

Weird Tales

May
1954

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Cover by W. H. SILVEY

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

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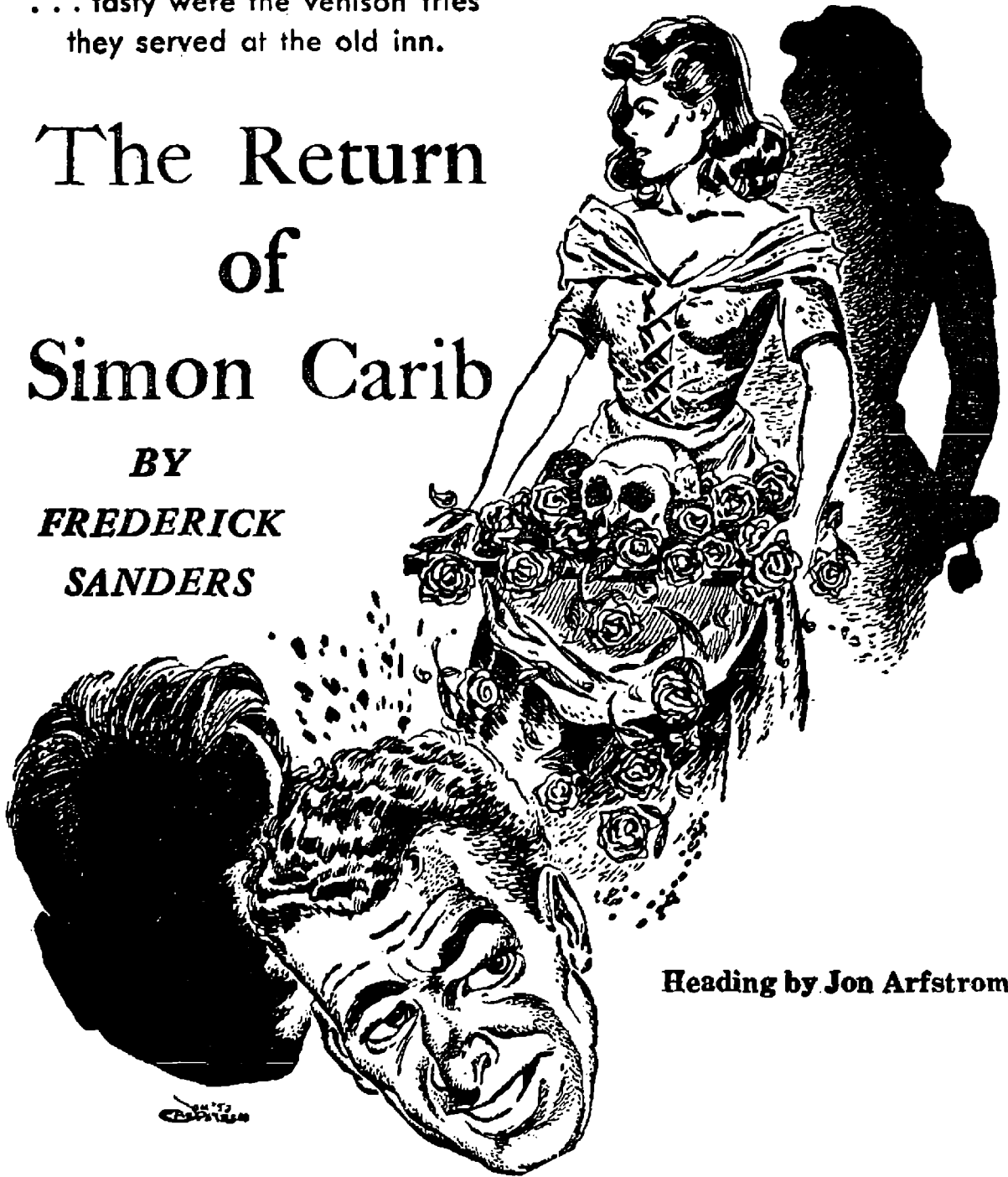


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. . . tasty were the venison fries
they served at the old inn.

The Return of Simon Carib

BY
FREDERICK
SANDERS



Heading by Jon Arfstrom

I

THE November fog was every-
where. It swirled around the
old churchyard on the hill and
touched with chilly breath the
faded inscriptions on the old
tombs that had once been names.

In the town below ghostly lights
seeped through the brownish
blanket of freezing vapor and
only subdued sounds of traffic
filtered out into the blankness
of the treacherous night. Yet this
damp detestable horror did not
worry me, for I was in a warm

haven of dryness and soft light with the mouth-watering aroma of good food not far away.

As a traveler in tobacco my work takes me far and wide in the country, and, though many years have inured me to all weathers, I can appreciate all the more comfort and good food where they can be encountered upon the roads. Either from established places known to me and others of my occupation or upon those now and again chance drop-ins at strange places in new territory that come up to more than one's estimation where plates have to be covered with something substantial and glasses filled with liquid to sustain the mind and warm in winter the chilled cockles of our hearts. The "HAPPY TRAVELERS EATING HOUSE," in which I found myself ensconced this moisture-drenched evening of November, was such a place. If it had not been for the terrific fog making visibility almost nil, I should not have got off my usual bearings and become temporarily lost in the old cathedral city of Oldchester, that I knew in the main, as well as I did the backs of my own hands. In losing myself, I discovered the Happy Travelers as I furtively cruised my small motor-van down a steeply narrow street to where I hoped to pick up the old winding High Street, from where I could make my

fog-bound way to my last port of call for that day.

It was a splash of red seen through the mist that signaled to my mind and made me think "This is it," as I drew into the gutter, braked and switched off the engine. And "This" was it! As I got out of the car the warm red curtains over a long narrow window glowed from the light behind them. Over the top of the window I read "The Happy Travelers Eating House." I opened the door and went in to find myself in a largish room with a low ceiling. Long high backed seats faced each other across highly polished tables. Clean smelling pine sawdust was scattered over the boarded floor and in a tidy sized old fashioned fireplace, spitting away merrily upon the fire-dogs were logs of cherry wood sweetening the air. Candles, in tall copper candlesticks, placed at strategic points about the room and upon the tables combined to give a cheerful illumination.

I hung my hat, overcoat and scarf upon one of several wooden pegs which seemed to do duty as a clothes' rack near the window. Then, settling myself in a corner of one of the seats nearest the fire, I relaxed. How clean, warm and comfortable, I mused. So quiet.

Stealing into the room came a cozy aroma of cooking from somewhere beyond. It seemed

that I had stumbled upon one of those places of refreshment one does come across in these modern times that are modelled on the lines of eating-places of a hundred and fifty or more years past. A place designed for an exclusive clientele of men, who were not exactly epicures, or gluttons, but who appreciate good food, nicely cooked and well-served. I rubbed my hands, and was just about to ring a small highly-polished brass bell near at hand; when a form passed into the room, tripped briskly across the sawdred floor, and stood before me. It wore an ample ankle-length dress of blue, had a beautifully corseted waist, above which a snow-white blouse coyly emphasized a delicately modelled bosom. But the face! Ah! that countenance! I know that I shall never see its counterpart again, at least not in this world! Then the vision spoke and set my heart racing mad. "An' it please you, Peg O'Myhart, at your service, sir."

II

WITH my nerves all a-tingle and a peculiar sensation flowing along my spine, I gazed up at Peg O'Myhart. I caught my breath, for there, in the mellow candlelight I perceived a face of such beauty and sweet innocence that I was tempted to think that she would suddenly sprout wings

and so like an angel—for she really looked like one—spread them and vanish away. She did neither. Instead she informed me that there was roast pheasant, after which there would be served a special pudding three years old, kept with brandy. And as I gazed at her great blue eyes and mobile red lips, with just that added fullness as if a bee had lightly stung them, I thought "This is an exclusive show. Pheasant and brandy-pudding! A pretty penny this will cost me!" So I ordered supper and was rewarded with a devastating smile and a neat old-fashioned curtsy and Peg O'Myhart disappeared away to where the choice aromas of cooking escaped.

I really did enjoy that dish of pheasant and I am rather afraid that I overcame good-manners to openly feast my eyes upon the lovely Peg when she served it and again when she cleared the dishes preparatory to the second course.

I had nearly finished the intoxicatingly good pudding when a slight sound made me glance up to see a tall lithe man approaching the table. He wore a short-waisted cut-away jacket with shining metal buttons and sported a most exquisitely embroidered colored waistcoat surmounted with a cravat of Alpine whiteness. His nether limbs were encased in rather tight fitting

black trousers, and gleaming polished wellingtons, from the sides of which depended golden-corded tassels putting the finishing touch to this old-time male ensemble. "Nothing like keeping up the clothes of the period to go with the surroundings," I thought. As he stood before me I noted his light brown skin, dark eyes, fullish lips and crinkly hair. An Indian type and a cultured one, I noted mentally. Then in a very English voice barring a slight slur, he bowed, saying, "Simon Carib, keeper of the Happy Travelers, sir. I hope everything is to your satisfaction?"

As he finished his introduction I popped the last spoonful of the rich dark-brown pudding into my mouth, set down the spoon, and answered him that I had enjoyed everything. The dining room, the courtesy, the well-cooked meal and the charming waitress.

"Yes," retorted Simon, "she is a winsome lass. Been here several months, and has endeared herself to all hearts. In fact she is what one would call a 'toothsome morsel,' sir." At that precise moment the charming Peg tripped in, removed the spoon and empty plate, smiled and tip-tapped her way out of the room.

"Indeed she is, Mister Carib," and I glanced at his shining face as he and I framed a sentence,

which, when spoken blended into one and the same, "Quite sweet enough to eat!" We laughed, and said Simon, "Two minds with but a single thought betwixt them. There is no doubt that girls like young Peg can be to us mere males a consuming desire. Though it may well be it is our own hearts we eat out over their artless though artful ways." We chuckled. Winked at each other.

Then the quarter-chimes from the old cathedral clock nearby told that it was a quarter to eight o'clock. This would not do, for I had to get to my last place of business by eight—closing time. I asked my score and Simon asked me a sum but half what I had expected. A trifle surprised I paid him, leaving a tip for Peg. He saw me to the door, and remarked that I had picked a good time to have my supper, for soon the London coach would arrive with a goodly crowd who would soon make the eating room ring with quip and jest and much chatter.

"Come here at the same time a week from today, sir. We shall have a rare dish—specially cooked venison pie from a little deer fed and fattened to a nicety under my personal supervision. Good night, sir, good night!" The fog had cleared a trifle and going to the end of the road, I emerged from under the old gate-house archway, into the near de-

serted street. As I edged out into the main thoroughfare, I noticed the name of the street of the Happy Travelers. It was named, Corncockle.

III

FIVE minutes later I parked my car outside the shop of Phineas Fagg, retail tobacconist, the local historian of Oldchester and president of the select Oldchester Historical Society, and was soon seated at the back of his commodious shop, in his little private office, pen in hand and order-book open for his list of requirements. Phineas was a sparse little man of some sixty summers. Soon our business was transacted and I arose to go. "I fully expect you will be very glad to get back to Medvale Town and a good hot supper this unfelicitous night, Mr. Sprucer," remarked Phineas. "As a matter of fact." I rejoined. "I have dined well at a new place I discovered but an hour ago!"

"Ah! The 'Tudor Rose Cafe' I presume, that only opened this week at the other end of the High Street?"

"Not the 'Tudor' but a 'new-old' cafe if one can call it such up in Corncockle Street," I replied.

Phineas opened his eyes wide, and I could see that I had caught him on the hop. He didn't know.

"Yes; a place called 'The Happy Travelers Eating House' not far up from the old city Gate House. And rare food they serve up and at a price to suit the pockets of commercials."

Phineas looked fully surprised, then he suddenly got excited, a rare thing for him, and he could only stutter out "B-b-but t-that i-is im-pup-pup-possible, Mr. Sprucer!"

Then a rap came at the office door and one of his two assistants came in to remark to Phineas that the cash register had jammed, and would he please come out to try to release it, so that he could finish checking up the day's receipts.

So thanking Phineas for his order I bid him good night, to leave him to wrestle with the recalcitrant register. Whether it was sheer amazement or the heralding of fear that shone in his eyes as they followed me to the shop door, I could not be sure, but in a few moments I was out in the fog again, ready to drive away home.

A WEEK soon slipped by and it was order-day for Oldchester again. It had been a cold hard day and now, at half past six in the evening, the rime of frost was present under the moonlight. I was ahead of schedule as I cruised along the High Street, thinking of The Happy

Travelers—and pretty Peg. I turned the motor van under the Gate House archway and moved up the steep ascent of Corncockle Street, looking out for the lighted red-curtains of the eating house. I was just about to pass a blank-faced, unlighted building when a glimmer of light manifested itself and a dull red spot appeared at the lower window. I pulled over to the other side and got out. Sure enough, the red-gleam in the window grew and grew as someone—no doubt Peg—lit candle after candle in the room behind. I crossed over, pushed open the door and was in the warm atmosphere of the dining room, with its cheerful fire and candlelight, but no one was present.

Evidently the lighter of candles had just left the room as I had been about to enter.

So I hung up my coat, hat and scarf and settled myself down where I had seated myself a week before. A few moments later there sounded a patter of feet in the outer passage, and in at the door came a lovely well-knit dark-haired maiden who quickly tripped across to me, and, dropping a swift curtsy said, "If it please you, sir. Maria Lovelace, at your service, sir." I was sorry not to see Peg, and I surmised that the establishment kept more than one waitress. Then, into the room walked Simon, and, cross-

ing to us, bowed to me, wishing me a "Good evening."

Turning to Maria he asked, "Has cook got the first of the special venison pies ready?" Maria replied that she had and that they smelt uncommonly delicious.

"Then," said Simon, "bring a goodly portion for our gentleman here, for I am sure he has had a long cold day behind him."

"And where, if I may be so bold as to ask, is our fair Peg tonight, Mr. Carib?" I inquired.

"She was called away three days ago, to her poor dear mother, who lies exceedingly ill in London, sir. I do miss her, as do we all. But young Maria Lovelace is an apt pupil and fills her place admirably well, until Miss Peg can be with us again, sir."

We chatted of this and of that until the dark-haired Maria brought in the pie and placed it before me. I sniffed the aroma. Such cooking! Such rare meat! And the smell of delicately applied cooking herbs pervading it. "I will now leave you in peace, to enjoy your supper, sir!" remarked Simon. "I am sure you will say when you have partaken of it that you have never eaten anything so truly rare and tender before. Every few months I treat my customers to such regal meat and, I may add, I eat a goodly fill myself, for to venison pie I am very partial, as was my fath-

er and grandfather before me. Indeed sir, the cooking recipe was handed down from my great-grandparents." Then softly he quitted the dining room, leaving me to enjoy such a meal as I had never tasted before.

IV

BY THE time I arrived at Phineas Fagg's shop, I was feeling fully repleted, warm and happy—right on top of the world. I went through into his little office, gave him a cheery greeting and the usual hand-shake.

"You seem full of snap and vim this evening, Mr. Sprucer," remarked the kindly old historian. "And so would you be, my friend, if you had dined and wined like I have, at the Happy Travelers," I replied. "In these modern times it is not many restaurants, if any at all, that dish up venison-pie for a weary traveler's supper!"

"Venison?" the word was like the last of an echo from the old man's lips. "Where is this 'Happy Travelers Rest' you speak about?" He was eyeing me, so I thought, rather warily.

"In Corncockle Street, Mr. Fagg. You must pop up there one evening—dine out; you know."

Slowly he replied, "That I cannot do, my dear friend, for the

eating-house, you mention does not exist!"

Something in his words made me short-tempered. "Call me a liar then! Go on! Just because you happen to know a great deal about this locality no one else must know anything!"

He was very decent, was old Phineas, for he smiled in a queer way and patted my arm, saying "Now, now; listen to me, Tom Sprucer. Corncockle Street exists, but the eating-house you speak of ceased to be a place of call as far back as the winter of 1820. The house is still there, but it has had a very chequered career, and for the past thirty years it has remained empty, fast falling into decay."

"But Mr. Fagg!" was all I could reasonably say.

Phineas went on. "You have seen the past come back, my friend. You have been seeing ghosts of people dead and gone for over a century. I have heard of such things, but never experienced such myself. See here, Tom." (And Phineas moved over to a small bookcase from which he took a large leather-covered book, placing it on the desk before me.) "Here you can read of the old 'Happy Travelers Rest' from a cutting from an old county-journal published back in 1820."

He opened the old well-thumbed press-cuttings book and

pointed to a yellowy-brown cutting affixed on one of the pages. I read with growing apprehension and horror the account of happenings—and of people whom I had recently seen—that occurred but five short years after the Battle of Waterloo!

A DASTARDLY DEVIL BROUGHT TO JUSTICE.

“Early yesterday morning, the 14th of November, a light-colored man by the name of Simon Carib was apprehended for the murder of Miss. Peg O’Myhart who had been in his employ as a serving-maid at his eating-house, The Happy Travelers Rest in Corncockle Street, of this town. Miss Maria Lovelace, a quick-witted girl last in his employ had noticed many peculiarities about her employer and coupled with a bone she found protruding from the earthen floor of the large cellar beneath the house, laid information with the local authority who brought down Bow Street detectives, who had the house surrounded and the fiend Simon Carib placed under arrest.

“The cellar was dug up and the remains of eight bodies, all young women, were disclosed.

“Carib confronted with all his guilt broke down and confessed to killing them all and from the choicest portions of these youthful serving-maids, whom he kept

and fed well, feasting upon them and to making ‘venison pies’ for his special customers. Carib is a near descendent of cannibals who up till quite recent years still lived and practiced cannibalism on one of the remoter isles of the West Indies.

“Owing to his confession we hope very shortly to see this fiend incarnate hung from the old Hanging Oak opposite the UNICORN·INN, at the four-way on Pendleton Heath. Good seats for the hanging can be obtained from the offices of this newspaper at half-a-guinea per numbered ticket.”

V

AND now I did want to believe that all that had passed was but a phantasm—an abnormal state of mind caused somehow from remote psychic influences. My horror must have shown itself in my face. A face, that I perceived in the small wall-mirror opposite to me, of a peculiar yellowish-green with dead white nose and bloodless lips set with two dark-rimmed staring eyes.

Old Phineas called out to me, “Don’t let it worry you Tom! What you saw—what you ate—did not, could not, have really existed.”

My stomach seemed to be tying itself into a great and

painful knot. I heard myself crying out in anguish, "But the venison-pie! I ate it! It was SO REAL! Everything was SO REAL!" And I remember saying to that—that—Simon, "She was QUITE SWEET ENOUGH TO EAT!" Pretty Peg O'Myhart whom he described as a toothsome morsel. Phineas, Phineas, that PIE, made from a little "deer!" A "LITTLE DEER"—

BUT IT WAS DEAR PEG—
DEAR PEG O'MYHART!

MY INNER-SELF became a complicated contortion of anguishing pain. Then I was horribly, excruciatingly ill. A crimson mist obscured my vision and a final wrench of the great knot inside sent me, with a gigantic spasm of agony into merciful oblivion.
