spectacle, I began a search for the missing members, and was finally rewarded by unearthing the head some twenty feet away, where it lay half buried in the soft loam of decayed vegetation and sifted chole. But a painstaking and minute hunt failed to reveal the missing hand and foot.

I was successful, however, in finding something immeasurably more important—a manuscript. This I found by the side of the mangled skeleton.

It consisted of several pages of closely written material, in a small pocket notebook, which fact, in con-

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nection with the partial shelter afforded by the crevice where the body lay, doubtless accounts for its preservation through the years that have passed since its owner met his hideous fate.

PICKING up the notebook with nervous fingers, I opened it and turned the damp and musty pages through, reading it at first hastily, then slower and more carefully, then with a feverish concentration—as the awful significance of the words was riveted into my brain.

The writing was in a man's cramped, agitated hand, and I give it to you just as I read it, with the exception of the names and places, and a few paragraphs of vital scientific data—all but a few words at the very beginning and end, where the manuscript had been molded into illegibility by the gradual action of the weather. Here follows:

“as strange. I had a sense of apprehension from the start, a vague, indescribable feeling of doubt, of dread, as if someone, something, were urging me out, away, into these sullen hills.

“I might have known. The law of retribution is as positive as the law of gravity. I know that now. Oh irony!

“But I was so sure. No one knew. No one could know. She, my wife, heart of all, until the end. And the neighbors, her friends, never. She had merely pined away. No one dreamed I had poisoned her. Even when she died, there was no thought of autopsy. She had long been failing. And had I not been most concerned? None in the little town of \_\_\_\_\_, but who sympathized with me. And I mourned. Oh, I mourned! So it was that she paid the price of her infamy. Ah, but revenge never was sweeter!

“And he? Oh, but I despised him—even as I had formerly admired

him, even as I had once loved my wife—so I despised him. And despising him, I killed him—killed him, but with a poison far more subtle than that I had used to destroy my wife—killed him with a poison in effect so hideous, so harrowing, that I can scarcely think of it without sickening even as I write.

“The poison I inculcated into his veins was a germ poison—a disease I, a physician of no small repute, had discovered and bred—a disease I had found existed only in a particular and very rare species of virulent purple and orange-banded spider—the genus \_\_\_\_\_ [here follow in the original manuscript seven paragraphs of elaborate scientific data, of no particular interest to the average reader, but of incalculable import to the scientific world. These paragraphs I have omitted from this account for very significant reasons, but I hold them open to scientific examination at any time, and as I have said before, I will welcome investigation by reputable scientists]—a disease which was responsible for the extreme rarity of this particular species.

“By careful investigation I was able to learn the exact manifestation and workings of the disease—which by their frightful ravages upon the system of the unfortunate victim fairly appalled me.

“By segregating and breeding diseased members of this particular species of spider, I was able to produce the disease in the young in its most virulent form. You can well imagine the care I used in handling these spiders, to prevent infection. Briefly, the symptoms were as follows: The spider about to be stricken apparently first experiences a peculiar numbness of the first left foreleg, to judge from its inability to use or move the affected member. A day or so later the leg, which in a healthy condition is a dull brown, turns a pale, sickening shade of yellow, which deepens

rapidly until it has taken on a flaming orange hue. Then, in a few hours, a deep, vicious-looking blue cincture, or band, appears just at the first joint of the affected member. This cincture rapidly deepens to purple, which seems somehow to sear its way into the flesh and through the bone, so that in a surprizingly short time the whole leg is severed at the joint where the cincture has been.

"The spider then appears to regain its normal condition of health, which it maintains for about a week; then once again the hideous disease manifests itself, this time in the left feeler, or antenna, which in turn becomes yellow, then orange, whereupon the same blue cincture appears and deepens to purple; then, in about the same period of time as in the case of the leg, the antenna drops off, seared as if by some hellish flame.

"Once again the spider appears to regain its health—then in about a week the whole *head* of the stricken insect turns slowly yellow, then orange—then the cincture appears—and as a last manifestation, the head is seared off in flaming agony—and the spider dies in horrible convulsions.

"That, briefly, is the process—as I was able to note after weeks and months of tireless research and observation.

"So what more perfect punishment for the man who stole from me my wife, while pretending to be my friend?

"**L**OVING her as I did, I had not the heart to kill her in this hideous way; so I put her to death with a painless and insidious poison.

"But for ——— I had no mercy. In fact I gloated as I worked over my vile and diseased spiders, breeding them together until I was convinced that I had the germs of the disease in its most virulent form. Even then I was not sure what their effect would

be on a human being—but that much at least I must hazard.

"So having finally made all my preparations, I invited him to my house and placed one of the diseased spiders upon his forehead one night as he slept.

"It must have bitten him, for he awoke with a cry, and I had barely time to close his door and get back to my room before I heard him rise and turn on the light.

"Then he called me, and I came to him, burning with a fiendish satisfaction. 'Something has bitten me, horribly,' he said. 'I feel as if I were going to be ill.'

"I managed to reassure him by telling him that it was very likely nothing but one of our uncommonly large mosquitoes, and he returned to bed.

"But he did not sleep. All night I heard him moaning and tossing. And in the morning he was very pale.

"'I do not know what is the matter with me,' he said, and I thought he looked at me queerly, 'but I feel as if a little rest would do me good. I feel choked. I think I will pack up my knapsack and go off to the hills for the week end. Want to come?'

"I longed to go with him, to see the dread disease work, but I feared its deadly contagion, and was anxious to get him away before I myself became contaminated. So I said no—and he went.

"That was the last I ever saw of him—but once.

"**H**E WENT away, as he had promised, and he seemed apparently well—all except the curious little inflamed spot on his forehead, whose significance I knew so well.

"He went away—and he failed to come back. Days passed, and there came no word from him. People began inquiring. It was odd that he should have left no address. His business suffered.

"Weeks went by—and no word. Search parties were sent out. The river was dragged. The morgues of near-by cities were searched. And all the while I laughed. For who would think of turning to those far-off hills?"

"And yet, as the days went by, I found myself turning to them again—wondering, wondering, wondering. I grew nervous, agitated. I got so I couldn't sleep.

Finally, on a day in late summer (it was the 8th of August—date I shall never forget!) I packed a few things and set off. In search of him? God knows. I tried to tell myself not—but at any rate I found myself strangely, magnetically drawn to those distant somber hills—and thither I went.

"It was one of those gorgeous mornings that only August can produce, and the exhilarating air would have lifted my spirits, but instead I walked along depressed, and the knapsack strapped to my shoulder served only to intensify the feeling.

"In spite of all I could do, I found my mind reverting to the hideous revenge I had wreaked on my wife and her lover, and for the first time repentance stole in upon me.

"I walked along slowly, and it was well toward noon before I left the beaten road and started at random off over the hills, following a narrow and little used path.

"Progress now became doubly slow and painful, leading often up steep inclines and hard descents, with the aspect momentarily becoming more and more rugged, as I left the lower hills and climbed toward the mountain.

"By this time, however, I had got a kind of exhilaration sought in vain during the earlier hours of the morning, and climbed on and on, glad to free body and mind thus of the poison of brooding and lassitude. I would return to the town at night and take

supper at one of the small inns that abounded thereabouts. This would give me some hours yet before I turned back. For the time being, the thought of searching for \_\_\_\_\_ was forgotten. I had freed my mind of him entirely.

"PRESENTLY the path I had been following branched, and the right half narrowed into an all but obliterated trail, leading up a laborious slope. Forcing my way over dry, snapping underbrush and under low-hanging spruce boughs, occasionally starting an indignant partridge from its hidden nest, often put to a wide detour to avoid some hazardous gully cut deep by centuries of spring and autumn freshets, I at last emerged upon a small, circular clearing, evidently the work of some lone wood-chopper.

"Here I sat down, tired by the climb, and refreshed myself with a sandwich from my knapsack. Then I pushed on to the summit, pausing frequently to examine some uncommon species of insect life with which the hills abounded.

"So much was I enjoying myself and such scant notice of the time did I take, that sunset came upon me unawares and I found myself, with darkness settling in on all sides with a startling rapidity, still on the summit of the mountain, with a good three mile descent before me. Indeed, the prospect was not altogether a cheering one and I reproached myself for my heedlessness. But I had found a species of spider for which I had searched in vain for months, so, somewhat reassured by its precious body in a pill-box in my pocket, I started down.

"In spite of my best speed, however, night shut in on me before I had made one quarter of the return, leaving me to grope the rest of the way in utter darkness, with not even the light of a dim star to go by. Vague fear

awoke within me, but I shielded my eyes and stumbled to the bottom, sliding, falling, clutching here and there at some projecting tree-limb to check my headlong descent. Finally, torn and disheveled and shaking, I emerged upon the clearing. Pausing only for breath, I plunged on into the dark. Fear was growing—growing—that peculiar fear of the dark which is the heritage of those who have taken human life.

"What was that? Something lay gleaming queerly ahead, with a dull phosphorescent glow. I stooped and picked it up—and flung it from me shuddering. It was the skeleton of a human foot!

"I groped on, my every heartbeat choking at my throat. Of a sudden I came forcefully against a barrier of rock. I tried to feel my way around it, to get beyond it, but could not. It seemed continuous, a solid wall that would not let me by. Had I fallen into a trap in the darkness? Terrified, I turned—and there lay something else gleaming with that same weird phosphorescent glow! Sick with terror and dread, half fearing what it might be, I sprang on it and picked it up—picked it up—the rotting hand of a human being! With a stifled gasp I flung it from me, reeled, tripped through some vines, and fell swooning.

"WHEN I came to myself, I struck a match and looked about me. Its feeble flame revealed a pair of damp, rocky walls, low and vaulted. I was in some sort of cavern.

"Later on I crept out, collected an armful of sticks, brought them back, and soon had a fire started. By its light I observed that the rear of the cave was still in darkness, and judging that it must extend back indefinitely, I gave my attention to my immediate surroundings—when with a shock I saw, directly in front of me, a granite slab. On it lay several loose

sheets of manuscript, scrawled wildly on odd scraps of paper.

"With a prophetic dread I bent forward and gathered the loose sheets together. Holding them near the fire, I peered closer. Then I think a cry must have escaped me. The writing was in \_\_\_\_\_'s hand, curiously scrawled and scraggly, but still recognizable.

"So fate had brought me to my victim!

"For the rest, there is little more to say. I am doomed as I deserve, even as he was doomed. His words speak all that can be spoken. They follow:

*APRIL 4th—I had meant to spend only the week-end in these hills, yet here I am, after two weeks—still here, and suffering the pains of hell. What has come over me I cannot imagine. And yet—can I not? I am not so sure! Perhaps—perhaps \_\_\_\_\_ has in some devilish way managed to poison me. He is insanely jealous. He thinks there was something between his wife and me. Verily I believe he harassed her to death on the subject. And, having thus brought her to her grave, he wishes to send me there.*

*Perhaps he will succeed—if it is true that in some fiendish way he has got some of his germs into my blood. That bite, at his house that evening. I am not so sure. It was a most unusual bite. It seemed upon the instant to sour all my blood.*

*And yet, if he accomplishes my death, how vain it will be—for as God is my witness I swear I never harmed his wife. We were the best of friends, nothing more. And she loved him with a wholeness, a passion that any but a man maddened by groundless jealousy must at once have seen.*

*How he has wrecked his life! A mind so brilliant—and yet, with her dead, a closed room.*

*However, I may be wrong. I will wait. By the symptoms I will know. I write this down, for I must do something.*

APRIL 5TH—*It is he now, his hellish work. I am sure of it. Today my left leg, which for two weeks has felt positively numb, turned a sickening yellow, from the ankle down, which began at once to deepen, until it now flames orange. And oh! the pain is hellish! Yes, I am sure it is ——'s work. But I will still withhold judgment.*

APRIL 6TH—*Today a deep, virulent blue cincture has appeared just at the ankle of the affected leg. What a hellish contrast to the orange!*

*It is ——. I am sure now. Oh, what a fiend!*

APRIL 7TH—*The cincture has deepened to purple, and seems to cut into the very flesh. It seems sometimes as if the pain would drive me mad.*

APRIL 8TH—*My flaming foot dropped off tonight, seared at the ankle by the purple cincture, and I flung it outside the cave. I wonder. Perhaps I may yet live to return to the world. Ah, I will be avenged for this!*

MAY 23RD—*I am cursed, cursed! Today, just as I was beginning to believe the hellish thing had left me, it returned, this time in my left hand. Oh, I can see it all: tomorrow and the next day and the next, for just two weeks, my hand will be numb; then will come that frightful yellow; then the orange; then—then the purple cincture!*

*Curse the man who discovered this hellish disease—and turned it into me! I could tear him limb from limb. Oh, I pray to return! I would go now, yet I fear my malady is of a vilely contagious nature. I have not*

*the heart to menace a whole community, perhaps a whole nation, perhaps humanity itself—merely to avenge myself on one man.*

JUNE 6TH—*I was right! This morning I awoke with my hand that death-yellow. Oh, it is too regular, too certain—too cruelly certain!*

JUNE 9TH—*Thank God! My hand is gone—out there where my foot went. It happened tonight. Perhaps I may yet return! Perhaps I may yet be avenged. I wonder.*

JULY 21ST—*Doomed! That fearful numbness again—this time in my head. I cannot think—I cannot write—I can scarcely breathe. Oh, the pain—the pain—*

“HERE it ended in a sputter of ink. Trembling in every limb, filled with a horror and anguish and remorse no man can know, spellbound by the awful tale those few sheets told, I sat there motionless.

“So I had been wrong. Oh, my jealousy, my insane jealousy! As I sat there, all desire of life suddenly left me, and I thrilled with joy at the remembrance of the hand and foot I had come upon, outside the cave. They were his. I had touched them. I was contaminated with the dread disease.

“What was that? I listened, straining every nerve. From the back of the cavern had come a sound.

“Five minutes passed—ten—fifteen (I was oblivious of time)—but it was not repeated. Slightly I relaxed my aching nerves and tried to think. Already I fancied I could feel the fearful poison of the diseased spider working in my veins.

“Suddenly the significance of that last entry in ——'s diary burst upon me, and I sat shivering as under a sudden deluge of icy water. ‘July 21st’. Two weeks more would make



it *August 5th*, and three days more would bring it to—*August 8th!*

"Great God!" I cried aloud, 'to-night is the night!'

"Yes, tonight is the night!" echoed a sepulchral voice from the cavern's inner darkness.

"In an agony of dread I looked, and the blood within me paled to water at the sight that met my gaze. Something—*something with but a single hand and foot*—emerged from the shadows of the back of the cavern and began to come forward, leaning heavily upon a rough staff for support.

"Stay back—*stay back!* For the love of God!" I shrieked. But the terrible thing came on and on, and the awful eyes fastened themselves upon my person and suddenly recognized me—and it smiled a hideous smile.

"When it drew nearer, I could see that all above the shoulders flamed orange, while around the neck a livid purple cincture seemed actually to be searing its way into the flesh.

"This is your revenge,' it spoke 'And this is mine,' raising the hellish stump of its mutilated left arm and panting heavily at me: 'My suffering is over—but yours is all to come. And

to the bodily pains of hell will be added the mental tortures of hopeless remorse—knowing your wife was innocent. With that I curse you.'

"Even as it spoke, the eyes rolled out of sight behind horrible lids, the tongue protruded itself in flaming agony, and the whole head, suddenly severed at the neck, thudded the cavern floor.

"I came to my feet with a mad cry, that, shattering the silence beyond the deepest shadows, swelled up in a thousand echoes, from the wail of a soul in torment to the screech of a crucified demon. Then I rushed headlong out.

"For the rest —"

THE last page was illegible, as the first had been, worn and corroded by the slow action of years of decay.

I put the notebook slowly in my pocket and sat there thinking, sickened and awed by the astounding manuscript.

Again I went over to the skeleton there in the fissure. Now I understood why the hand and foot were missing, and why I had found the head many feet from the body.

There it lay, mute evidence that the retribution was complete.