

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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# THE PURPLE HEART

## *The Story of a Haunted Cabin*

By HERMAN SISK

I WAS WEARY of the fog that hung over me like a pall, fatigued to the point of exhaustion. Since early afternoon the chill wind had forced it through my clothing like rain. It depressed me.

The country through which I traveled alone was desolate and unpeopled, save here and there where some bush assumed fantastic form. The very air was oppressive. As far as I could see, were hills—nothing but hills and those bushes. Occasionally I could hear the uncanny cry of some hidden animal.

As I pushed on, a dread of impending disaster fastened itself upon me. I thought of my home, of my mother and sister, and wondered if all was well with them. I tried to rid myself of this morbid state of mind; but, try as I would, I could not. It grew as I progressed, until at length it became a part of me.

I had walked some fifteen miles, and was so weary I could scarcely stand, when I came suddenly upon a log cabin. It was a crude affair, quite small, and stood back some distance from the little-used road in a clump of trees. A tiny window and a door faced the direction from which I approached. No paint had ever covered the roughly-hewn logs from which it was made, and the sun and the wind and the fog had turned the virgin wood to a drab brown.

I felt it was useless to knock, for the cabin had every appearance of being deserted. However, rap I did. No voice bade me enter, and with an effort I pushed open the door and staggered into the house. Almost immediately my weary legs crumpled under me, and I toppled and struck heavily on my face.

When I regained consciousness, a rough room, scantily furnished, greeted my eye. There was an ill-looking table, the top of which was warped and rectangular in shape, standing in the center. To one side was a rustic chair. Beyond the table was a bunk built into the wall; and on this lay a man with shining eyes and a long, white beard. A heavy gray blanket covered all of him but his head.

"You're right on time," he said in a high-pitched voice.

I looked at him closely.

"I don't know you," I said.

"Nor I you; but I knew you would come."

"You are ill and need help?" I asked.

"No," he replied in his strange monotone. "But on this day some one always visits here. None has ever returned. But I have yet to be alone on the night of this anniversary."

There was something so weird in the way he looked at me out of those big, watery eyes that I involuntarily shuddered.

"What anniversary?" I asked.

"The murder of my father," he answered. "It happened many years ago. A strange man came to this cabin just as you have done."

He paused. I said nothing.

"You wish to stay all night?" he asked.

"Yes, if I may," I replied. A moment later I regretted it.

"Quite so," said he, with a slight nod of his white head. "Those were the very words he addressed to us. We took him in. When morning came I found my father dead in there," rolling his eyes and raising his head to indicate some point behind him, "with a dagger in his heart. You can see the room if you open the door behind me."

I looked at him a moment, hesitating. Then I went to the door and pushed it open. Cautiously glancing into the other room, I saw there was nothing there but a bunk similar to the one the old man occupied.

"Don't be afraid," he said, evidently sensing my fear. "Nothing will hurt you now. It's after midnight when it happens."

"What happens?" I asked.

"I don't know. No two men have the same experience. It all depends on one's state of mind."

"You mean—" I began.

"Yes," he interrupted. "One man saw hands reaching toward him and ropes in the air. He was escaping the gallows. Another saw faces of beautiful girls. He was on his way to a large church wedding. A third saw pools of

blood and the white snow stained by human life. He was again living through a massacre in Russia."

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"No. No one does. The cabin is quite deserted. I come each year to welcome the evening's guest."

"Is there no other place to stay?" I asked, a sudden fear seizing me.

"None. Besides, it is growing dark without, and you would lose your way even if you could leave."

There was something ominous in the way he uttered these last five words.

"Yes," he went on, as if I had asked the unuttered question in my mind, "you may think you can go, but you cannot. That is the curse my father placed on this cabin. And I come each year to see that his word is obeyed. Whoever enters that door yonder on this date must stay until morning, and endure the agonies that only the rising sun can dispel."

I looked about me to make sure that he and I were the only living things in the room.

"What is to prevent my leaving?" I asked.

"Try to," he replied, an eerie note of glee in his queer voice.

I walked to the door and gave it a mighty pull. To my utter amazement, it was locked!

I tried again, this time with greater determination; but the door remained unyielding. A sudden terror seized me. I turned to beseech the old man to let me go, but *he was not there!*

I looked quickly about me. He was nowhere to be seen. I ran into the other room. It was as empty as before. I rushed to the door there and pulled vigorously, but my efforts were in vain.

Returning to his bunk, I examined it closely. To my great astonishment, the heavy gray blanket was gone. In desperation I tried once more the door through which I had entered the cabin. It was still as inflexible as concrete.

Darkness fell fast and the room became very dim. I groped about and discovered some matches and a candle on a shelf under the table. I struck a match and lighted the candle. Letting some of the tallow drip onto the table, I made a

stick for it. I then sat down on the edge of the bunk and anxiously awaited developments. But nothing occurred to mar the somber silence of my prison.

Thus I remained until my watch pointed to the hour of nine. My journey had greatly fatigued me, but my fears counterbalanced my weariness, so that I kept awake in spite of it.

At length, however, my eyelids grew heavy; my eyes became bleary, so that the candle multiplied, and my head drooped until my chin rested on my chest.

Letting the candle burn, I lay back on the hard bunk. I was cold and very nervous, and greatly felt the need of food and dry clothing. But my fatigue soon overcame me and I fell asleep.

When I awakened, a sense of suffocation and bewilderment hung over me. Whereas the room had been cold when I lay down, it now seemed close and hot. I pulled myself to a sitting posture. The room was dark. The candle was out.

I jumped to my feet and started toward the table. But in another moment I stood frozen to the spot, my eyes arrested and my body palsied by what I saw before me.

**A**T THE far end of the room was a purple glow in the shape of a human heart. It was stationary when I saw it, but almost immediately it began to move about the room. Now it was at the window. Then beside the table.

Again it moved quickly but silently into the other room.

I pulled my frightened senses together and groped my way to the table. I found a match. With trembling hands, I struck it and lit the candle. To my surprise, it was almost as tall as when I had fallen asleep. I looked at my watch. It was one o'clock.

A moment later the flame was snuffed out and I was again in total darkness. I looked wildly about me. Horrors! The purple heart was beside me! I shrank back in terror. It came closer.

Suddenly I acquired superhuman courage. I grasped for the spectre. I touched nothing. I placed my left hand before me at arm's length. *Lo!* it was between me and my hand!

Presently it moved away. A great calm settled over me and I began to sense a presence in the room. Now, without any fear and with steady hand, I again struck a match and lighted the candle. It was promptly extinguished. I struck another with similar results.

And now something brushed my lips and an arm was passed lightly about my shoulders, but I was no longer afraid. The room continued cozily warm, and a greater sense of peace came over me.

Presently I lay down again and watched the purple heart as it came toward me and took its place at the edge of the bunk, like some loved one sitting beside me.

I must have fallen asleep again, for I knew no more until broad daylight awakened me, and I found myself lying in the middle of the room. There was no fog. The sun was shining brightly, and a broad beam was streaming through the dusty window pane. The candle and the matches were no longer visible.

Suddenly I thought of the locked door. Springing to it, I gave a mighty pull. It opened easily!

I snatched my cap from the rough floor and hurried into the warm sunlight.

A short distance from me a man came trudging along. He was a powerful-looking fellow of middle age and was dressed in coarse working clothes.

"Do you know anything about that cabin?" I shouted, as we drew closer.

"Sure. It's haunted," he replied. He looked hard at me. "Were *you* in there last night?"

I related my experience.

"That's queer!" he muttered. "But I ain't surprised. Last night was the night."

"What night?" I demanded.

"Ten years ago an old man was murdered in that cabin, and his son swore on his deathbed he'd come back every anniversary and lure somebody into the cabin for the night and torture him."

He shuddered, his white face staring at the cabin.

"Come away!" he whispered. "Come away! It's haunted! It's haunted!"