

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1950

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

".... warning, warning, warning," came the ghostly echo.

The Round Tower

BY
STANTON A. COBLENTZ

I

OF ALL the shocking and macabre experiences of my life, the one that I shall longest remember occurred a few years ago in Paris.

Like hundreds of other young Americans, I was then an art student in the French metropolis. Having been there several years, I had acquired a fair speaking knowledge of the language, as well as an acquaintance with many odd nooks and corners of the city, which I used to visit for my own amusement. I did not foresee that one of my strolls of discovery through the winding ancient streets was to involve me in a dread adventure.

One rather hot and sultry August evening, just as twilight was softening the hard stone outlines of the buildings, I was making a random pilgrimage through an old part of the city. I did not know just where I was; but suddenly I found myself in a district I did not remember ever having seen before. Emerging from the defile of a crazy twisted alley, I found myself in a large stone court opposite a grim but imposing edifice.

Four or five stories high, it looked like the typical medieval fortress. Each of its



Heading by Vincent Napoli

four corners was featured by a round tower which, with its mere slits of windows and its pointed spear-sharp peak, might have come straight from the Middle Ages. The central structure also rose to a sharp spire, surmounting all the others; its meagre windows, not quite so narrow as those of the towers, were crossed by iron bars on the two lower floors. But what most surprised me were the three successive rows of stone ramparts, each higher than the one before it, which separated me from the castle; and the musket-bearing sentries that stood in front.

"Strange," I thought, "I've never run across this place before, nor even heard it mentioned."

But curiosity is one of my dominant traits; I wouldn't have been true to my own nature if I had not started toward the castle. I will admit that I did have a creepy sensation as I approached; something within me seemed to pull me back, as if a voice were crying, "Keep away! Keep away!" But a counter-voice—probably some devil inside me—was urging me forward.

I fully expected to be stopped by the guards; but they stood sleepily at their posts, and appeared not even to notice me. So stiff and motionless they seemed that a fleeting doubt came over me as to whether they were live men or dummies. Besides, there was something peculiar about their uniforms; in the gathering twilight, it was hard to observe details, but their clothes seemed rather like museum pieces—almost what you would have expected of guards a hundred years ago.

Not being challenged, I kept on. I knew that it was reckless of me; but I passed through a first gate, a second, and a third, and not a hand or a voice was lifted to stop me. By the time I was in the castle itself, and saw its gray stone walls enclosing me in a sort of heavy dusk, a chill was stealing along my spine despite the heat. A musty smell, as if from bygone centuries, was in my nostrils; and a cold sweat burst out on my brows and the palms of my hands as I turned to leave.

It was then that I first heard the voice from above. It was a plaintive voice, in a

woman's melodious tones. "*Monsieur! Monsieur!*"

"*Qu'est que c'est que ça? Qu'est que c'est que ça?*" I called back, almost automatically ("What is it? What is it?").

But the chill along my spine deepened. More of that clammy sweat came out on my brow. I am sorry to own it, but I had no wish except to dash out through the three gates, past the stone ramparts, and on to the known, safe streets.

Yet within me some resisting voice cried out, "Jim, you crazy fool! What are you scared of?" And so, though shuddering, I held my ground.

"Will you come up, *monsieur?*" the voice invited, in the same soft feminine tones, which yet had an urgency that I could not miss. Frankness compels me to admit that there was nothing I desired less than to ascend those winding old stone stairs in the semi-darkness. But here was a challenge to my manliness. If I dashed away like a trembling rabbit, I'd never again be able to look myself in the face. Besides, mightn't someone really be needing my help?

WHILE my mind traveled romantically between hopes of rescuing maiden innocence and fears of being trapped into some monstrous den, I took my way slowly up the spiral stairs. Through foot-deep slits in the rock-walls, barely enough light was admitted to enable me to stumble up in a shadowy sort of way. Nevertheless, something within me still seemed to be pressing my reluctant feet forward, at the same time as a counter-force screamed that I was the world's prize fool, and would race away if I valued my skin.

That climb up the old stairway seemed never-ending, although actually I could not have mounted more than two or three flights. Once or twice, owing to some irregularity in the stone, I stumbled and almost fell. "Here, Mister, here!" the woman's voice kept encouraging. And if it hadn't been for that repeated summons, surely my courage would have given out. Even so, I noted something a little strange about the voice, the tones not quite those of the Parisian French I had learned to speak; the

speaker apparently had a slight foreign accent.

At last, puffing a little, I found myself in a tower room—a small chamber whose round stone walls were slitted with just windows enough to make the outlines of objects mistily visible. The place was without furniture, except for a bare table and several chairs near the further wall; but what drew my attention, what held me galvanized, were the human occupants.

So as to see them more clearly, I flashed on my cigarette lighter—at which they drew back in a wide-mouthed startled sort of way, as if they had never seen such a device before. But in that glimpse of a few seconds, before I let the flame die out, I clearly saw the faces; the fat, stolid-looking man, with double chins and a beefy complexion; the alert, bright-eyed boy of seven or eight, and a girl of fourteen or fifteen; and the two women, the younger of a rather commonplace appearance, but the elder of a striking aspect, almost regal in the proud tilt of the shapely head, the lovely contours of the cheeks and lips, and the imperious flash of eyes that seemed made to command.

"Oh, *monsieur*," she exclaimed. "Thank you, sir, thank you very much."

All at once it struck me that there was something unutterably sad about the tones; something unspeakably sad, too, in the looks of the two women and the man, something bleak that seemed to pervade the atmosphere like a dissolved essence, until I caught its contagion and felt as if a whole world's sorrow were pressing down upon my head.

Now, as never before, I wanted to flee. But something held me rooted to the spot. I was like a man in a dread dream, who knows he is dreaming and yet cannot awaken; repelled and at the same time fascinated, I watched the elder woman approach with outflung arms.

II

THERE was, let me not deny it, a seductive charm about her glowing femininity. Although she was no longer young—I took her to be somewhere in the nether

years just beyond thirty-five—there was something extraordinarily appealing and sweet in the smile which she flashed upon me, a plaintive smile as of one who looks at you from depths of unbearable suffering. At the same time, there was something that drew me to her; held me spellbound with a magnetic compulsion. I could have imagined men easily and willingly enslaved to that woman.

"*Monsieur*," she pleaded—and for the sake of convenience I give the English equivalent of her words—"monsieur, they have ringed us around. What are we to do? In the name of the good Lord, what are we to do?"

"They permit us not even a newspaper, *monsieur*," rumbled the heavy voice of the man, as his portly form slouched forward.

"They stand over us all the time. We have no privacy except in our beds," put in the younger woman, with a despairing gesture of one bony hand.

"They inspect all our food—every bit of bread and meat, suspecting it may contain secret papers," the elder woman lamented. "Worse still—our doors are all locked from outside. We can hardly move a step without being trailed by a guard. We cannot read, we can hardly think without being inspected. Oh, was ever any one tormented with such vile persecution?"

"Was anyone ever tormented with such vile persecution?" the second lady took up the cry, in a thin wailing voice that sent the shudders again coursing down my spine.

As if by instinct, I was backing toward the door. I wondered if I were not the victim of some frightful hallucination.

"But what do you want me to do?" I blurted out, as with one hand I groped behind me for the doorknob.

"Do? What do we want you to do, *monsieur*?" groaned the elder woman. "Speak with *them*! Plead with *them*! Beg them to treat us like human beings—not like beasts in cages!"

"But *who* am I to speak to? Who are they? What do you mean, *Madam*?"

"Who but our persecutors—our oppressors?"

"Who but our persecutors—our oppres-

sors?" echoed the other woman, with a ghostly repetition of the words.

By this time it was so dark that the five persons made but shadows indistinctly seen against the dungeon-like gloom. There was no arguing now with my fear; it was taking command of me; the next instant, had the man not surmised my thoughts by some clairvoyant perception, I would have left the dolorous strangers to their fate and dashed pellmell down the tower stairs.

"Hold, *monsieur*," his voice detained me. "It is growing late—we need a light."

And then, with startled eyes, I witnessed one of the eeriest, one of the most inexplicable incidents of all. Suddenly, though I had seen no lantern, there was a light in the room! It was a sort of gray-white phosphorescence, midway between the hue of a light fog and that of pewter; and it seemed to come from nowhere in particular, but filled the room with a fluctuating radiance, at times bright enough to reveal every object, at times permitting everything to sink back almost into invisibility. By this illumination all things—even the man's beefy face—took on a ghastly pallor; my own hand, outstretched in a gesture of spontaneous horror, startled me with its pale, spectral quality.

"Do not be afraid, *monsieur*," one of the women spoke reassuringly. "They will not find you. The guards were sleeping; else you could not have come up. You were heaven-sent to help us in our need."

My knees quivering beneath me, I did not feel heaven-sent to help anyone. In that uncanny wavering light, which struck my disordered imagination as almost sepulchral, I was more frightened than in the darkness. I was just a little relieved, however, to see how the small boy, curled up near the wall with some straw for a pillow, was sleeping an apparently normal childhood sleep.

Nevertheless, I had found the doorknob, and was drawing it toward me. A blast of chilly air, contrasting weirdly with the heat of the summer evening, swept up the tower stairs.

A second more, and I would have been gone. But the elder woman, crossing the room like a flash of light, had placed her-

self next to me; between me and the door. I could see her big sad eyes, not a foot from mine, glowing as if from immense hollow depths; I could see her long, pale proud face alternately brightening and darkening by the flickers of the changeable unearthly light. And once more she exercised that strange, that magical compulsion upon me. My limbs were frozen. I could merely stare—and wonder.

"It is not for our own sakes, *monsieur*," she resumed, in a voice that shook and wavered even more than did the light. "It is not for our own sakes that I beg your aid, but for our poor, innocent children. For their sakes, in the name of heaven's mercy, go out and plead with our oppressors, *monsieur*. Rush forth—rush forth and summon help, before it is too late!"

"Before it is too late!" came a low sobbing echo.

"But you—who are you?" I demanded, growing more mystified from minute to minute.

"We? Who are we? Is there anyone in all Paris that does not know?"

"Is there anyone in all Paris that does not know?" there sounded a sobbing refrain.

But they seemed not to hear, or at least not to believe my denials.

"Look at me! Do you not recognize me?" the man demanded, thrusting his face within inches of mine. "Who in all the land could help recognizing me?"

Observing the round, commonplace features, the paunchy cheeks, the sensual lips and dull eyes, I failed to recognize anyone I had ever known.

"Ah, *monsieur*, you must be a stranger in the land."

"I—I—yes, I am a stranger—from California," I managed to grasp at a straw.

"From where do you say, *monsieur*?" he asked, as if he had never heard of my native state. And then dismally he went on, half to himself, "Am I then so changed by my hardships that I cannot be recognized? Ah, no doubt I had a different look in the old times, when I went forth daily in the hunt. Yes, that was a sport worthy of a king—chasing the antlered stag. A sport worthy of a king!"

"And I," bewailed the elder woman, her eyes downcast, her whole form seeming indistinctly to sag, "perhaps I also am changed—oh, how changed from the days when I led in gay revels and frolics, and banquets and masked balls, and was merry the whole day long—and the whole night long, too! Little did I suspect, in those old happy times, what a bitter blow was in store for me!"

"Little did I suspect," moaned the second woman. "Little did we all suspect!"

Had I chanced upon a band of lunatics? Was this old tower the hospital where these poor deranged wretches were kept? This seemed to me, all in all, the most plausible solution. Nevertheless, it did not explain the weird light, which still pervaded the grim round tower room from some unseen source. Nor did it account for various other incidents, which I report even now with a tingling sensation along the spine and a numbing clutch at the heart.

III

IT MAY have been only the wind; but the door, which I had opened slightly, suddenly closed with a dull thudding jar. Yet how could it have been the wind, since the door opened inward, and hence a breeze from below would have pushed the door wider open? And from inside the closed room, how could an air current originate? But I was sure that no hand, and least of all mine, had touched the door.

Even as I struggled to regain my composure, I reached again for the door handle, more determined than ever to leave. But, as I did so, my shaken nerves were shattered by another shock. With a series of high-pitched yipping barks, a small creature ran out as if from nowhere and began cavorting about my knees. Where had the little dog come from? I was certain it had not been in the room before. I was equally convinced that there was no way for it to enter.

By the flickering grayish-white light, it had a sort of half-solid appearance as I reached down to pet it; and somehow I was not quite able to place a hand upon it. Eluding my touch, it ran over to the elder woman, who bent down and caressed it. And then, as suddenly as it had come, it was gone. But from someone's throat—the adolescent girl's, I believe—there burst a spasm of uncanny hollow laughter.

Then, as I pulled at the doorknob, the elder woman was again at my side, her lovely sad eyes fixing me with a stare of such terrible intensity that I was gripped powerless in my place. My hand dropped from the doorknob; for the first time, I knew myself to be a prisoner.

"What is to happen to us, *monsieur*?" she lamented, not hysterically, but with an air of dignified restraint beneath which I could feel the hot passion smoldering. "What is to happen to us all? Time after time we hear the tocsin sounding below us on the streets. We hear the crowds shouting. But we can only guess what it all means. Can you not tell us, *monsieur*, what it means?"

"Can you not tell us, *monsieur*?" echoed the younger woman.

I shook my head, helplessly.

"Ah, *monsieur*, you are like them all," the first speaker sighed. "Like the guards—like that monster who has charge of us. You know, yet you will tell us nothing."

"You know, yet you will tell us nothing," came the unflinching repetition.

"I feel it in my bones, a worse fate is in store for us," the woman moaned, while one pale hand moved significantly across her neck. "My sainted mother, who was far wiser than I, foresaw it all long ago; but then I was too young and giddy to listen. Now that she is in her grave—*monsieur*, sometimes at night I can see her before me, warning, warning, warning——"

"Warning, warning, warning——" took up the other woman.

"Come, come now. Things are not always so bad, are they?" the rumbling voice of the man broke out in incongruous, soothing contrast. "We have no complaints about many things—least of all, about the food,

now have we? At noon we have three soups, two entrees, two roasts, fruit, cheese, claret, and champagne—it is not all we have known in our better days, *monsieur*, but it is not bad. It is not bad. Then the boy and I, on fine days, are allowed to walk in the court below——"

"You can walk there, but not I!" broke out the elder woman, who was evidently his wife. "You can submit yourself to the stinging insolence of those beasts of guards—not I! You can console yourself with your fine meals—not I, not I! I—I think of the fate that is in store for us all. I—I think of the future of our poor children!"

"I—think of the future of our poor children!" came the inevitable echo.

The boy, slumbering against the wall, chose this particular moment to turn over in his sleep and moan.

I FOR my part would have left then and I there—had this been possible. But even if I had not already been riveted to the spot, I would have been held by the woman's anguished cry.

"Think of our friends—our poor friends—the ones who did not escape, or came back out of loyalty to us—those tigers in human form have cut their heads from their bodies—torn them limb from limb!"

"Have cut their heads from their bodies—torn them limb from limb!"

"Come, come, my dear," interposed the man, still in a placating voice, "we cannot always think of these horrible things. Come, come, play for me at the clavecin, as of old—sing to me, my dear."

As if from nowhere, an old-fashioned musical instrument—a clavecin, or harpsichord—appeared before us. It could not have been there before without being seen, for it was a huge thing on legs, nearly as large as a modern piano. Yet there it was, clearly visible in the wavering grayish light; with a stool before it, at which the elder woman seated herself.

As my lips opened in a half-uttered cry of horror, the player began plucking at the strings—and the strangest melodies I had ever heard began coming forth, while she accompanied them in a quivering sad voice

of a subdued loveliness. The music was low, almost ghostly faint; and was charged with such a deep, throbbing sorrow that, at the first note, the tears began coursing down my cheeks. As the woman went on and on with her song, its melancholy increased, though it still had the same eerily distant quality; it seemed that I was listening to a plaint from across countless years and remotest places. Now everyone in the room appeared to have forgotten my presence; the younger woman, the man and the girl gathered about the player, as if to drink in every note; even the small boy arose and joined the group; and as they did so the light, as if condensed by some unseen reflector, suddenly concentrated upon them, leaving the rest of the room in shadow. And then the illumination, wavering and flickering more than ever, began to dwindle . . . until suddenly, without warning, it went out and I found myself in blackness.

But still, from amid the coaly gloom, that phantom-thin music continued to sound, the voice of the singer blended with the notes of the instrument, unspeakably sad, immensely distant, fading like the wind-borne tones of receding minstrels.

Only then did all my concentrated dread and horror find expression in one tremendous scream. Fumbling and groping, somehow I found the door; somehow I forced my limbs free of the spell that had gripped them, and started down the twisted stairs. And then all at once everything went blank.

WHEN I came to myself, still listening to that sad, faint music, I was lying on a Paris street. The glow of late twilight was in the air; a small crowd had gathered about me.

"Does *monsieur* need help?" a man's voice sympathetically asked. "He stumbled and fell, and has been many minutes coming to. No doubt it was only the heat."

"No doubt—it was the heat," I agreed, as I struggled to my feet. But in my ears that phantom music still made a dismal refrain.

Next day I reported my experience to my friend Jacques Chervier, a student at the

Sorbonne, whose speciality was Parisian history.

He looked at me sharply as I finished. "Just where did you say this happened?"

I mentioned the exact street location, of which I had taken note after the adventure.

"So?" he answered, significantly. "So? Well, this *is* strange. Do you know you were walking on the exact site of the old Temple?"

"What in thunder was the Temple?"

"It was the old castle of the Knights Templars, which was torn down in 1811, at the age of almost six hundred years."

"Torn down in 1811?" I repeated, dully.

"It's famous as the scene of many historic episodes," Jacques warned to his theme, "not the least notable being the imprisonment of a king and queen of France, along with their two children, and Madame Elizabeth, the king's sister. That was back in 1792. You know, of course, what king and queen I refer to."

I could only mumble something incoherent.

"Louis the Sixteenth and Marie Antoinette were both lodged there before being sent to the guillotine. The old castle, from all I can make out, was exactly as you have described it, even to the small dog that kept the prisoners company."

"But that doesn't explain why I, of all persons, and at this particular time—"

"Don't you recall the date?"

"Let's see. Today's the fourteenth, isn't it?"

"And yesterday was the thirteenth. It was on August thirteenth, just at about sunset, that Louis the Sixteenth and Marie Antoinette were imprisoned in the Temple. Perhaps every year, on the anniversary of that event—"

But I did not hear the remainder of Jacques' speech. I was not interested in his explanations. In my ears a thin, sorrowful music seemed to be playing; I was back in a tower room, in a wavering fog-gray light, where five shadowy figures were gathered, among them a woman whose deep pleading tragic eyes seemed to call and call across an immeasurable gulf.