

Weird Tales

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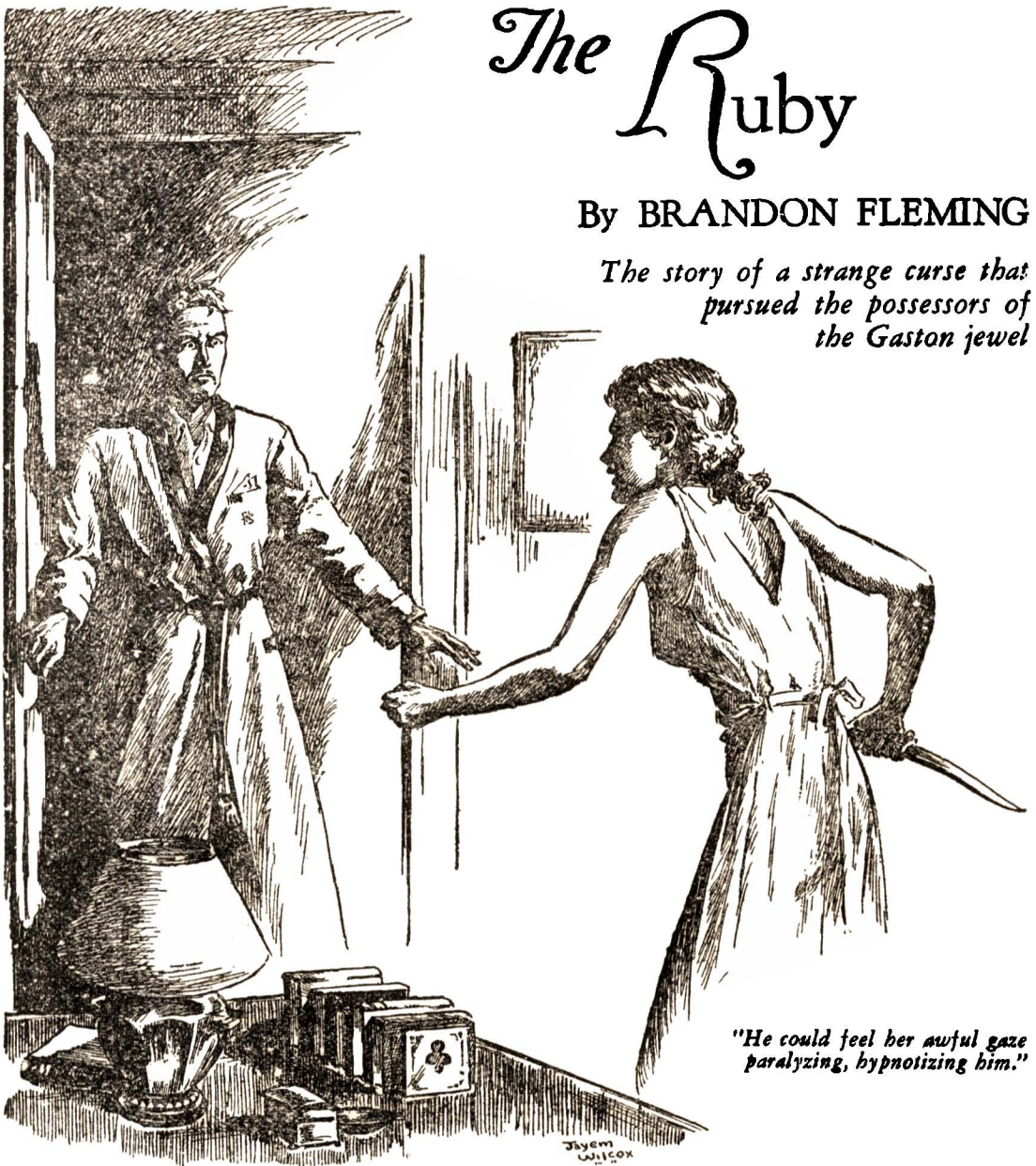
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The Ruby

By BRANDON FLEMING

The story of a strange curse that pursued the possessors of the Gaston jewel



"He could feel her awful gaze paralyzing, hypnotizing him."

MARY GASTON stood at the open French windows of the library at Shelcombe Hall, looking out into the hot still night. Occasional flickers of distant lightning showed up the black masses of the trees at the far end of the garden. The air was oppressive, full of the heavy scent of flowers. She turned back from the windows, and crossing to one of the bookcases, began searching in the drawers. Sir John Gaston, returning after seeing

off the last guests of the evening, mixed himself a whisky and soda. He was a heavily built young man of about twenty-six, good-natured and easy-going, and if not overburdened with brains was rich enough to be beyond the necessity of possessing them.

"Looking for something, darling?"

She closed the last of the drawers and turned away.

"Where's the account of the Gaston Ruby?"

Sir John started. The soda water splashed over the edge of the glass he was holding to the siphon.

"Good Lord, I don't know. Who's been telling you about it?"

She went to another case.

"Your cousin Maud."

"Stupid nonsense," said Sir John. "Nobody believes that sort of rot nowadays. I've never even read about it myself." He brought the glass to the table. "No time for stuff like that in nineteen thirty-two."

"I simply *must* know all about it," she declared.

He looked at her adoringly. It was only three weeks since, at the end of their honeymoon, he had brought her to Shelcombe Hall, the historic old home of his family, and of all the lovely chatelaines it had known, there had been none more beautiful. She was a sweet, sunny-natured girl. Already she had endeared herself to every one. John Gaston was accounted a lucky fellow, and knew himself to be one.

She came across to him.

"It's too thrilling," she exclaimed, "to have married into a family with a real live curse. Please tell me the whole story at once."

He took out his pipe, and filled it.

"But, my dear girl, I don't know the bally story. Never bothered about it. There's a bundle of old papers about it somewhere here, but I've no idea where they are. Probably in that cupboard over there."

"I shan't think of going to bed," she said, "until I've heard all about it from beginning to end. See if the papers are there."

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"All right, I'll have a look. But it's all stuff and nonsense."

He went to the cupboard and began

rummaging among the bundles of papers in it.

"Here we are. The ruby. Look out for the dust. It's filthy. Don't suppose they've been touched for years."

He went to the windows, and shook the dust off the package. Then he brought it to the table, and untying the tape, sorted out the papers.

SHE perched herself on the arm of his chair. The sheets of paper were old, and the writing on them so faded in parts as to be almost indecipherable. He selected a few, and put the others down.

"This looks like the beginning. I'll try to give you the sense of it. It's damned difficult to read. The death of Wilfred Gaston—what is it?—July 19, 1712. I'll have to give it in my own words. Can't read this stuff aloud. Here goes. Wilfred Gaston, who seems to have been a bit of a blob on the jolly old family escutcheon, came back from India with a marvelous ruby. He never would say exactly how he'd got it, but it was certain there'd been a spot of dirty work. There was something about robbing a temple and a priestess and some dreadful rites, and all that; but the only definite thing he'd say was that there was a pretty bad curse on the stone. He was a daredevil sort of fellow, and it seemed to amuse him. It certainly didn't trouble him at all then, but about a year later he came into the title and got married, and after that he sobered down a good deal, and became quite a model husband. He had a secret cupboard made in this room, locked the ruby away and said nothing about it, and everything was O. K. His wife was a beautiful woman, and they had two children. There was no hitch of any sort until, giving a dinner party in this house in celebration of the third or fourth anniversary of his wedding, I regret to say he got drunk. After dinner he

produced the ruby and showed it to his guests. It is said that some one there and then made him an offer for it, but in his drunken excitement he declared he wouldn't part with the curse for all the money in the country."

He paused to relight his pipe. In the distance there was a faint roll of thunder, and the lightning behind the trees had grown brighter. The air had become hotter and more oppressive.

"Go on," she said. "What happened after that?"

"What happened after that was that the next morning he was found lying dead on the floor in this room. He had been stabbed through the heart with an Oriental dagger which had been taken from among other ornaments on the mantelpiece. The most extraordinary part of the affair was that the secret hiding-place, where he had kept the ruby for four or five years, was open, and the ruby itself was lying on the middle of his forehead."

She uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Darling, it's a perfect thriller! I believe you're making it all up!"

"I'm not," he declared. "It's all here exactly as I'm telling you. He was wearing a dressing-gown over his night-dress, and slippers. For some reason or other he had got out of bed, without disturbing his wife, gone down to the library, and been murdered there."

"Perhaps he had heard some one moving about," she suggested.

"That's practically out of the question. You know yourself that from our bedroom it would be quite impossible to hear any one in this room away at the other side of the house."

"He might have heard some one passing the bedroom door."

"There was no one to pass. The only other people in the house were the serv-

ants in their own quarters. But wait until I've finished. The body was found by one of the women servants at six o'clock in the morning. The door was closed, and the windows were fastened. Nothing else had been disturbed or tampered with, and not a thing had been stolen. Lady Gaston's maid ran upstairs, and found her just awake, wondering why on earth her husband had got up so early."

She was silent while he drained his glass.

"But whoever killed him must have been able to open the secret hiding-place and take out the ruby. Where was the key?"

"That," said Sir John, "is the question I should have expected from a bright girl like you. And here's the answer all ready. The key was kept in a spring panel in an old writing-desk—that old desk in the corner. Being drunk when he got it out, he had let every one see where it was."

"And no one else," she asked, "except the people in the room, could have known where to look for it?"

"It says not."

"Of course he might have taken out the key and unlocked the hiding-place himself when he came down, and the murderer was either hidden in the room or came in afterward and attacked him."

"Those questions," he returned, "are all asked here. Why did he get out of bed and go down at all? And why was he killed? What was the motive? If the murderer had wanted to steal the ruby, why didn't he, or she, or they, steal it, instead of putting it on the dead man's forehead? What could have been the object of that?"

THE thunder was louder now, and the lightning more vivid. She got up and closed the windows. Sir John took

the opportunity to help himself to another drink.

"And how did the murderer or murderers escape? The doors and windows were all fastened."

She came back to him.

"Does it say anything was ever discovered?"

"Nothing," he replied. "The thing that scared them was the stone on the forehead. No one could give a reason for that. Lady Gaston locked the dagger and the ruby away together in the hiding-place, and went away from the house. She could never be persuaded to enter it again."

The girl clapped her hands.

"It's marvelous! What next?"

He settled himself again in his chair, and picked out another paper.

"Apparently nothing for a good time. It says Wilfred's son died when he was twenty, and the title passed to another branch of the family, to Charles Gaston, an invalid, who lived in London. He never came to this house, and was not at all interested in mysteries or curses. In spite of his bad health he lived a long time, and when he died his nephew George inherited. George Gaston was round about forty-five, with a rather commonplace sort of wife, and a son, and two daughters. From all accounts he was a quiet, decent, rather religious chap; and although, of course, he had heard the story of Wilfred's death, he wouldn't have anything said about it, and was specially anxious that his children shouldn't hear any suggestions of a family curse, which no doubt he regarded as profanity.

"His son was about nineteen, and the girls a year or two younger, and the first Christmas they were here there was a house party of some college friends of the boy, and school-fellows of the girls. Several of the youngsters were rummaging

about in the library here one afternoon among some old papers, and came across an account of the murder of Wilfred, apparently scribbled down by one of the servants. Of course they at once started searching the old desk for the spring panel. It wasn't very difficult to find, and the key was there, untouched since it had been put back by Wilfred's wife before she left the house about fifty years before. The account told them more or less where the secret cupboard was, and they unlocked it, and took out the dagger and the ruby."

"Go on," she begged. "I'm frightfully thrilled!"

"Just as young Gaston was putting them on the table for the others to see, his father and mother came in, and there was something pretty bright in the way of a row. The things were put back at once, and they had to give solemn promises not to touch the key again. At about four o'clock the next morning Lady Gaston woke and found that her husband had got out of bed and was not in the room. She was frightened, and rang the bell to the servants' quarters. They found him dead on the floor here, stabbed with the dagger just as Wilfred had been, and the ruby was on his forehead."

He knocked the ash out of his pipe, and put it down on a small table by his chair.

"Well—Mr. Sherlock Holmes—any comments?"

"Not yet," she said, "I'm waiting to the end."

"That was the second case. It was almost exactly like the first. The doors and windows were all fastened, and the secret cupboard was open, just as they had been before. There was not a clue of any sort, and nothing was ever discovered. The ruby and the dagger were sent to London and locked up in a box at the bank, and

stayed there for another sixty or seventy years until Reginald Gaston came into the title. He was one of the bucks of his time, a sportsman and a gambler who wouldn't have been afraid of the devil himself. When some of his friends joked him about the curse he offered to bet a thousand pounds that he'd bring the ruby back to the house, show it to any one who wanted to see it, and be alive at the end of a year. His wife, who was nervous, did her utmost to persuade him not to do it, but he wouldn't listen to her. Some one took the bet, and he went up to town post-haste, got the ruby and dagger out of the bank, and brought them back here. Then he gave a dinner party, and showed the things round."

A vivid flash of lightning and a loud clap of thunder interrupted him. He paused until the noise had died away.

"That night, about two hours after they had gone to bed, screams were heard coming from the Gastons' bedroom. Lady Gaston was found sitting up in bed, with a lighted candle in her hand, almost beside herself with terror, pointing to her husband's empty place. There was a rush to the library, and he was found, just as the other two had been found before, with the ruby on his forehead. That's the whole story."

"And nothing more was ever found out?"

"Nothing," said Sir John. "No one was able to explain why those three men should have got out of bed and gone down to the library—what they could have found when they got there—why they were killed in the same way, though it could not, with that interval of time, have been by the same murderer—and why the ruby was put on their foreheads."

"What happened to the ruby," she asked, "after the last time?"

He looked over the remaining sheets.

"It doesn't say for certain. It may have been taken back to the bank, or put in the secret cupboard here again." He threw the papers down. "And that's that."

"Then—it may be here in this room now?"

"I suppose so—if it ever existed at all, I'm sure I don't care. It doesn't bother me."

She stood in front of him, her eyes dancing with excitement.

"Darling, we simply *must* find it."

"Go ahead," said Sir John, "I don't mind. There's the old desk. See if you can spot the panel. Bet you a quid there's nothing in it if you do."

THERE was the quick snap of a spring.

"Jack—there *is* a key here!"

"Good Lord!" said Sir John.

He went over and looked into the narrow little panel, cleverly hidden in the back of the desk.

"So there is." He took it out. "Devilish rusty. Very old, too."

"The secret cupboard," she cried; "where can it be?"

He went back to the papers on the table.

"I think there was a bit about that somewhere. Let's have a look. . . . Yes, here it is. Take away books seven to fifteen, fourth shelf. Bookcase nearest door on left. The partition can be knocked away and the keyhole is behind it. . . . Let me do it. Sure you're not afraid?"

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "Of course I'm not afraid. Such things don't happen in these days. It would take more than any old ruby to get *you* out of bed once you're in."

"I'll bet it would," grinned Sir John. "Well, here goes for the jolly old cursel

Line up for the Gaston thrill! Of course the bally thing may not be there at all. Probably been pinched long ago."

He took down the books from the shelf and pushed one of the partitions aside.

"The keyhole's there all right. . . . And . . . yes, by Jove, it is here! And the dagger, too!"

He brought them out, and put them on the table—a strange, curved Oriental dagger and a small leather bag. She took up the bag, and opening it, shook out a great blood-red stone into the palm of her hand.

"Oh Jack, look at it!"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir John.

"It's marvelous!" she cried.

He looked at the ruby, lying dark and angry against the creamy whiteness of her skin.

"Gad, it's a wonderful stone!"

She held it up to the light.

"Look at the color."

"I've never seen anything like it," he declared. "No wonder—hullo!"

He stared at her.

"What's the matter?"

A sudden change had come over her. She had turned deathly pale.

"I don't know. . . ."

He put his arm round her.

"Sweetheart, you're trembling."

She drew away from him. Her eyes were wide and strained.

"Jack, take it away from me. Take it out of my hand."

He took the stone and put it back on the table.

"Mary, my dear——"

She was breathing quickly. For a moment she swayed, putting out a hand to a chair to steady herself.

"Oh Jack, it's evil—I could feel it—terribly, dreadfully evil."

He took her in his arms.

"My darling—only a few minutes ago you were laughing at the idea——"

She shivered.

"I know—but I hadn't seen it then. I hadn't touched it. I didn't understand." She shuddered again. "Oh, I wish we'd left it there."

"By Jove," said Sir John. "I believe you're really frightened."

She clung to him. Her face was so white that he began to be anxious.

"Sweetheart, there's nothing to be nervous about. I ought not to have told you those stories about the beastly thing——"

Her hands clutched him tightly.

"Oh Jack! there *is* something to be nervous about—something awfully, horribly wicked." She looked at the red stone on the table, and her eyes dilated again with horror. "For God's sake put it away, and promise—promise you'll never touch it again."

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Sir John.

He turned to the table, picked up the ruby and put it back into the bag.

"We'll shove it where it was for tonight, and tomorrow I'll have the damned thing taken right away."

A minute later he turned back from the bookcase, and taking the key back to the old desk, snapped the spring panel to.

"There, little girl, there's nothing to worry about. Let's forget all about it——"

He was just in time to catch her as she fell forward in a dead faint.

A DEEP-TONED clock in the hall struck two. Not a sound disturbed the silence of the house. A figure in a dressing-gown paused at the top of the wide staircase, and began to descend slowly, noiselessly. . . . Sir John Gaston. . . .

Half-way down he paused again, listening.

He reached the bottom, and stopped, staring across the hall. The library door was open. There was a light. He crept across, step by step. . . .

Outside the door he halted and stood still for a moment. Then, without making a sound, he moved forward and looked into the room.

It needed all his self-control to check the exclamation that sprang to his lips. He stood watching his wife, stiffening with horror. His wife . . . Mary. . . .

The little cupboard in the bookcase was open again. She had taken the key from the panel in the desk, and unlocked it. She held the ruby in her cupped hands. She was smiling at it, whispering to it. It seemed almost as if she was praying to it. But the thing that held him petrified, horror-stricken, was the expression, the dreadful, unspeakable wickedness, of her face.

He tried to speak, to call her name, but his dry lips would not frame words. He could only stare at her, a cold, numbing sensation creeping over him. She was unconscious of his presence, oblivious of everything except the red stone in her hands. Her baleful eyes were fixed on it with a terrible unwinking stare, her lips moving ceaselessly with the same sibilant, toneless whisper. . . .

The same thing had happened to those three murdered men before him. . . . The reason they had left their beds was the reason he had left his, to follow. . . .

Her voice grew louder. She was speaking strange words he could not understand—chanting in a kind of evil ecstasy.

With a great effort he regained some control of himself. He forced himself to move a step further into the room—to speak.

"Mary——" He hardly recognized his own voice.

She turned her blazing eyes on him, mad with a demoniacal hatred.

"Put the thing down. Put it down."

He could feel her awful gaze paralyzing, hypnotizing him; that all his strength was being numbed into an icy helplessness. Then she sprang at him, and he saw the gleam of the curved dagger in her hand. Drawing back, his foot slipped on the polished floor, and he fell backward. The fall saved his life. Lunging at him with incredible strength, she overbalanced and clutching at the back of a chair, let the ruby fall from her hand.

Instantly the madness passed from her face. She stood perfectly still, staring straight out in front of her with dull glazing eyes. The dagger dropped from her limp fingers. Without another look at him she went slowly out of the room, across the hall to the stairs.

He locked the library door and waited until she had reached the top, then followed. She went along the corridor, and opened their bedroom door. When he entered a few minutes afterward and switched on a shaded light, she was sleeping peacefully, her lovely face pillowed on her arm. He bent down and kissed her. She opened her soft, gentle eyes.

"Jack, darling, what's the matter? Why are you up?"

He laughed, kissing her again.

"It's all right, sweetheart. I wanted some water—a bit thirsty. Go to sleep again."

He turned off the light, and getting back into bed, occupied himself with grim plans for the fate of the ruby in the morning.

