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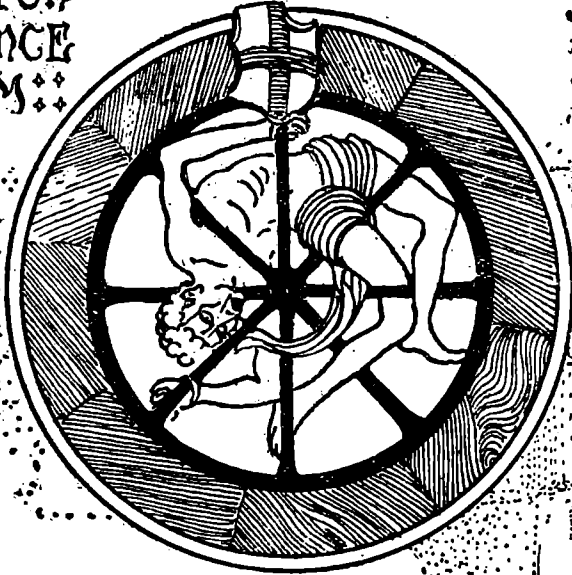
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THE ROBE-WIDOW

by CHARLTON
LAWRENCE
EDHOLM



"The round window depicted the symbol of their shame."

FOREWORD

THE tottering old man with long white hair and red-rimmed eyes, who but a few years ago was a familiar figure in the streets of the South Side, the German quarter of St. Louis, bequeathed me the following history as he lay sick with a fever. He insisted that it was his death-bed confession and it turned out that he was right, for the disease took an unexpected turn for the worse and finished him. He told me what he had never confided to anyone else, that he had fled from Stuttgart where he had a shop of his own (he was a wood-carver, did altars and things for churches), left his business and a girl whom he cared for, because he

was in terror of arrest and decapitation on account of the murder. Doubtless the truth of it is that his head had been turned by too much brooding over some philosophy of reincarnation, and I dare say the gargoyles and other medieval grotesques of which he was such an eager student and copyist added their share to his weird imaginings.

In going over the manuscript, I have retained the rather formal diction which marks its German authorship, rather than risk losing the atmosphere of the narrative by recasting it:

IN THE little city of Tuebingen, renowned for its university, stands the old church of St. George, which

is less interesting for any purely architectural beauties, though it is no mean example of the Gothic style, than for its many curious and bizarre stone carvings, among them the splendid monuments of the early rulers of Wuerttemberg, Duke Ulrich, Eberhard the Bearded and other mighty wielders of the two-handed sword, who lie in the choir, full-armed, stark and rigid with watchful, wide-open eyes.

It was late in the afternoon when I entered the church, dusty and warm as I was from the parched highway, for, knapsack a-shoulder, I had walked from Stuttgart that day;—yes, I could foot it with the best in my wander years and still be fresh for sightseeing at the journey's end.

Strangely enough for a Protestant church, it was not close-locked, and a small door admitted me into the dusky choir. An old woman with a dust-brush was shuffling among the pews in an obscure corner, but I was in no mood to be led from one sight to another by a garrulous guide eager for a fee, so I moved noiselessly among the tombstones and memorial tablets, admiring those quaint art works of a more simple, more pious and far more artistic age.

The high windows on the north side interested me particularly because of an idea in ornament that I had not seen elsewhere. In their pointed arches was Gothic carving, of course, but it was not the variation of the trefoil and quatrefoil such as the medieval sculptors delighted to elaborate, but figures of saints skilfully graven with decorative effect so that they filled with credit the place of more conventional designs. The stained glass was fitted around their contours so that they stood silhouetted in a many-colored halo.

The figures, as I remember them, represented the Blessed Virgin, Saint Martin dividing his cloak with

the beggar, and Saint George slaying the dragon. I had been told of another, a rose window, said to represent the martyrdom of the knightly George, but I did not find it at once for there was much else to attract the eye of a journeyman wood-carver; for instance the grim aspect of those old bishops sculptured on the choir benches, who scowled defiance at their arch-enemy, Dr. Luther, a jovial, smiling face carved on the organ loft. I remember also a sinister device on one of the many tombstones against the wall. In the dim light this appeared at first to be the common design of a helmet surmounting a blazoned shield and bearing a winged crest, but looking closer I saw that the helmet was a polished skull through whose eye-sockets a serpent writhed, the crest a flying hour-glass, and the coat of arms that of the most unchivalrous, relentless and invincible of warriors, Time.

I know not how many hours had elapsed in studying and sketching such details when the heat and quiet rendered me drowsy and I stretched out at length in a pew of the northern aisle. The hum from the marketplace without, like the droning of flies on the pane, lulled me to sleep.

It was an eldritch dream, a confusion of menacing sounds of darkness and of blood. I have a recollection, too, of seeing the church, but it was as a building uncompleted; on its eastern front yawned a great black hole where a round window was to be built in the wall. Strangest of all was that, while everything was changed, it should be so familiar.

Many instances I can not remember connectedly, but there remains a vivid impression of some enemy who had from the beginning of things haunted me, as dream enemies do, and blighted my every hope; the fortune I was to inherit he had a later but a better claim to, for I was

merely the foster-child after he, the true son, was born; the maiden I desired, loved him because he was a goodly youth and fairer to look upon than I.

To learn the goldsmith's trade he went away, far away, and when years had passed without tidings, I believed him lost or, better still, dead, and I dared to hope that the yellow gold and the other priceless treasure which would have gone to him might yet be mine.

I was walking in the fields not far from the city (so my dream continued). It was evening; in the tavern garden near the crossroads sat two young men, drinking. I had been indulging my vain hopes when I saw the pair. "My God! he has returned!" I exclaimed, and I swiftly resolved: "He must not reach home!"

I found a secret place to hide among the bushes where the roads parted, one to Tuebingen, one to my native city, Reutlingen.

IT WAS late twilight when he passed like a shadow in the gloom, but light enough for me to drive the knife deep into his back, light enough for me to drag him under the trees with averted face, and then, ah, far too still and far too dark for me to stay and bury the dead alone in those somber aisles.

Fearful and exultant I fled homeward, but by a circuitous route, sought my foster-father's fireside—and found there the man I had tried to murder! Yes, there he sat, rosy with the wine he was drinking, a table spread with delicacies before him.

My brain was benumbed by this unaccountable horror. Had I lost my reason? Was the whole ghastly affair in the woods—the treacherous blow, the blood on my hands—all the work of witchcraft? I shuddered. Then, like a serpent, the cold, slimy

suspicion crept into my mind that I had struck down a stranger in the dark woods. I had dealt a death blow, foul and profitless, to an unoffending man. God knew who he might be.

Certain it was that my foster-brother, whom I hated and had sought to destroy, was there before my eyes, boasting and laughing about his travel adventures, flushed with meat and drink. His parents, overjoyed at his return, were filling his cup and plate afresh, meanwhile plying him with questions till he could scarcely find time to eat. And the girl whom I loved sat close beside him caressing his hand, her eyes full of adoration.

I must have swooned at the sight (if one can swoon in a dream), for it seemed days before his happy parents told me of how he had returned, and how they had almost fainted with joy at the sight of their son. But their joy was presently turned to apprehension, for a charge of murder was laid against him.

Things moved swiftly to a tragic climax. The city of Tuebingen sent an armed deputation to seize his person and hold him for trial. One of their citizens, a young man returning from his travels in Italy, had been found at the cross-roads slain with a stab in the back. My foster-brother was accused by the landlord of the near-by tavern. "They had been traveling together," said he, "for they drank brotherhood and farewell after the manner of young journeymen until long after sunset; then the victim went his way; after an interval the murderer followed, and the rest had no witness but the eye of God."

When I heard that, I *knew* that I had done murder in vain.

Horrible it was, that dream of my treachery, of how when the city of Reutlingen refused to deliver up her son, it was I who plotted and

planned with the spies of Tuebingen. Enough, it was my hand that unbolted my foster-father's door at midnight; it was I who led the stealthily treading soldiers to his bed-chamber; it was I who helped bind and gag him, all in the interest of justice, so I explained to the men of Tuebingen. A wagon loaded with hay stood in our street not too far from the door. In that we concealed him.

In the morning he had disappeared, no one in the city knew whither. The wagon loaded with hay had also gone from our street.

We could only guess at the mystery of his fate. None knew it, until the day when it was made a public spectacle. On that day I stood among the crowd in the marketplace of Tuebingen; above our heads loomed a black structure of beams and planks; the "poor sinner's bell" wailed incessantly in my ears and I saw—from the horror of that sight I started, awoke from the dream in which I had dreamed this ghastly crime and found myself lying cramped and chilled in the church of Tuebingen where I had fallen asleep. But as my eyes opened they fell upon the uncanny Thing of which I had dreamed.

It hung, black in a circle of pallid light, high on the stone church wall. How can I describe it? Its outline was somewhat like that of an enormous spider, from whose shapeless body as a center reached eight horrible radii to the circumference. It was, I could discern, the semblance of a human form, broken and tangled in the spokes of a huge wheel of torture.

Like a row of tall specters in the darkness of the church loomed the pale Gothic windows of the choir, but through the rose window poured baleful light as from a waning moon and cast upon my face the mottled shadow of the Thing. In bewildered

and terror, I struggled to rise, but my body lay quite rigid, nor could I so much as turn my head, try though I would. I felt as if I were drowning in a black and silent sea.

The straining and creaking of ropes over the wheels in the tower told me that the bell was about to strike. Thank God, I could be assured of one tangible fact! To know the hour were a plank on this vague sea of darkness and uncertainty. The first quarter chimed; how it dragged! Deliberately the second blow fell; would it never be done? The third stroke echoed sullenly through the vault; its vibrations rang on and on into infinity. What hour of the night it was, now three-fourths spent, I knew not.

I waited for the echoes to cease, but my ears were sharpened to every gradation of silence, as my eyes were sensitive to the shades of black about me, and I listened, as it seemed, for hours, to the quivering of the bell like deep and distant music of a great organ, as it became fainter and more intangible until at last I perceived it only with some latent sense.

To have broken this tremulous silence with a cry for help would have tortured my spanned nerves. I shuddered at the mere thought of it. With my gaze fixed upon the luminous orb that glared into the void like an evil eye, silent I lay for what seemed years and years of agonizing suspense, and listened.

I listened, and out of the unquiet stillness grew a rustling like that of leaves withered on the branch, as they complain in the wintry gusts; and out of the rustling grew a whispering as from a thousand parched throats, inarticulate, intermittent, now hoarse, now shrill, like the voices of conscience or of memory, attuned only to my ear that strained at first to hear, then heard but too well and too soon understood.

But why should this voice sound like one I had known for a lifetime? Why, though it was as familiar as my own utterance, did I strive in vain to associate it with some person, time or place?

It was from this voice that I heard the ending of the story in my dream.

* * * * *

THE body, broken on the wheel, hung in the marketplace until the sun had shriveled it to a mummy. The men of Reutlingen soon heard of this outrage of secret trial and judgment, and I was one of the armed band which sallied forth and, although beaten back from the walls of Tuebingen, left a breach in the fortifications that we took care should not be mended.

Then upon a cloud-laden night (and I remember now that it was a year from the night when I had lain in wait at the cross-roads), seven sons of Reutlingen stole through that ill-guarded opening and cautiously passed through dark alleys to the marketplace and there, while four of us kept watch, the other three disentangled the dried and broken limbs from the spokes and huddled them into a sack, and together we fled through the unlighted streets, through the broken wall, through the dark woods, like a flock of frightened shadows.

It was the fool's cunning of fear that had made me join them. Who would have suspected me of delivering my foster-brother over to his enemies even had I *not* been the most clamorous to recover his body and one of the first to volunteer in the mad expedition? With beating heart, I cursed the timidity that had made me reckless beyond my power of endurance. Why had I not stayed snug at home, clasped in the arms of my bride for whose possession I had done the black deed?

As we fled, one after another shifted the burden to his shoulders; five times had the sack been taken up and each time I had trembled lest I should be called upon next. But what folly to shudder at touching the enemy whom I had rendered harmless! That a corpse will bleed when its murderer lays even a finger upon it, I knew to be true enough, for I had seen it tested in the open court of justice, but a mummy with every drop of its blood burned out by the sun, *that* could never accuse me! I laughed aloud, made foolish speeches and whistled many a tavern catch to drive away the thought.

Lightning flashed in the west and threw its white glare upon us from time to time, and once, far in the depths of the wind-stirred forest, I saw and heard things too fearful for human minds to bear: souls of murdered men, unshriven, who yelled amid their torments for vengeance; souls of murderers dying impenitent, bearing ever upon them a grievous burden of sin, in all eternity never to be shaken off.

My companions, I could see, pretended to have heard nothing of this, but they drew aside from me when I sang shrilly and brandished my dagger, gathering silently about him who bore the load.

Why did they cluster so about that accursed burden? What did they see, what did they hear that was not meant for me? Had the malignant victim opened his withered jaws? Was he moving those grinning lips? Was he whispering with scorched and blackened tongue that it was I, I who had murdered his friend, here on this selfsame spot at the cross-roads; that it was I who had given him up to be tortured and slain for my crime; that it was I, wretched creature, who had stolen his life, his heritage and his bride, all unpunished?

"He shall not whisper so! They are lies, all lies! I will stop his mouth with dirt!" I screamed. "Give me the sack!"

As I took it upon my back, the heavens opened; they were full of fire, and I stood revealed in such light as flashes before the judgment throne, dabbled with innocent blood.

With a mighty roar demons bore me to the earth and plucked out my soul. From hand to hand, from star to star they tossed it whirling through space.

Presently they forced me to look down and I saw my unconscious body lying in the forest; I saw the sack bursted by a thunderbolt and the shriveled limbs of the dead embracing mine. My companions had fled; I realized that the Hand which had felled me had written out my guilt plainly for all men to read.

In obedience to the judgment of God, my lifeless body was bound to the wheel on the marketplace of Reutlingen and left to burn in the sun, and when all was known to the citizens of Tuebingen and they realized that they had dealt death unjustly the city fathers and the good Duke Eberhard resolved that the town should do penance for all

time. In the unfinished church they built a round window depicting as a symbol of their shame the figure of a man perishing on the wheel.

The sculptor was sent to Reutlingen and it was from my body, exposed on the marketplace, that he modeled the memorial of my victim.

THE morning-gray that precedes the dawn glazed and chilled the awful eye from which perforce I had not removed my own.

While the voice had spoken I constantly questioned: When had I heard that intonation? Was it years ago? It seemed hundreds of years ago. Was it in my earliest childhood? Was it in this life or in another existence until now forgotten? Was it the voice of one living or of one who was dead? Or of the dead returned to life?

As the light waxed I scanned anxiously the form suspended in endless torture, for a horrible suspicion grew as I watched, but not until the dawn tinged the face of suffering and I saw it as one sees his face in a mirror did I know with certitude that memory, asleep for centuries, had awakened: *The voice was my own.*

