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Contents for February, 1927

- Cover Design-----C. Barker Petrie, Jr.
Illustrating a scene in "The Man Who Cast No Shadow"
- The Man Who Cast No Shadow-----Seabury Quinn 149
A grisly terror of ancient legend creeps into the life of a New Jersey city—a tale of Jules de Grandin
- The Atomic Conquerors-----Edmond Hamilton 163
Up from an infra-universe hidden in a grain of sand poured a host of invaders bent on conquering the world
- The Brimstone Cat-----Ellen M. Ramsay 181
A weird story about witchcraft, and Queen Elizabeth of England, and the torture devised by a hangman
- Drome (Part 2)-----John Martin Leahy 193
A weird-scientific novel that penetrates under Mount Rainier into a land of strange monsters and wonderful women

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The Fetish of the Waxworks**-----**Victor Rousseau** 220
The sixth in a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky, "The Surgeon of Souls"
- The Church Stove at Raebrudafisk**-----**G. Appleby Terrill** 227
A grim tale by the author of "The Supreme Witch"—a story of terrible retribution
- The Death Cell**-----**Samuel M. Sargent, Jr.** 232
Verse
- The Head**-----**Bassett Morgan** 233
A weird and terrible tale of horror and surgery in the jungle wilderness, by the author of "Laocoon"
- The Unearthly**-----**Don Robert Catlin** 241
The arts of the magician astounded everyone, but the skeptic brought the camera to bear on his achievements
- Meg Merrilies**-----**John Keats** 244
Verse
- The Sign of the Seven Skulls**-----**A. L. Smith** 245
A breath of horror out of the past sweeps through this tale like a chill wind from the tomb
- The River**-----**August W. Derleth** 252
The song of the Volga boatmen rose on the night breeze, foretelling death and destruction
- The Girdle**-----**Joseph McCord** 255
Strange power had this belt of human skin, which was worn by Sir John's son in the trenches
- The Star Shell (Conclusion)**-----**George C. Wallis & B. Wallis** 259
A four-part story about a voyage to the Planet Jupiter and thrilling adventures in the Forest of the Great Red Weed
- Weird Story Reprint: No. 20.**
The Lady of the Velvet Collar-----**Washington Irving** 271
The German student met her at the foot of the guillotine in Paris, one stormy night
- The Eyrie**----- 275
A chat with the readers

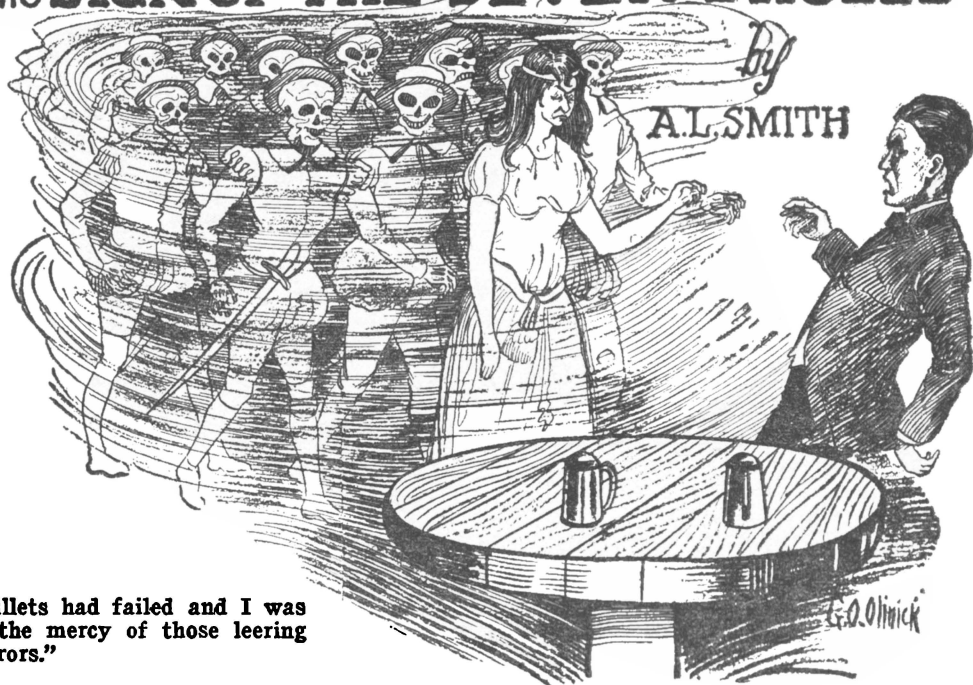
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The SIGN OF THE SEVEN SKULLS



"Bullets had failed and I was at the mercy of those leering horrors."

I STOOD looking back at the little village of Kraanstaadt. From the height it looked more than ever like a fairy-tale village, with its high peaked roofs and winding streets of stones. Even for that picturesque land of the Hartz Mountains it was delightful, a very masterpiece, and the grim old castle that brooded in silence over it might well have housed an ogre or some sleeping princess.

Strange little land of fairy-tale! The very place that gave rise to so many stories of the "little people," living in its same tenor of ways and filled with ancient customs that made one instinctively gaze into the sky for winged dragons, flying carpets, or even witches on broomsticks.

The people were as superstitious as ever was mortal race. They had begged me not to tramp the road to Kraanstaadt and had held up their hands in horror over my insisting on taking the trail through the woods.

"No, no," mine host of the tavern had cried, "be not so foolish, for the woods are filled with awful things." And his wife, dear old soul, had clung to my arm with tears.

But I was not to be turned from my course of action. The walk would take the better part of a day in the deep woods and give me even a better appetite than I already possessed. Besides, this was the land of romance, and I, for one, was not to be cheated of that. To their arguments, therefore, I turned a deaf ear and prepared to go. The good wife finally pressed upon me a crucifix, and in order not to hurt her feelings I put its cord about my neck and the cross I buttoned under my shirt. I could feel it there now, and what was more to my liking, could also feel the heavy .45 under my armpit. I was curious as to whether a werewolf might bow to the cross, but not a bit doubtful as to whether his animal brother would respect the leaden pellets from

the heavy gun. So, protected both physically and spiritually I stood and looked down upon the little village, and then turning, I plunged into the wooded trail.

I tramped until midday and then, at a crossroads—perhaps I should say crosstrails—I sat down and ate the lunch I had brought with me. The crosstrails marked the half of my journey, and a few more hours would find me looking down on my destination. I lit my pipe and finally, with regret, I left the delightful spot and took the trail to the left as I had been directed. The other was overgrown with weeds, and I made a promise in my heart that some day it would be explored.

Tramping along, I let myself be lulled by the soft forest air, and in my mind I pictured these strange woods, dark and forbidding as they were, with the actors of childish stories half-remembered. Surely along the tiny trail ahead of me were walking the children, the lost babies, and the old witch's cabin would soon come in sight; eagerly I looked for the gnomes and dwarfs, and once a crackling in the brush brought me about to scan the forest for the sign of the wolf of Red Riding Hood fame. Soon I left the trail and sat down by a tree. Soothed by the hum of insect life and the day's heat, I soon fell asleep.

It was late afternoon when I sprang up and gazed at my surroundings. Angered at myself, I at once made for the path and turned down it, for I knew now that my sluggish sleep had made me late, and I was in no eager mood to be left wandering in woods I did not know through the evening and darker night. Hurriedly I paced the path with no more thought of the elfin folk with which my fancy had peopled the woods earlier in the day. It was cold now, a biting wind had sprung up, and dusk had begun to fall silently about

me, a fact that accelerated my speed in an endeavor to keep warm.

The path ran and wound among the trees, and in the growing darkness these lost their charm, and instead of hidden princes changed by the wave of a witch's wand into towering forest giants they seemed more like the hideous monsters of some forgotten era waiting to pounce on the unwary traveler who strayed from the path. It seemed, too, that behind me another presence paced, and glancing behind me in the growing dusk I saw a white object melt into the trees on my right. Slowly I picked my way, glancing about me as I went, and was soon rewarded by seeing it again, for a moment, as it slipped between some tree trunks. Then I stepped across a little glade and, drawing my revolver, slipped behind a tree trunk and waited. A few seconds passed, and there stepped into view a monstrous white wolf that stalked across the tiny space. I fired, the deepening dusk being lit by an orange flame as my revolver spat lead, and the beast raced into the trees with a snarl that told me of a hit scored. But it hung grimly on, for several times I saw it glide through the trees, although owing to its caution I was unable to get another chance to shoot.

Then suddenly the path was crossed by another. I swore in my anger, for mine host had told me there was only one place where the trail was bisected by anything. Still here was another path well worn by the passing feet of a multitude for many years, bigger and broader than the one I followed. Suddenly the question arose in my mind: had I in my first few seconds of wakefulness retraced my steps? With this in view I examined the broad path before me and then turned to look at the one down which I had come. The darkness, however, had so covered the ground that it had van-

ished, and look as I might about me, I could not discover it.

A moaning creak drew my attention from the ground to the air above my head and I started back with an exclamation. There, only a few feet from me, was erected a gibbet, and upon it swung a dead man. The wind, which was rising rapidly, swung him to and fro like a pendulum, and the rope moaned and complained. So intent had I been upon the path that I had not noticed it until that moment. Poor fellow, I reflected, had he perchance left loving arms and eyes that wept behind him, or had he faced the world alone? Guilty or innocent, had he faced death bravely or gone whimpering to the Great Beyond? Or had he cursed those who hung him? A rustle from his shoulder, and two little red eyes glaring at me turned me away shuddering. Crows, birds of evil omen, followers of executions! An old poem I had heard in my boyhood days came back to me out of the annals of years:

“We shall sit on his breast,
On his broad manly breast,
And pick his eyes out, one by one.”

I shuddered and turned down the broader path. Surely the old customs of ancient days survived here if nowhere else. Hanging a man at the crossroads! My thoughts were brought back to earth by the cracking of brush to my right. Evidently the wolf was still there.

THE moon rose over the forest, and the clouds raced across the face of it in the rising gale. They took odd shapes; one was shaped like a coffin, another took the form of some belated specter hurrying to keep some dark tryst on a ruined castle's battlements, and one (I remember that very well) changed its shape into a skull with the moon's pale rays glaring through the empty sockets.

The shadows flung on the ground by the passage of these clouds also had dire and forbidding outlines. The entire scene was in keeping with the tales of the Hartz Mountains, of ghosts and hobgoblins, sheeted specters and hooded horrors and all the evil spawn of hell that ran through the tales of ancient Germany.

I hurried onward, hoping at every curve or at the top of every hill to catch the lights of the little town shining upon me, but instead the dark forest continued on and on and hemmed in my path. Several hours must have passed this way, and it was very close to midnight when I saw, shining through the trees, a light to the right of the path. Here was shelter from the coming storm, crude and homely shelter no doubt, but shelter for all of its crudeness, and with a lightened heart I hurried toward it. As I approached, a broader beam of light showed that someone had entered or left, and as I met no one along the pathway as I hurried up, I concluded the person had entered.

To my wonder, on approaching I found the unmistakable outlines of an inn. How very good it looked! I pictured the warmth and coziness of the great room within, for I was cold and chilled by the night air. I paused with my hand on the doorknob and looked at the crazy little signboard overhead. The moon came out from behind the clouds and sent a broad ray across it; and there, arranged in two rows of three each with a larger one in the center, were *seven skulls!*

After the events of the night I was somewhat shaken by the sight of those seven little emblems of mortality that grinned down upon me in their deathly mirth, but as the rain was beginning to come down in torrents, I shrugged my shoulders and went in. Mine host might have his gruesome little joke, but his fire was what I craved now, and if it was

good, why, the sign would be perhaps the center of a tale about the roaring fireplace.

Slamming the door against the wind that pushed with a thousand tiny hands as though demanding admittance, I stood inside and blinked the rain and darkness out of my eyes. The great fire roared up the fireplace, lighting the room with a vivid fitful glow and showing me the contours of the several guests that were gathered near it. Ordinary peasants and foresters they all seemed to be, and mine host, in white apron and cap, came smiling toward me.

"Welcome, mine friend," he said, in a throaty whisper, "the storm is indeed a bad one and you are very fortunate to have made my door."

While thanking him for his offers of assistance and hospitality I looked at him carefully. His throat, I noticed, was wrapped with a heavy white cloth, sure sign of a bad cold, and this explained his queer way of speaking. His eyes protruded fearfully from his face, a sign of inward goiter, so I had heard; but altogether he was such a kindly-appearing person that I followed him, with thankful heart, to the fire's warmth, the others making room for me.

Food there was none, so I must perforce content myself with the remains of my lunch, to mine host's utter sorrow. However, as he brought me some really good Rhine wine, I could not object. His explanation was that this time of year his guests were scarce, yet for several days he had had such an influx that he was "eaten out of house and home." As I had plenty of food left over, I did not object, and I was telling him not to worry himself when a scratching began at the door.

The tavern-keeper crossed to it hurriedly and swung it wide, admitting, as he did so, the great white wolf that had stalked me through the woods.

"My dear little girl," he cried, "thou art overly late. Surely I have been very lonesome without thee.

"My dog, *mein Herr*," he continued in explanation. "Savage to some, yes, but to me very gentle."

He stroked the great white head lifted to him.

"But what is this?" he cried. "Ach, my little darling has been wounded in the shoulder! See, *mein Herr*, see how the blood has run. Ah, those charcoal-burners with their guns! Nothing is safe, nothing."

And he ran for warm water and towels to bathe the wound.

I believed it better to keep silent as to my share in the episode, and sat watching him. The beast whimpered and cried, and then, when her master's back was turned she swung upon me her red eyes filled with hate and anger. I loosened the pistol in its holster, for dog or no dog, the great creature would die did it rush me. However, it went to the fire's opposite side, as soon as the wound was dressed, and there stretched out at full length in the heat.

My frugal repast being now finished, I fell to studying the different travelers at the inn. There seemed something odd about them that I was at first unable to place. Then it dawned upon me: the costumes—even in this very old world they seemed out of date. The costumes of a century or two ago. I was delighted. This *was* romance! I could not see their feet on account of the shadows, but I pictured them as being incased in long hose running to trunks, and surely those capes in the corner were of a pattern.—

"Ah, you sleep!" came the inn-keeper's voice. "You are tired then. Come, let me show you to your room, mine guest."

It was true indeed that, soothed by the soft gutturals and the fire's glow, I must have slept, so I allowed him to light a candle and show me up

the narrow stairs in the back of the great room to my bedroom.

THE rain had ceased, but the clouds still ran across the moon, drawing weird and fantastic shadows across the ground. Underneath me I could hear the voices and an occasional creak from the crazy sign. I bolted my door and sat by the window watching their queer designs. Sleep seemed to have left me, and the room was bitterly cold, yet I did not mind either of these things, so engrossed had I become in the wild night scene without.

Suddenly a scratch came at the bedroom door, bringing my thoughts back with a snap to the present. The great white wolf or dog had followed me! I sprang up and made sure of the door-fastening, and at the sound of my footsteps it padded away limpingly. Poor beast! I was sorry I had shot it now, but I had no inclination to explain matters, especially in that narrow room.

I went back to the windows and stood looking out. Suddenly the candle behind me started to go out. With an impatient oath I turned about. The keeper had evidently given me a very short one, as he thought I would soon be asleep, I thought. But no, the candle was still quite long, and yet it was dying slowly as if for want of oxygen. Lower and lower went the light, and then suddenly flickered and went out. Quickly I struck a match and went toward the candle, but dropped the match when *something* seized my arm. At almost the same instant *something else* seized my leg, and then I was grasped by numberless little hands in the dark.

How can I describe that fight in the narrow room? I was filled with disgust and loathing as well as horror. Little creatures they appeared to be, that tried to bear me down by weight of numbers. I sent my fist in-

to faces and felt teeth loosen under the driving blows, hurled some from me and heard them strike with crashing force against the sides of the room, and I cracked skulls with the butt end of my revolver. Still I was forced back and back, for their number seemed legion; and then, weak and worn out, I was forced to the bed and bent back and back until I was flung upon it. My shirt was torn open in the struggle, and I bled from a number of tiny wounds, yet still I fought grimly on with horror in my mind, horror of these unseen foemen.

As my back touched the bed, the moon sprang out from behind a cloud and lay in a broad beam across me. The tiny silver cross caught and reflected the rays—and suddenly, as it had commenced, the attack was withdrawn, my foemen vanished, if you can call people who were never, not even in the moonlight, visible, “vanished;” and slowly, as I lay spent and panting on the bed, the candle began to glow and finally sprang into life.

Slowly I staggered to my feet and stumbled toward the door, seeking the companionship of those below. Under my feet I *felt* bodies—bodies perfectly invisible to me even in the lamplight. It never occurred to me until later that those below should have *heard* the row going on over their heads, or that even the dullest ears should have detected the uproar, to which the smashed and broken furniture gave testimony in that narrow room.

With weakened steps I made my way down the dim hall and narrow stairs, and at the last turn I saw, with a glad heart, the great room leap into sight.

“Mine host!” I cried; “mine host!”

But then, after I descended the few remaining steps with a rush, my words choked in my throat and I

staggered to the wall, where I stood in horror.

The room was lit by a red glow that seemed to have no source. The fire—or for that matter any fire ever built my man—could not have made the awful glaring red that filled the entire room. It seared and burned into the brain, bringing out every detail with startling distinctness, and the travelers who now swung slowly around to face me were not human. The faces were the faces of those long dead—dead that lived—the undead of a century long past. Those clothes *were* the doublets and hosen of long ago! Long wicked swords hung at sides, the faces (ah, the faces!) were skulls—skulls picked clean and white by the grave-worm in moldering tombs. Only the sockets were filled with that reddish glare of hell that pervaded the entire room. The innkeeper's eyes still protruded from his sockets, but the bandage of a few hours earlier was gone and his neck was twisted and broken; the face was that of a newly hung man with the horror of death still upon it. Under my horror-stricken scrutiny the lineaments changed and it became a skull, a horrid grinning skull like the others, only the twisted neck remaining awry and the vertebrae showing jagged beneath the leering death-mask.

A growl brought my terror-filled eyes to the white wolf that sat by the fire. Slowly it stood up on its hind legs like a trained animal and then, hellish and terrible, a transformation took place. The body grew to a greater height, the long cruel snout vanished, the beastlike properties were slowly banished one by one and human lines took their places until a girl stood glaring at me. A girl, a demon from hell's darkest pits, with eyes of reddish hate—a werewolf, one of the truly undead.

I crouched in my corner as the awful faces turned toward me, and

drew my weapon. The werewolf moved toward me, its right arm dangling, and then I sent shot after shot into the throng, to no avail. Bullets had failed and I was at the mercy of these leering horrors. In fear and horror I ran my hand up my bosom toward my throat and felt, beneath my trembling fingers, the tiny cross. Swiftly I tore my shirt open and held the emblem toward them as I cried, "Back, back, you fiends! Evil I fear not!"

The wolf recoiled, and the faces of the others turned toward each other as though in whispered consultation. So Death took council while a madman waving a silver cross faced his ranks. Slowly they arose and came toward me and formed a hideous circle in front of me. The *things* had decided, I suppose, to frighten me into dropping the little cross, and then—

I felt my senses going, my hand was trembling and dark little motes began dancing before my eyes, the walls reeled about me, and the only solid substance in the universe was that leering crowd of death-masks with the white, hate-filled face of the fiend in girlish form that ringed me in. The red light seemed to glow and then to fade as I fought for the mastery of my mind; a white glow flooded the scene, somewhere I seemed to hear a cock crow, and then as I fell I heard a shriek as of some baffled fiend who hears the fall of a curtain of safety between it and the victim upon which its claws have been so nearly laid.

LATE afternoon had come when I opened my eyes and found myself on a rude cot in entirely different surroundings. An old man, whose face was kindly, rose from the fire and came toward me with some gruel in his hands.

“Drink this and sleep,” he said; “you are in safe hands at last, my friend.”

For several days I tarried with the charcoal-burner and his stalwart son in the rude little shelter they called home and drew from them the tale of the inn and its occupants that I now set down.

For years the inn had lain on a well-traveled thoroughfare in the Hartz Mountains, and well along in the Sixteenth Century had been the stopping place for many a noble and knight. Then Karl the Terrible had bought it and gathered about him a crew of murderers and slayers. He was credited with having traffic with the devil, and his only sister had surpassed him in all evil, finally becoming, so the story ran, a werewolf.

Travelers were murdered by his creatures and their bodies hidden in the cellar. Tales of screams and cries were circulated until it came at length to the baron of the district, one Hoerlarin of Kraanstaadt. He at length, with a goodly gathering of men-at-arms and knights, had one day suddenly appeared at the inn and captured Karl and his men. The sister had escaped.

The trial had been swift and sure, for very little digging brought the bones in the cellar to light. Punishment had followed as swiftly. The many followers had been tied to the

beds of the inn and burned alive in its conflagration; Karl was taken to the crossroads and hung so that all might see and fear; but the sister was never found.

The road fell into disuse even as the great castle at Kraanstaadt had crumbled and become dark. Yet the ruins of the inn, blackened and seared by the purging fire, still contained evil qualities; and there, night after night, had gathered the evil crew for ghastly carousals. Karl's body swung at the old crossroads until moonrise, when he descended and joined his old companions; and often the white form of a werewolf was seen as it slipped between the tree trunks toward the den of hell.

In the blackened ruins I had been found, for the shots of the night before had been heard and investigated by the two charcoal-burners.

Perhaps I dreamed the horror; perhaps the people of the Hartz Mountains are merely superstitious yokels who frighten themselves with needless tales of horror; perhaps you, the reader of this tale, will smile; but I wonder what made my hair turn white and why the little marks of claws upon my body have never left. I, for one, have never gone back to that haunted area, and I place my faith upon the beliefs of the strange peasants of the Hartz Mountains.

