

Weird Tales

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The RETURN *of the* MASTER
by H. Warner Munn



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Eli Colter—Seabury Quinn—Roscoe Gilmore Stott—
Bassett Morgan—Hugh Irish—Victor Rousseau

Weird Tales

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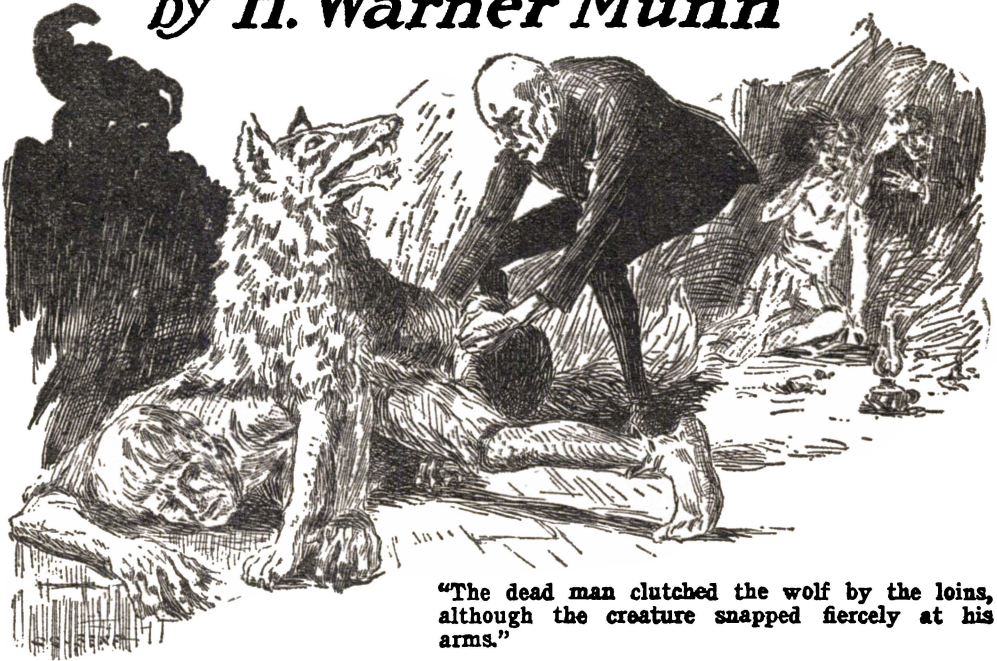
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The RETURN of the MASTER

by H. Warner Munn



"The dead man clutched the wolf by the loins, although the creature snapped fiercely at his arms."

Hark! In a trice they are hushed and flown,
For morn is at hand, and the cock has
crown!

'Twas a gala night for the souls set free:
Then hail Death and Equality!

—Danse Macabre.

1. A Voice from the Dead

MANY years had passed since last I had seen my old inn-keeper friend, Pierre Garnier, in far-away France.

Disinclination, perhaps born of fear, perhaps mere laziness and sloth, had kept me long near home. Travel ceased to beckon, for as one grows older he is ready to sit quietly by the fire and think, dwelling more in the past than either the present or the future.

Once I was cursed with itching feet which had carried me into strange places, but now they seemed content to rest easily in soft warm slippers,

the while my fancy rebuilt old scenes and faces in the glowing embers.

Since the news of Pierre's death in far-away France, which had arrived simultaneously with the curious Latin work, written on human skin, which I have described in the translation that was made public some months ago, I had lapsed into apathy.

Pierre had been the last of my friends. Some correspondence had passed between us lately, but never a word in regard to his amazing ancestor, Wladislaw Brenryk of Ponkert, the werewolf whose diluted blood coursed in Garnier's veins.

That was one reason why I had never returned to the inn. Where lives the man who can converse calmly with son of warlock or vampire? Surely I am not the man who finds it possible, and so I closed the chapter, as I thought, and went away. But still I handled with a fearful de-

light the thought that once a thing of other spaces had been so close to me that I had hobnobbed in ignorance with the descendant of a fiend, and I surrounded myself with weird and occult literature of many kinds. I steeped myself in lycanthropical lore, I drowned my common sense in fantastic legend, myth, and fable, I became a recluse, living alone with my books and a single servant.

One evening late in March, I was speculating idly upon the peculiar recurrence in a work on philology that I had just finished, of the name Garnier, Grenier, or Gangere, which the writer had connected often with the *loup-garou*, or werewolf.

"What a peculiar coincidence," I thought, "that Pierre's surname should be one of these! I could tell that writer something that would interest him much," for I had not formerly revealed Pierre's name in full.

While I still smiled, on the heels of the furtive thought came a tapping on the door, and I heard Parker shuffling down the hall. Soon he returned, in his hand an envelope of yellow.

"A telegram, sir," he said, respectfully. "Willie Thoms brought it from the town, as the station agent believed it was urgent."

"Very well," I said, extending my hand for the message. "Give the boy a quarter, and let me alone," for I disliked being disturbed and Parker knew this well.

As he closed the study door, I tore open the envelope and found that which led to the most horrid adventure I had ever yet encountered in fact or fiction. It began:

Monsieur M——:

You will know without names who this is from. If you would aid an old friend in the direst of peril come at once to the inn that you know of. I feel that only you can save. In God's name, old friend, come at once; a week's delay may be too late.

P. G.

My first emotion was one of gladness. Pierre lived, and I should see him again. For the first time in months I felt cheery. But on re-reading the cablegram, which had been relayed by wire from the terminal, I was struck by the agonized tone of the message, so foreign to Pierre's usually placid demeanor. Pierre was in danger, I was needed at once! Again I read, "a week's delay may be too late."

I rang for Parker, and when he came in sight at the end of the hall, called, "Pack my trunks at once. I leave on the morning train." Without waiting for a reply or question I shut the door, and prepared myself for bed.

2. *The Man on the Train*

IT IS not necessary to burden this narrative with minute details of the journey, for it will be lengthy enough at best. Suffice it then to mention only that the ride to Boston was without event, as also was the trip to Paris. I chafed and fretted, spending most of the time as far in the bow as I could place myself, as though I would be nearer to the journey's end than any other. I was first down the gang-plank, and in an hour's time was on the train, and on the last stage toward my goal.

It is necessary to change trains about ten miles out of Paris, and although I had a whole compartment to myself on the first train, the second time I was not so fortunate. I ran down the platform, but all the compartments were closed, signifying that no space remained, and as the wheels commenced to turn I discovered a hand that beckoned from a door. As it reached me I flung in my grip, scrambled in myself and shut the door.

There were two occupants already in the carriage, a slender woman gowned in black, who wore a veil that

concealed her features, and a small dapper little man about whom there was something repellent. I sensed animosity the moment I entered, and felt a surge of dislike in return. But he smiled and nodded politely enough in a smooth oily manner, saying slowly as though he were choosing his words, "You—are—agile—*Monsieur.*"

If his person was repugnant to me, more so was his voice. I made some conventional reply, and pretended an acute interest in my paper. Seeing that I was not to be drawn into conversation, he chose other methods of amusement.

Now it has always been my code to keep strictly out of others' affairs. One can not be positive what are another's motives in performing a certain act. Hidden influences are at work upon that person that are impossible for us even to dream of, and interference may be not only impertinent and unjust, but also dangerous to ourselves. Such it was in this case, but not wholly, for although I might have been spared some moments of mental anguish and terror, the end would have been much the same. I did not realize the true nature of my foe or I should never have left America. There I should have been safe, for there is a great expanse of moving water between that land and France.

As I sat reading my paper I could see that the woman was restless. She was continually glancing at me, as I could tell by the movement of her head, although the heavy veil hid her face. Apparently she and the little man were companions, though I received the impression that it was not friendship, but another bond that held them together.

The man addressed himself to her in words so intentionally offensive that I refuse to include them in my narrative. I half laid down my pa-

per to interfere, but an imperceptible gesture of her hand warned me that it was none of my affair, and I resumed my reading. But I kept close watch of his actions.

Now he attempted to seize her hand, which she allowed him to do, but as he moved nearer to her, placing his knee familiarly, so that it pressed hers, she shrank away as far as she could to the end of the seat, and I felt that circumstances called for action.

I laid down my paper, rose, bowed as courteously as might be in the swaying carriage and inquired politely, "Is this man offending you, *Madame?*"

"No, *Monsieur,*" she said in a low tone. "He is my brother."

The little man leaped to his feet, yellow with passion.

"You lie, you slut!" he cried, and struck her in the face with his open hand. Turning to me he began, "Sir, I will thank you to mind your own affairs," but with the cowardly blow I leapt, and we rolled together on the floor.

The woman screamed as we fought.

With amazing strength he clutched my throat; my mouth opened, and my tongue protruded. Strange lights flared before my eyes, and I knew that I had met a power greater than my own.

Summoning my waning strength I struck again and again, but my hardest blows were nothing against my conqueror. Finally I gained my feet, face black, and with a roaring as of many waters in my ears. I staggered across the carriage blindly, and fighting for air crashed against the side.

Faintly through the darkening haze I saw the woman move toward us, felt cold air rush by my face, as the door swung open, felt tugging at the hands that throttled, and suddenly my enemy released his hold. With the last of my power I smote at the

little man, felt his teeth pierce my hand, and backward he plunged through the open door, rebounded once and lay quiet, soon far behind.

The woman lifted the veil, hesitated with her face averted, then seemingly with a great effort turned toward me and boldly looked into my face.

I searched her features with great disappointment. When one has plumed himself upon being gallant and chivalrous, it is indeed sad to find that the one for whom he has fought is neither young nor beautiful. Although I have long passed the prime of life, still I have a keen eye for beauty.

Not long could she withstand my gaze.

She expectantly eyed me for a moment as though, most strangely I thought, I was to show some sign of recognition, but the face, seamed by wrinkles, yellow and blotched, was entirely unfamiliar to me. Then she turned and watched the flitting landscape that passed so swiftly by.

3. *Regina's Story*

I WAS haunted by a vague sense of the familiar after a bit, something so indefinite that it seemed only a fancy, something that eluded me in a most aggravating fashion.

While I still watched the small oval of withered cheek that I could yet see, down a wrinkle, as from a dried-up creek courses the spring floods, flowed a drop of something bright and wet, followed by another and another that glittered in the fading sunlight. And I became aware that very quietly she wept.

I touched her shoulder.

"*Madame*," I said, "do not cry, I beg. I meant only to preserve you from annoyance. Surely this regrettable occurrence was not of my making. Never would I have interfered

had I thought that it was not your wish. Shall I stop the train, so that we may return and search for him?" And I reached for the cord.

With a strength that was ferocious, she pulled me down into my seat again, and held me there.

"Stop the train? Rather pray that it may never stop, and pray to all the gods you know that he may be dead or dying. It is not for that I weep. Could I but know that he was mashed to pulp these would be tears of joy!" she cried. "No, my sorrow is from another cause. I can see in your face that you know me not, but I know you well, and once I was not a stranger to you. Look into my face if you will and tell me with your lips that which your eyes already have told me!"

Desperately she strained back the loose skin on her temples and forehead with her palms. The wrinkles smoothed out a bit, but that was all. I was, though pitying her evident distress, compelled to say, "I do not remember that we have ever met."

She beat upon the window-sill with her gloved hand, then buried her head in her arms, and burst into a storm of tears. Between her sobs came broken words.

"Old! Old! And I was so young! How horrible I am! How changed! Only eighteen, and I look a hundred. Once you knew me well, and I—I worshiped you. I was very young, and you were kind to the little girl that served you. Have you forgotten *Regina Noël* that waited upon the tables at the *Blue Falcon*?"

"*Regina!*" I gasped, scrutinizing that haggard face. Indeed I had known the little waitress, but she had been a child of thirteen when I had last seen her, and now this haggard claimed to be a young girl.

"Impossible," I said. "There is no resemblance."

There was silence, and the train clacked on, rail joint after joint speeding by beneath us.

Up she flung her head, defiant.

"Yes, I was Regina, now I know not what I am, save that a devil has me for its slave!"

"The Devil!" My lips shaped the words.

"That *It* is! The Black One! The Enemy! He with whom you fought. Why, oh why did you stop him? Can't you see that it was a plot to kill you? It is a miracle that you escaped; he has planned this thing for months to bring you into his power, and now you have defeated his plans in the first struggle. But it will not be long. He has got me, and he will have you. I feel him following fast!"

"Hush, my child." I soothed and patted the heaving shoulder in the traditional clumsy manner of man soothing his women folk. "That man is dead. He will not trouble you again."

"Oh!" she cried: "it is not the insult that troubles me; I have known far worse than that. It is your dreadful fate that causes me to fear. He has dragged you to him over half a world to gain his ends, and you prate over my troubles."

"I do not understand," I said. "I came in answer to a letter from my friend Pierre, asking for help."

She looked up wofully. "I wrote that message," she replied. "Can you guess who forced me?" Another paroxysm of sobs racked her frail body.

She did not resist when I put my arm around her.

"Tell me about it, Regina," I begged. "I will help you."

"Nothing can help us now," she answered in a desolate tone. "We are lost, but I will tell you. It was five years ago, you went away and did not come again. Pierre watched

and waited, but you never came, and I wished that you would return, for you were always so good to me. You remember how you would not let the cook beat me when I spilled the wine?"

I nodded.

"So for three years we waited, and then Pierre died. The manner of his passing was dreadful. It came so slowly that before we realized that he was weaker the sickness had him. Every day he moved more feebly until one night he sat in his armchair by the fire and could not get up again. We had to carry him to bed, and he never left it.

"He was brave, a noble one. Although he knew what ailed him he never told. I think he tried to shield us, and partly he succeeded. I was the one he confided in.

"Regina," he called, and I came. 'I am going tonight. I feel it. But before I leave you, listen. In yonder drawer is a book; bring it to me.'

"I did so, and he said, 'Regina, you must not read this. There is meat in here too strong for you. When I am dead, send it to my friend across the sea who fears a poor old man, dying all alone. Write that I loved him, and wish him well, but tell him not that I died like this.'

"Then he raised his poor feeble hand to his throat, and pulled a bandage away.

"Look close, girl," he whispered. 'What do you see?'

"Two small wounds," I said. 'Have you cut yourself?'

"No, dear," he answered. 'Be brave and not afraid, for much depends on you, and I can trust no one else. I am ridden by a demon every night, and this is the mark of the vampire.'

"Somehow I was not afraid. Perhaps I did not understand his whole meaning, and he went on:

“ ‘Tonight I am to die. I feel it plainly. Do not weep for me, dear. I am old, I have lived, I shall die, but after I am dead’—his voice became stern—‘do you follow my instructions’ without fail!

“ ‘I am the descendant of a man who, four hundred years ago, became a werewolf. While planning revolt against his cruel master he was betrayed, and was forced to kill his own wife as a warning to the other members of the pack. His baby daughter was rescued from him, and later on all of the beasts were trapped and killed except the leader. Down the ages has his seed persisted, always menaced by the still living vampire, and out of each generation has one been taken in payment for the man’s treachery to his master.

“ ‘So it has been revealed to me, and I am the last of the line. I speak from the grave, and in warning. Tell my old friend that I am dead, but tell him nothing else, lest he should come hither and fall into the monster’s power.

“ ‘I am going to ask a dreadful thing for a girl to do, but I know you are brave enough to obey unquestioning, much braver than these fools that work here seeing nothing but their weekly pay.’

“ ‘I am, sire,’ I said proudly.

“ ‘I knew it,’ he smiled wanly. ‘Hark! You will go now, write as I have told you, and mail the book and letter at once. When you return I shall be dead. Go to the priest, tell him all that I have told you under the seal of secrecy, and unless he does certain things I shall become a vampire after death, and shall live again, a monstrous thing. You and the priest must open the grave after I have been buried. Sever my head from my body; fill my mouth, nostrils and ears with garlic. Upon each eye lay a silver cross, and drive a silver nail through my heart. Then return the

earth to the grave again and upon it pour boiling water and vinegar.

“ ‘If you do this, the good God will bless you as I do, but if you fail, my curse shall be upon you! Now go, and do as I have said.’

“ ‘I left the room, wrote the letter and mailed it to you with the book unread. The Latin is strange to me,’ she admitted, with a touch of unconscious humor.

“ ‘When I returned to report my mission completed, I entered the room and saw that Pierre was dead as he had predicted, and there was another present, sitting on the bed. It was the man you fought with, and now you know why I am here. I failed in my promise, I am a slave, and you and Pierre are lost.

“ ‘The monster promised me great things, saying, ‘Regina! Queen thou art in name, queen thou shalt be over my loyal subjects that I shall soon secure.’

“ ‘Merciful God in Heaven,’ she cried, leaping to her feet. “ ‘Is this the face of a queen? Am I in queenly garb?’”

I pulled her down beside me. “ ‘Go on,’ I said huskily.

“ ‘The inn was closed after the funeral and never opened again. The Master lives there with one other, and people shun the place as haunted. He searched for the book, but never questioned me till you published the story.* Why did you do it? Why did you? How he obtained a copy I have no idea, but he has one, and in vengeance he swore your death. He has sworn to start a devil pack with you, and to add to it until all France is humbled by him.

“ ‘Sire, Hell is loose today, and there is no hope. I cabled you under his orders, and you know the rest. Now if you can escape, do so, but think no more of poor Regina!’”

* “The Werewolf of Ponkert,” in *WEIRD TALES*, July, 1925.

4. Pursuit

SHE was pale and bloodless. I was about to speak when suddenly she whispered. "Hush, do you hear it?"

I listened, but heard only the train noises, and so replied, but she impatiently gestured for silence.

She opened the door, and together we looked back. Nothing was in sight, but she said, "I feel him coming. *Monsieur*, are you armed?" And then, "Too late, too late," as she pointed.

Far down the track behind us fluttered a thing monstrously formed, growing yet more huge as it reeled down the sky after the train. In shape it resembled a bat, but one of such tremendous size as has surely not been seen before, since man first dragged himself out of the mud and began to breathe air with lungs.

Rapidly it overhauled the rushing train, soaring high over trees, buildings and wires, slanting down again, dipping with effortless speed along the level lands, and gaining, always gaining, as it rocketed across the fields that we were passing.

Soon it paralleled our course, passed our coach and flapped onward toward the head of the train.

Passing around a curve, the train bent into a crescent, and from our window we could see the creature dip toward the windows of each coach, hold the position, and drop back to the next, searching for something or someone, and I did not need Regina's horror-stricken moan, "It is He!" to inform me for whom the monster searched.

The train straightened out, and we could no longer see ahead, but down the wind came shrill chirpings, almost too high in the scale of sound to be heard. Liquidly sweet, arrowy sharp and piercing, with a note of inquiry in the pitch, the stridulation came louder and nearer, and we were seen.

I felt the girl cringe against me.

Beneath my protecting arm her body stiffened, and muscles set rigid. I was no less afraid than she, but it is the man's part in times of stress to hide fear from his women folk, so I patted her shoulder reassuringly and smiled. There was no mirth in the grimace!

It was four times the size of the fox-bat, largest known of the species, that I have seen in Java, but in many ways the two were similar. It possessed the same pointed muzzle, instead of the fluted nose-leaf that makes most bats hideously alien to one's conception of a face's appearance. Whiskers were present, on either side of the nostrils, whose flaring red contrasted strangely with the jet-black appendages.

Its six-foot body was bare in spots, otherwise covered with a mangy, dirty brown hair, shading to ash-gray along its under side. Mud caked in the matted fur, and not yet dry, made it seem more appalling.

Ten-foot membranes buffeted the air as train and terror drove on together. The whistle screamed for a crossing, and as if startled by the sound, the thing turned its head and stared at us again.

Imagine a bat's head the size of a small tub, and you have its dimensions. Picture if you can a mouth that mowed and gibbered at us, disclosing sharp white teeth, and above it eyes of evil in which lurked things unutterable.

Oddly there came into my mind that perhaps this was the very bat that had been lost in Hell, now newly released with something of that unearthly horror lingering in its eyes. I imagined the things it must have seen fluttering down those murky aisles, lost in the choking smoke, soiled and scorched by the lurid flames until it beat with throbbing wings into the free and purer air once more, with memories that nothing could ever wipe away!

What curious things come into our heads at the oddest times and most peculiar places!

Again the whistle shrieked, and with it mingled a most bitter wailing from outside. Suddenly the winged beast zoomed upward, overshadowing us with its mighty membranes, and blackness rushed to meet us. As we entered the tunnel I saw the creature rise almost perpendicularly to surmount the hill that we were passing through.

Regina shuddered as though released from a spell, and I recalled the power that had held the Hungarian numb in the sleigh when the werewolves pursued him along the river. With the thought came action. Although I had felt nothing of this paralysis I knew that I might be next, and it would be then too late to do what I had in mind. I opened my bag, garments flew over the compartment, as I searched for my automatic which I usually carry while traveling abroad. As I closed my hand on its chill metal we burst into the twilight. The dull red sun was cut in half by the hill we had pierced, and against its ominous glare a black dot flickered for a second.

We waited. Soon we saw our pursuer near the carriage. One gigantic wing finger scratched the window-pane, and while its wing was raised for another stroke and its filthy body was clearly exposed I poured six bullets into the junction of wing and trunk.

To the music of tinkling glass and eldritch squeaks of pain he danced in air, rose high, somersaulted over and over, and thudded to earth in a lashing huddle of leathery membrane.

The train rushed on. I hugged the girl beside me in ecstasy. "He is gone! The Master is dead!" I cried.

"No one will ever say that," Regina replied. "You can not kill him. Look!" And she drew her head back

from the broken pane with dull wo written on her haggard face.

I stared back, and far behind bobbed a black shape like a large dog, running with a limp, but following with great speed.

Over plowed fields he ran, dipping out of sight and reappearing again farther in our wake, still coming on with the speed of the swallow.

And the sun went down.

5. *Surprises*

THE night was creeping in upon us when we left the train, for although I knew that Pierre was truly dead I dreamed that perhaps I might avenge him. How this was to be accomplished I had no idea, but I felt certain that if the Master had gone to such labors to drag me across half a world he would not allow me to slip from him thus easily.

Still less did I know what to guard against, for the cunning of this being was beyond my power to comprehend. So, resolving to be constantly upon the alert, I strolled down the road toward the village, apparently at ease, but instead a quivering bundle of nerves, with every sense exploring the literal and mental blackness before me.

Regina walked at my side, her hand within the crook of my arm. Although she pleaded with me to hurry I knew it was useless. If I was to tilt with the Powers of Evil that night, as well in one place as another, and I fancied myself well armed.

So we slowly neared the village. Suddenly Regina stopped and gripped my arm.

"Listen," she whispered. "Do you hear it? He is coming!"

At first I heard nothing, but soon came a soft pattering of feet on the other side of the hedge that grew at the left of the road.

I could not see clearly in the dim light, but I had the impression that something was eyeing us through the hedge. Watching carefully I saw a dim shape bulk out from the shrubbery, and I knew from the old manuscript what it was.

My reading had given me knowledge to cope with this emergency. I reached down and picked up two sticks, while Regina cowered behind me. Holding them crossed I advanced resolutely upon the thing.

"Oh, vampire! Werewolf!" I cried. "Gaze upon this and fear. Behold this cross and tremble! Here is the Lord our God who died for us upon the tree! I conjure you in the name of the White Christ to vanish and trouble this land no more."

I confess I can not understand what followed. This incantation, so claim the books, was a sure charm, and never failed to work in many cases in which it was used. But in this case it did fail.

The beast launched himself at me, but rebounded from the hedge with a baffled raging cry.

In that moment I knew fear. Still I was thankful for my books, for one truth was holding good. I knew he could not pass the hedge.

But in my long absence what had befallen the hedge? My recollection told me that it extended around the field, almost to the village, but how had he entered? Somewhere there was a gap, but if we could reach the village before he could retrace his steps we were safe for the night, and the next day I would enlist the powers of holy men against this child of hell, and blast him back to whence he came.

I did not doubt that the exorcism was efficient, but perhaps I had made some mistake. Perhaps he was armored against minor spells, and if so I was defenseless. So thinking I hurried on. Life for more than myself was at stake if I failed.

Could I reach safety in time?

As we began to near the village I searched busily through my memory for further exorcisms, and one that the books had claimed to be of great efficacy I determined to try.

Again I paused, faced the hedge, this time tracing the sign of the cross in the air, and repeated in a loud voice:

"I exorcise thee, unclean spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ. Tremble, O Satan, enemy of the faith, thou foe of mankind who has brought death into the world, who has deprived men of life, and has rebelled against justice! Thou seducer of mankind, thou root of evil, thou source of avarice, discord and envy, disappear forever!"

A scream from Regina, and a dark shape plunging at the hedge was the only result of this curse, and with a frightful horror I realized the truth.

The power that fought against me was so anciently evil, so horribly unnatural, that only other magic as ancient as itself could prevail against it. Either that or the God or Gods that rule us are indifferent to human fates.

We hurried on. Along the muddy road we passed, slipping in the muck of a much-traveled country highway. I heard, as an undertone to our noisy splashes, three steps and a gap, a recurrent rhythm that kept pace with us on the other side of the hedge.

A stifled whine of eagerness that held a note of furious thwarted desire now brought the girl near to collapse. She became a dead weight upon me, and I could go no farther.

Vainly I urged the danger of our position. She could not or would not stir. The need for desperate haste was terrible, but she seemed very remote and unconscious of me or her surroundings. Finally I seized her by the shoulders and shook her mightily, crying I know not what, and then she spoke. It was a very wee, very

faint little voice, and although her sad, piteously marred face was only a few inches from mine, I had to bend nearer to hear at all.

She spoke, and the words were worlds away, "Don't—stay! Something—I don't know what, is happening——"

Then as she leaned against me I felt her body stiffen, she leapt away from me, her fingers widely spread as though pushing something from her, and screamed, "No! No! Ah, Master—not that!" And then to me, "Run!" And with the word she began tearing frantically at her clothing.

A glimpse I caught of snow-white shoulders that belied that aged face, and then I turned and ran, fled stumbling through the dark, slipping and falling in the mud, clawing my way through the mire, praying for a light ahead. For in my mind was coursing a wild, maddening sentence of the long-dead Brenryk's story: "When my body changed into a wolf I had all the terror of a wild beast for encumbering clothing!"

Behind me—thank God it was far behind!—there shrilled a long, high keening, a wailing shriek that held within it triumph and—despair!

I had not followed that road for years. I am old, the mud was clinging and heavy, and many times I fell. I heard no sounds across the hedge, but the silence was more menacing than a snarl.

Where was the Master, and upon what business was he absent?

The lights of the village began to gleam through the trees and across the fields, but as I picked myself out of the muck again I knew that I should never reach them, for leaping down the lane came something as large as a collie, running with a rabbitlike lope.

I swung up my gun; it spat dryly once, and was silent. The beast stopped short, then came on more

slowly. I dared not turn my back, so while I menaced with the empty weapon I backed cautiously down the road. It came nearer. I shouted loudly for help, which seemed to frighten it, but only for a moment.

Then I recognized my surroundings. I threw the heavy automatic, heard it thud on flesh, turned and ran for the building at the roadside.

Behind me, racing feet that fell faster than the throbs of my wildly pounding heart. Before me, the closed door of the deserted inn, and as I reached the step a lurching creature charged from the side, and all three of us struck the door together!

It crashed in. I was thrown on the floor, the beasts having struck each other at an angle blocked the doorway, each struggling to be first!

I kicked the swinging door from where I lay. It slammed between me and those slavering jaws. I think that never before in all my life had I heard such a welcome sound as the clicking of that latch.

6. *A Night at an Inn*

SILENCE—inside the inn, silence and a haunting dread. For there were those that prowled without. I held my breath and listened. There was that odd rhythm of the injured creature, three steps grouped close together, a gap, felt rather than heard, and again three.

A rain of light pattering footfalls that passed like a wind about the grounds, and like the wind there were dolorous wailings also.

Interwoven into the fabric of terror these two were weaving came another thread of sound. A heavy pound of unshod feet that were falling dull and lifeless upon the earth.

My breath hissed loudly through my teeth, and I lost the newer sounds, but within me I knew, although I could not say how or why, that the being that tramped leadenly outside was beyond mortal passions,

and the weapons that men use against one another would not prevail against it.

And I suspected, nay, was almost certain that I knew *what* it was that strode automatonlike around the inn, and *who* it once had been!

The two that prowled were now three, and as though this had given them confidence they bunched together and struck the old door, a mass of fury. It creaked, gave, but held! And round again they flew.

Now, curiously enough, my mind perhaps slipping away from this peril (as I have read it is like to do in times of stress, one becoming calm and poised, who before was frantic), of a sudden my thought spanned time and space to old Hadley, far across the seas in Puritan New England.

I remembered how in the early days of that struggling colony, so beset by foes and forces, a little maid in her sleep heard tramping in the snow outside the palisade, and when awake the march did still persist. How the fear flew like pestilence through the fort, till all were awake and heard a steady tramp that passed and repassed around the building, till women sobbed in unison with the steady thud of marching feet. How a certain holy man, the Reverend Abner Kelton, did order lights to be brought, and Hadley became a blazing radiance through every window and loophole. Hymns were sung and prayers were voiced and with the dawn came silence. The people of Hadley saw that about the fort the snow stretched like a frozen sea to the forest, unsullied by print of foot.

Now, I had my own opinions as to the value of prayers against these creatures that besieged me, remembering well the unexpected result of my exorcism. I had never a voice for singing, and the hymn that seemed appropriate to the occasion was *Brighten the Corner Where You*

Are. I had forgotten the words to this, but I lived up to the spirit of the title at least.

There was no such thing in this village as electricity, near though it was to Paris, and Pierre had always depended upon oil lamps and candles. With the light of a match I searched the gutted rooms, from which everything of value had been stolen, and found four stubs of candle, the longest of which was well under two inches, and a small lamp half full of oil. With these I hoped to bridge the night till dawn.

I felt easier at once, such is the effect of light in dispelling the unseen terrors that haunt us all. To you that read this it will seem strange that I thought so belatedly of lights. You may contend that the normal reaction of a man beleaguered in such a manner would be toward unhampered vision. Granted, but I was not normal. I was no longer a reasoning being like yourself, but a quivering bundle of nerves, most horribly atremble at the sound of paws padding about in the night. I could hardly think two consecutive thoughts on the same subject, until welling from the subconscious came the half-forgotten story read so long ago, with its curious analogy to the present.

After the lights were lit I felt more secure, and examined the fastenings of the doors and windows. The glass was gone, but there were heavy wooden shutters barred across the spaces. Two swung open and the floor was covered with dry leaves that had blown in through the openings. These I secured, noticing as I did so that in one pile there was a hollow where something had laired.

The place reeked with a sickening, musky odor, and I felt nauseated. The rear door was rotten, and the lock that held it was rusted.

My situation was desperate, for there were no weapons, nor anything

that could be used as such. The house had been systematically looted, it was plain, and I found myself in much the same plight as had been Brenryk, the Hungarian—defenseless.

But I consoled myself with the thought that I was much better prepared to cope with my enemies than he had been. Was I not armed by the knowledge of the ages? What though my exorcisms had failed in my most desperate need? The older and more potent lore had prevailed, and I knew with certainty that I was safe while the light lasted. It is written in the ancient Persian hymn to Ormuzd (pure spirit of light) that

“Those that follow Ahriman
Shall fear him!
Those who walk with me
Shall by my power conquer him!”

So I waited for the dawn while the candles flickered, though the air was very still.

There were night noises yet, some of evil portent, and others that seemed innocent. The building was full of creaking joints, and small sounds that a too eager ear might translate as creeping things almost ready to pounce resolved themselves into natural noises after all.

Still the pattering persisted, and that dreadful sodden pounding of heavy feet came now from the rear of the inn, and again lumbered by the door. Then came an ominous hush, and I sensed that the storm was about to break.

A light stir overhead brought dust sifting down from the decaying plaster. Simultaneously with the sound of someone walking in the room above there was a mighty ripping crash as the rotten door rent from its hinges and thundered down!

Over it, as it crumbled into punk, limped a slaving beast; and behind it a hulking brute, human in form but expressionless and clumsy, moved woodenly through the doorway.

The dark beast came with a lurch-

ing leap, but when it entered the circle of light, flinched and cried out throatily. Still it pressed forward, but I could see that every movement gave it pain.

While it came, the man behind it moved also, eyes fixed in a kind of dumb adoration upon the Master, but as he gradually slowed and stopped, not daring to enter more fully, the newcomer halted also, and together they retreated into the sheltering night.

I was physically and mentally sick at the sight, for in that bloated evil face, brutalized by the filthiest vices and seared with the seal of corruption, I recognized the dearest friend I had ever known, Pierre Garnier, a living dead man!

I stepped back beside the lights and collided with a soft warm body behind me that moved.

My heart almost stopped. I whirled, ready to fight for my life, and Regina stood there bravely facing me. She was swathed in a heavy portiere from one of the upper rooms, and her pitiful eyes begged dumbly for protection. I took her hand in mine and together we faced the foe.

7. *Shadows All!*

Now the wind through the doorway flickered the candles even more, and Life and Death played a game upon the walls with shadows as their pawns, and the stake two human souls!

It was a scene that pen can do no more than outline. A brush wielded by one who habitually deals with masses of color in his art might have captured that eery moment, but words are too inflexible. Black and White Magic were battling, Light and Shadow were at war, and the prize for which they strove awaited the outcome with no power either to fight or flee!

Shapeless forms crawled upon the

walls, darting at us but retreating to their corners with reluctant squirm. Night was welling in through the open door. Darkness and all the evil that is held within it crouched just inside the threshold.

The Master resumed his human form again, his left arm hanging limply at his side. The shoulder was a mass of blood, stiffening in the cool breeze.

As the candles flickered, horrid phantoms hurtled across the ceiling, and close in pursuit rippling banners rushed. Banners of Light, fiercely intolerant of evil, scattering that tattered host of Night. The little points of yellow waved wildly, but the lamp, protected by a glass chimney, burned steady and true.

As the shadows raced upon the wall those in the dark wavered, now edging toward us under the protection of the sable wings that were spread over them, now wincing back from the demon-frightening light, when the wicks flared up once more.

I watched one candle-stub that was almost gone. "When that dies," I thought, "will they rush us? Will the remaining lights be strong enough to defend?"

It burned lower and more fitfully. There was only a rim of wax like a ring unburned. Then the wick fell into the melted wax, and the flame expired. The shadows surged in, and the watchers took one step nearer, that was all.

They dared not come closer while the light lasted, but it was failing fast, and the writhing coils of night seemed to know, and ravened silently for our lives.

We waited—what else was there to do? We could not flee elsewhere, we could not defend ourselves, there was nowhere to hide that they could not reach us. So while the frisking phantoms danced stealthily about us, and the dreadful prowlers leered, as bravely as might be we waited.

I looked at the girl and she smiled back at me, touching a bruise on her cheek that was beginning to blacken. The realization was forcibly brought home to me that this was the mark where the gun had struck.

I pitied her, but she misunderstood my look.

"Do not fear me," she said. "He can not change me now. I am resisting his power, and he is trying hardest to beat down your guard. Submit and he will call you to him, where he can reach you! Resist, and we may yet escape him!"

I fought back the growing lassitude that was overcoming me. How I longed for rest!

"Sleep!" I was commanded. "Fool, to pit yourself against me! Rest and forget the world! Come to me and I will give you rest," the wheedling voice insisted.

Leadily I stepped forward. Another candle died, and my enemy came to meet me.

Then it seemed that invisible hands raised a barrier between us. Although I pressed forward, and the third flame went out, I was firmly urged back against the wall and held there.

Nothing could be seen, but the air seemed palpitant with life. Life that exulted joyously in the pleasure of existing, life that pulsed with a definite purpose that would not be denied. Regina felt it, and her old-young face looked piteously into mine, and with a motion of protection I placed my arm about her shoulders and drew her close to me. Side by side we faced the end.

The thing that had been Pierre ran its red tongue over pointed teeth and watched us. Seemingly he did not fear. His brutish face held no gleam of intelligence. Only unspeakable vice and ravenous desire were written there. And this was the friend I had loved!

But he that had brought death and destruction to so many, that dread

personification of loathsome evil, at last realized what fear meant.

The oppressive feeling lessened; I felt free to move again, and once more I thought coherently. A deadening weight had been lifted from my brain.

Corpuscles of lambent cool flame began to gather. Thickly clustering in the room, they slipped through the shutters that barred the broken windows, and through the doorway. One passed through the Master's body. He cringed, and it lingered as though inspecting him carefully before entering farther. Even through the walls they came, and watching them we marveled at their numbers.

"What can they be?" I whispered to the girl.

"Wait," she said. "I think I know."

Now about each nucleus of light a mist formed like fog around a street lamp. It thickened, coalesced, and bodies began to appear. Their garments represented all periods and countries.

Side by side, near an imperious cavalier of Spain stood a gipsy wanderer gay in spotted neckerchief, polished leather, and gold coin buttons. Farther away, I recognized a Roman gladiator with his hand on the shoulder of a Persian spearman, whose harness was that of Alexandrian conquests. An ugly crone with hooked nose and protruding teeth tottered, and was supported by a Chinese bonze. Near them I saw the brown of Eastern faces and the green robes held as a holy color by the Moslems. And in the breast of each glowed dimly the central fires.

"It is the rising of the slaves," said Regina. "Here are those that have suffered from the Master's rule. The spirits of the dead have come to save us. Oh God, I thank Thee! Pray, sire, and give thanks, for we are saved!"

"Perhaps," I replied. "Look! The last candle fails."

The shadows rushed in again, but the Master and the Undead beside him did not advance. They were held in their tracks, and though they longed to flee they stood glaring at the accusing crowd, Pierre stupidly shaking his head at us.

One of this whispering company was more opaque than the others. In the throes of some gigantic struggle, he sobbed and panted, his nebulous light growing dim as he became more visible. As his shape became more pronounced the myriad radiant corpuscles waned in brilliance as though he was draining them of force.

The red of a British soldier's uniform faded to pink, the knight's armor, translucent at best, became gauzy, then transparent and disappeared before my eyes. Together the green robes of the Arabs and the yellow of the Chinese bonze vanished, and in their place was empty air.

One by one the strange throng became invisible, but I knew that each was still present, giving his all to his comrade, who was becoming more tangible every second.

Now more than half had gone.

The Master stood in the doorway still, but there was a difference. The hunter had become the hunted! As he had frozen others in their tracks while he worked his will upon them, so he was held in a grip from which there was no escaping.

But he was not submitting weakly to his former victims. He was fighting valiantly for his life. Great beads of moisture burst out upon his forehead as he hurled his mighty will at the shape that grew still more plainly human. His tremendous mental powers struggling against the combined strength of the now wholly invisible throng, buffeted the half-man hither and thither about the room.

Caught first in one eddy of force and then another he hurtled like a wind-blown leaf, and when he struck walls or floor there was no sound. He was not yet solid.

It was a mighty scene, one whose like has never been seen before. The unbelievable and impossible was occurring before our eyes. It was no less than revolution! Evil that had triumphed since unknown times was being overthrown, and by agencies that once were human.

I felt proud that I was man, one of the dominant race, and in a surge of power I gave my feeble mite to the struggle. Since obviously it was the Master's desire that the stranger should not become strong, I willed with all my force that he should. I like to feel that it was the added energy I gave that tipped the scales so evenly balanced, and I hope that it was.

Suddenly, without warning, a man as humanly solid as you or I stood in the center of the room. Dressed he was in harsh blue cloth, about his throat was fur, and upon his head a high hat of the same material.

With the transformation came vibrant joy that pulsed and throbbed through the room, and I knew that the invisible ones were rejoicing.

Visibly the Master aged. His power was ebbing from him, and the strength that had held back Time down through the ages was passing. The years were rushing in upon him.

Now the silence was broken for the first time since the door had been broken in. During the period of waiting, and through the battle of wills, nothing but the hoarse breathing of the living corpse was to be heard, but now the room echoed to long wild peals of eery laughter.

The stranger was giving vent to merriment, and at the sound we shivered. There were revenge, and joy, and death in the cry!

Then he spoke, and one of the strangest happenings of that remarkable night occurred. Although he spoke in unfamiliar language his meaning was clear to me.

"I have returned," he said in a slow, icy voice. "Do you know me?"

The Master did not answer, but I could see that he was shaken. His body visibly shrank, his hair grew white, and a tottering senile old man stood in the doorway, beside the dull uncomprehending monster that he had made of Pierre.

"Before I died I prayed that I might be given you for mine. I have waited for many years. I bided my time where I was sent to expiate my sins. Others I met, more sinned against than sinning. Together we have come. Are we known to you?"

A croak replied, "Vermin of the earth! Yes!"

"Then," cried the stranger, "prepare, for now you die!"

The Master stood more erect, with something of his old pride and might, and waited.

8. *Vengeance at Last!*

THEN the old formula of transmutation was gone through again. The actions that I was so familiar with from the old manuscript were repeated, and I saw for the first time a werewolf at the moment of change.

He tore off his suit of blue, and stood a very giant before us. Then he fell upon all fours, his limbs withered and became long, lean shanks. His hands grew claws and became pads. Hair sprang out upon his body. His head narrowed, mouth widening and ears becoming pointed. His eyes were bloodshot with fury, as he howled in a long dismal tone.

He was now a beast, and as I formed the words in my mind, I recognized my savior.

"Wladislaw Brenryk!" I gasped,

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The Return of the Master

(Continued from page 20)

while he slunk toward the door. "Revenge!" I cried, and the Hellhound sprang.

Straight for the Master's throat he leapt, but seized instead the arm that was flung across it. I heard a dull crack, and I knew the bone was broken. He staggered with the blow, groaned, and sank to his knees.

The beast shifted his hold and grappled for the throat again. This time he succeeded, but I could see that the fangs did not penetrate the skin. He toyed with the Vampire as a cat with a mouse. With one great paw on the Master's chest he held him flat, and snarled in his face.

Tasting to the full a revenge that had burned hot for many years, he delayed the death-stroke too long. A new factor was introduced into the struggle.

Pierre, the hulking mass of brainless muscle, lunged forward, clutching the beast by the loins, although the creature snapped fiercely at his arms. With blood pouring down his sides from his wounds he began to raise the Hungarian above his head, slowly as moves a ponderous machine.

Under the will of the Master the corpse was energized with movement, and was operating as directed by the Vampire.

Into my brain poured commands, and I knew they issued from the invisible company. Many voices, but all urged, "Hurl the lamp! They can not pass the flame!"

"But Brenryk?" I thought.

"He will not be harmed," they answered. "He lives in this shape only by our wish."

"And Pierre?" I queried silently.

"He is dead," was the reply,

“dead, but bound to earth while the Master lives. If you fail we can never strike again, and you will be one of us. Do you fear for yourself? Fire is a clean death. Strike!”

The Undead prepared to throw the writhing monster. The Master began to rise.

“Now!” they shrieked, and I threw the lamp.

Partly filled with oil and warm gas it exploded when it struck the floor. Flaming liquid spurted over the three and across the door. Escape was blocked.

The fire spread in the dry leaves. Staggering away from the wavering flames they were penned in a corner, and the fiery tongues licked in.

I broke out the remains of a window, and supporting the girl we escaped.

My last sight of the three was through a sheet of flame. Pierre stood dumbly stolid, watching the light. The Master lay on the floor manifestly dying, not struggling against the wolf that lay across him.

While I watched, a pale glow began to show within the beast's body. He became hazy and disappeared, his

mission finished. His last look was one of gratitude to me.

Then the walls began to crumble. Pierre went down, struck by a falling beam, and the scene was blotted out in a whirling veil of sparks.

As I dragged myself and Regina to safety I saw that it was gray dawn, and people were running from the village to stare open-mouthed at the sudden flames. And I knew no more.

I SIT in my chair and read the words I have just written. It seems a dream that I shudder out of, but all is well now.

We explained to the people that, passing by the haunted inn, I saw the girl in the grasp of a tramp, that I fought to rescue her, and in the scuffle upset a lamp. Some, I think, believed the story, but I saw others furtively cross themselves, and all were glad to see us go.

Part of the story I revealed to the village priest, under pledge of secrecy. He pronounced anathema upon the ruins, but I doubt that it was of much value. I place more faith in the whining wind that rose and scattered those ashes far and wide. It will be a powerful magic that brings together that dread world-wanderer again.

Regina I brought with me to America. From this time my life is hers, as my wealth shall be when I am gone.

Here I shall dwell in this pleasant New England town, and I rove no more.

Happier times are in prospect for the unhappy girl. Even on board ship I noticed that the haggard face was losing its wrinkles and careworn look. Good food and rest are bringing back the roses to her cheeks. She is young and youth is elastic.

The future? Who can tell? But there is a lad across the way, with a most engaging smile!