

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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Published monthly by THE RURAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION, 325 N. Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. Application made for entry as second-class matter at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Indiana. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States; \$3.50 in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for manuscripts lost in transit. Address all manuscripts and other editorial matters to WEIRD TALES, 864 N. Clark St., Chicago, Ill. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and publishers are cautioned against using the same, either wholly or in part.

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VOLUME 1

25 Cents

NUMBER 2

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YOUNG & WARD, 168 N. Michigan Boulevard, Chicago,
Advertising Agents for WEIRD TALES

*Farnsworth Wright Offers Another
Tale of Diabolic Terror*

The SNAKE FIEND

EVEN as a child, Jack Crimi delighted in collecting reptiles, and he seemed to absorb much of their venomous nature.

His best-loved pet was a large blacksnake; but when it caused him a whipping by crawling into his father's bedroom, he roasted it over a slow fire in a large pot, listening with glee to its agonized hissing and pushing it back with a stick when it strove to crawl out of the searing container. It is no cause for wonder, then, that his burning love for the girl of his dreams turned to fierce hate when she became the bride of another.

Crimi's sentiment for Marjorie Bressi was aroused by her fine Italian beauty, which reminded him of his mother. He could have fallen in love with any other girl as easily, if he had set his mind to it in the same way. By dint of comparing her with his mother's picture, he conceived a great admiration for her: then he wished to possess her, to be her lord and master, to marry her. Gazing on her every day with this thought in his mind, his admiration grew to a burning passion. Of all this he said nothing to Marjorie, and then it was too late.

Marjorie loved, and was loved by, Allen Jimerson, a young civil engineer. Crimi neither threatened nor cajoled. He simply accepted the fact, and meditated revenge. He was all smiles at their wedding, and he gave them a wedding present beyond what he could reasonably afford, while he

planned to tumble their happiness in ruins about their ears.

After a short honeymoon, Jimerson departed with his wife to take up his duties as resident engineer of some construction work on a western railroad. Crimi, his face glowing with friendship and good will, was the last to clasp Marjorie's hand in farewell, as the train pulled out of the station.

"Write to me often, Marjorie," was his parting injunction. "Send me a letter as soon as you get settled, and let me know how you are getting along. I don't want to lose touch with either of you."

And he meant it.

MARJORIE was fond of the handsome, manly-looking Italian youth, and liked him immensely as a friend, although she had never been in love with him. No sooner was she settled in her new home than she wrote him a long letter, telling of her husband's work, the bleakness of the desert country, and the strange newness of her life. She and her husband occupied a cabin together, apart from the bunk-houses of the construction camp, in the sagebrush region of northern California, not far from the Nevada border.

A fierce joy and exultation leapt in Crimi's heart as he read Marjorie's letter.

"You would like the country better than I do," she wrote.

"for it is infested with rattlesnakes. The bare desert rocks on the ridge four miles from our cabin are swarming with them. Ugh! They sun themselves in tangled masses, Allen says, but truly I can't bring myself to go near the place. I get quite too much of snakes without that, for we are constantly killing them in the sagebrush. This country has never been settled, and except for an occasional prospector, there was nobody to kill them before the surveyors came. The Indians never bother the snakes, but pass by on the other side of a sagebrush and leave them in peace."

Crimi scored these lines in red ink, word by word, as if to blazon them on his memory, and he drew little pictures of snakes on the margin. He burned out Marjorie's signature with acid, spitefully watching with minute care as the letters faded, and gleaming a savage satisfaction from seeing the paper rot away under the venomous bite of the poison. Then he fed the letter to the flames, as he had roasted his blacksnake, years before, and watched the missive burn into black ashes and crumble slowly away, page by page, into gray dust.

Followed Crimi's pursuit of the pair. His arrival was not expected by either Jimerson or Marjorie, but it was none the less welcome, for both of them liked the genial, companionable Italian. Life on the edge of the desert had few distractions at best. Crimi's eyes lit with genuine pleasure at sight of his prospective victims. The joy on both sides was sincere.

"No, this isn't a pleasure trip," he explained to them, "although I expect to have pleasure enough out of it before I get through. I have turned from collecting reptiles to studying their lives and habits. I intend to write a monograph on rattlesnakes. When I got your letter, Marjorie, I

knew that I could do no better than to come here. I expect to become very well acquainted with that ridge you wrote about, where the snakes sun themselves in tangled masses."

Marjorie shuddered, and Crimi laughed.

"Well, don't bring any of your snakes around here," she said. "I turn cold and something grips at my insides every time I hear one rattle."

Crimi built himself a small cabin about a mile from the Jimersons, in the direction of the rattlesnake ridge. He adorned the shack tastefully, and Marjorie's deft hand gave a distinctly feminine neatness and charm to its appearance.

He became a frequent visitor at the Jimerson cabin, and evening after evening he read to them in his melodious, well modulated voice. Sometimes the draughtsman or transitman would come in, and Crimi would join in playing cards until late at night.

He seemed to take keen pleasure in the company of Marjorie and her husband, and his face always lit up at sight of them, especially when they were together. But it was the joy of a boy who sees the apples ripening for him on his neighbor's tree, and knows that they will soon be ready for him to pluck. He was most happy when he was meditating his frightful revenge. As his preparations drew near their end, he often spent whole hours gloating over the fate in store for the couple. For Marjorie, in loving Jimerson, had aroused him to insane jealousy, and Jimerson, having robbed him of his heart's desire, was included in Crimi's fierce hate for the girl who had crossed him.

When, one evening, Marjorie and her husband happened in at Crimi's cabin, Marjorie expressed her horror at the thought of Crimi wandering among the snake-infested rocks of the rattlesnake ridge. The snake-hunter seated her on a box that contained a twisting knot of the venomous reptiles.

Marjorie, serenely unaware, talked on blithely, and Crimi's merry laugh pealed out at regular intervals. He was in right jovial mood that evening, for he was ready to spring the death-trap prepared for his two friends. He only awaited a favorable opportunity to strike.

THE opportunity came when the surveyors' cook, crazed by bad whisky, smashed up the kitchen. Jimerson discharged him, and the cook muttered threats of a horrible vengeance.

"Shut up," Jimerson ordered. "This is the third time you've been seeing snakes, and now you've wrecked the cook shack. You ought to be sent to jail—or a lunatic asylum."

"It's *you* that will be seeing snakes," the cook spluttered. "You an' that Italian wife of yours 'll see plenty of 'em—red, an' green, an' —"

Jimerson struck him across the mouth and sent him on his way. This was in the evening. The draughtsman and rodman went to town the next day to hire a new cook, while Jimerson and Marjorie went on an outing up the headwaters of Feather Creek. It was Sunday, and they intended to spend the day there.

Crimi declined their invitation to accompany them. It was the moulting season, he explained, when the snakes were casting their skins. He could ill afford to lose a day of observation at this time, for he had several perplexing points to clear up before writing his monograph.

Crimi walked fearlessly from rock to rock of the rattlesnake ridge, chuckling to himself. The tangled masses of snakes, of which he had been told, existed only in rumor, although there were snakes in plenty if one but looked for them. Tangled masses would serve his purpose later, but he had gathered them here and there, one or two at a time.

By noon the little cluster of cabins occupied by the engineers was deserted. Marjorie and her husband had been gone since sun-up, and the surveyors were all in town. Not a soul was stirring in the neighborhood of the shacks, and the men at the construction camp were mostly lying around in their bunks, or playing cards.

Crimi nailed fast the windows of Jimerson's cabin. Then he entered and secured the bed to the floor so that it could not be moved. He laboriously carried his boxes of snakes a mile or more, from his room to the little gully behind the surveyors' cabins, and hid them in the sagebrush.

Marjorie and her husband came back from their tramp after dark that evening, dog-tired. Marjorie cooked a little supper, and by 10 o'clock the two were asleep. Crimi entered their cabin about midnight. They were fast in the chains of slumber, and he did not even find it necessary to muffle his tread. He removed the chairs, shoes, clothes, and even the hand mirror and toilet articles. Everything that might serve as a weapon, no matter how slight, he took away.

Then he brought his snakes from the gully, and collected them in front of the cabin. When he had assembled them all, he knocked the top from the largest box, carried it into the room, and, in the audacity of his certain triumph, he dumped the twisting mass of rattlesnakes on the bed where Marjorie and her husband lay asleep.

The other boxes he emptied quickly, just inside of the door, and withdrew, for he had no wish to set foot among the venomous serpents. Revenge is never satisfied if retribution overtakes the avenger, and Crimi had no wish to share the fate of his victims. He locked the door from the outside, and battened it. Then he removed the boxes that had contained the snakes.

and returned to his cabin and peacefully went to sleep.

MARJORIE awoke with the first rays of the sun, and lazily opened her eyes.

Her heart leapt suddenly into her throat, and she was wide awake in an instant. The flat, squat head of a rattlesnake was creeping along her breast. Its beady eyes were fixed on her face, and its red tongue flickered before her like a forked flame. For a moment she thought she was still dreaming, but the familiar outlines of the room limned themselves in her consciousness, and she knew that what she saw was real.

Her shriek rent the air, as she threw back the bed clothes and sprang to the floor. She stepped on a coiled serpent, which sounded an ominous warning as it struck out blindly.

She quickly climbed back on the bed, and stood on the pillow, screaming. Her husband was beside her at once, hazily trying to understand the import of the hysterical torrent of words she was sobbing into his ears. For an instant he thought she must be in the clutch of some horrible nightmare. Then a quick, startled glance around the room turned his blood to ice.

There was now a continuous rattling, as of dry leaves blowing against a stone wall, for Marjorie's screams had galvanized the snakes into activity. The room was filled with their angry din. It sounded in Jimerson's ears like the crack of doom. The floor seemed covered with the creeping reptiles. Some were coiled, the whirring tips of their tails making an indistinct blur as they rattled, and their heads swaying slowly back and forth. Others writhed along the floor, their venomous squat heads thrusting forward and withdrawing, and their tongues darting out like red flames.

On the bed itself there was motion underneath the thrown-back coverlet,

and the ugly, gray head of a thick, four-foot snake protruded from under it, its evil eyes shining dully, as if through a film of dust. It extricated itself, and coiled as if to strike, while Marjorie shrank fearfully against the wall, wide-eyed with horror.

Jimerson attacked the reptile with a pillow, sweeping it from the bed onto the floor. He quickly looked about him for a weapon, and saw at once that he was trapped. There was not even a shoe or a pincushion with which to fight the crawling, rattling creatures.

He tried to rock the bed toward the window, as boys move saw-horses forward while sitting on them. But the bed was firmly fastened to the floor, and in his efforts to release it he was bitten on the wrist by the strike of a large snake coiled near the foot of the bed.

Jimerson flung the reptile across the room, and sprang to the floor with an oath, crushing a large rattler with his heel as he jumped. He raced to the door, and wrestled with it for a full minute before he discovered that he and Marjorie were locked in that serpent-hole.

He sprang to the window, and felt a sharp stab of pain in the flesh of his calf as the open jaws of another reptile found their mark, and the poison fangs were imbedded deep in the flesh. The window, like the door, was nailed fast, but he broke out the glass with his bare fists.

Unmindful of the blood on his lacerated hands, he was back at the bedside, treading over reptiles with his bare feet. Marjorie lay on the bed, unconscious.

He lifted her in his bleeding arms and hurled her through the window to safety. He struggled out after her, tearing open his bitten leg on the jagged pieces of glass still left in the window frame. The spurting blood drenched him, and he leaned, faint and dizzy, against the cabin as three

of his surveyors came running up, having been attracted by Marjorie's screams.

In almost incoherent words he told them what had happened. He asked them to make immediate search for the discharged cook, for there was no doubt in Jimerson's mind that it was the cook who had placed the snakes in the room.

Then the sky went suddenly black before his eyes, and he lost consciousness.

AT that minute Crimi was waking from peaceful dreams. He recalled what he had done the night before, and blissfully mused on what must be taking place in the Jimerson cabin.

A phantasmagoric succession of pictures weltered in his mind—Marjorie and her husband fighting with bare hands against the serpents—bitten a score of times by the angry fangs of the rattlesnakes—clinging to each other in terror—sinking to the floor in agony as the poison swelled their tortured limbs and overcame them—lying green and blue in death, with rattlesnakes crawling and hissing over their dead bodies.

It is remarkable how few people die from rattlesnake bites even when as badly bitten as Jimerson was. Probably not one adult victim in a hundred succumbs to the venom, although mistaken popular belief considers rattlesnake poison as fatal as the death-potion of the Borgias.

Jimerson had known too many cases of snake bite to believe his case hopeless. He did not give up and die, nor did he try to poison his system with whisky. He knew that his condition was serious but he let rest and permanganate of potash, rubbed into his wounds, effect a cure. The bleeding from the lacerated leg had almost entirely washed out the poison, and there was little swelling. The pain of his swollen wrist, however, distended almost to bursting, kept him from

sleeping, and the sickly green hue of the bite distressed him. But it did not kill him.

Crimi, careful observer of reptiles though he was, had never known an actual case of snake bite, and he shared the popular illusion that the bite of the rattlesnake dooms its victim to death. Hence he was certain of the complete success of his revenge, and his gloating glee was unclouded by even the shadow of a doubt that Marjorie and her husband had been killed in his death-trap. He awaited only the supreme joy of drinking in the details of his success, to feel the exultant thrill of complete victory.

As Crimi sat alone, two days after that horrible morning, Jimerson was limping slowly toward his cabin. His swollen hand still pained him badly, and there was a dull ache in his ankle when he put too much weight on it, but he thought the fresh air would benefit him.

Supporting himself with a cane, and leaning heavily on Marjorie at times, he went painfully toward the young Italian's desert home. Not once had his suspicion pointed toward Crimi as author of the crime, for the guilt of the lunatic cook seemed all too clear. Besides, he liked Crimi for his genial camaraderie, his joviality and good humor, and his frank interest in everything that concerned either him or Marjorie.

So intent was the snake fiend on passing the torments of his victims before his fancy, that he did not hear the knock on his cabin door. His brain was too busy to heed the message sent by his ears, for he was feasting on the mental and physical tortures that Jimerson and Marjorie must have endured before they lay cold in death on the floor of the cabin, hideously discolored by the venom of the rattlesnakes.

By degrees he became conscious that he was not alone. Two persons stood before him, and he raised his eyes in eager anticipation, to feed his

revengeful spirit on the story he had waited two days to hear.

Even when he gazed on those whom he had consigned to a horrible death, the thought that they were alive did not penetrate his consciousness. The idea of failure had never entered his mind for even an instant. They were dead, beyond the peradventure of a doubt, and now—*their avenging ghosts stood before him!*

CRIMI dropped to his knees in white terror and crawled behind his chair. He clasped and unclasped his hands in agony of fear. Sweat poured from his face and bathed his body. He implored mercy. He screamed for forgiveness. He gibbered like a frightened ape. Half forgotten words of Italian, learned at his mother's knee, fell from his lips.

He pleaded and begged for his life, crawling on his face toward the amazed couple in an endeavor to clasp their knees.

As the meaning of his broken ejaculations was borne in on them, a tremendous loathing and disgust overcame them. Marjorie clung to her husband, unnerved at the repulsive sight of the malicious coward groveling on the floor and trying to kiss their feet.

Crimi shrieked and gnawed his hands as he saw the avenging angels of his victims leave the cabin.

IT was impossible for the stern hand of the law to inflict a greater punishment on Jack Crimi than his own malice had wrought for him. Today he occupies a padded cell in a hospital for the incurably insane.