

THE SOUL MARK

By H. C. WIRE

FROM start to finish the whole thing was almost unbelievable. In the first place it seemed ridiculous that Harvey Grayham should go to San Marco if he expected to rest his nerves.

Grayham was a wreck; he admitted it. In spite of the fact that he was only middle aged, possessed a fine six-foot physique, a keen untroubled face and no more than the usual amount of life's worries, he was afraid.

He was afraid of everything; afraid of his business, which naturally suffered; afraid of himself. As he often said, "If I were younger I'd be afraid to go home in the dark." And when a man begins to call himself a coward, he is in a bad way.

So the lonely beach town of San Marco, with a bar-bound harbor that attracted only the scum of the sea's ships and men, was not exactly the environment Grayham needed.

But he liked the rocky coast-line, with its hills rising straight from the water's edge, and he thought he might come across some interesting scenes for his painting, a neglected hobby. Consequently, he rented a ramshackle house which stood on an isolated promontory some distance from the village, and settled there hoping to rest.

He was alone save for his old house-keeper, Marge; a woman with thin gray hair, three front teeth, and frequent hallucinations.

In the second place Grayham's adventurous friend, Doctor Jack Holt should not have chosen that time to return from an eventful crusade among the savages of the Raphael Islands. Not that Jack himself was to be considered harmful; on the contrary, the bond of friendship between the two men had steadily tightened ever since its beginning in college days, and Jack's deep concern for Grayham should have made his visit seem desirable—had it not been for something he brought with him from the Islands.

He came into San Marco harbor on a rusty, stumpy-looking tramp steamer, and hunted up Grayham soon after his arrival. At that time Grayham had been in the beach town for about a month, growing more timid with each day of his restless inactivity.

It was on Sunday that Jack went out to the isolated house of his friend, taking with him a collection of thrilling tales, some photographs—and this present for Grayham. The thing looked harmless enough; simply a small pouch made of black leather, peculiarly marked by a cross within a circle. But it had a gruesome history.

Jack was somewhat younger than Grayham, slighter of build, with a dark well-set face that was usually alight with a happy, carefree smile. That smile was the first thing Grayham missed, then he noticed that a strained, haunted look had come into his friend's face, and he wondered. Somehow, when he saw this evident weakness in the other man, he was glad that his own reason for coming to San Marco was apparently unknown to Jack.

They spent a day or two renewing their old friendship, exchanging experiences of the years past; Jack doing most of the talking. It was not until in the evening of the third day that he brought out the leather pouch.

"I'm going to make you a present of this," he said, "but perhaps you won't want the thing after you've heard its story."

"I'll take the chance," replied Grayham, laughing.

"Wait." There was a seriousness in Jack's expression, and a warning tension in his voice that cut short Grayham's merriment.

"This black leather," Jack continued, "is human hide, from the chest of a native. And this design is a brand, burned into the flesh. It is supposed to have some great supernatural power—a mystery no white man has learned—and all tribesmen branded with it are bound to each other forever, even after death.

"When the body dies the soul is believed to live on within the limits of that mark—as far as I can make out that cross and circle is the soul. It is always cut from a dead body and preserved.

"Don't ask me to explain. I don't understand it. All I can tell you is how I got the pouch and what its effect has been on me. Laugh if you want to—I'm not crazy.

"Strange, isn't it, how some things simply get you? One would think that

I have been through enough wild dangers to harden me to anything. And I am—to anything I can see or feel. But when there is only a noise and a smell, that's different."

THEY were sitting before a fireplace in which a log burned with a dull red glow, casting its color upon their faces, sending grotesque shadows of their bodies to dance upon the wall behind them. The only other light came from two candles placed upon a table near the opposite end of the room.

Grayham moved a little closer to the fire. The evenings always chilled him.

"I wrote to you, didn't I," Jack continued, "just before I started from Miamoa to cross one of the islands afoot? Old 'Chew Back' was my guide. I called him that because his one desire was for chewing tobacco, 'chew 'bac' he called it, and he would do anything for a plug of the stuff.

"He was not one of the branded natives, in fact he was from an enemy tribe. But he knew all parts of the island, and for two plugs of tobacco a day he consented to lead me across it.

"For three days we had nothing more exciting than swarms of bugs, sweltering heat and a devil of a job cutting our way through a jungle canyon. I began to believe that people back in the States were right, when they had told me there were no real savages left on the Raphael Islands.

"Then one evening when we were almost across, the thunder of the surf not far away, something went whispering past my head and I saw the shaft of a spear slither into the brush.

"I ducked for cover. Chew was already behind a tree, opening up with a forty-five automatic on a bunch of natives that had slipped along the trail behind us. Civilization had certainly taught that brown man how to use a gun! By the time I was ready for action he had cleared the trail. One poor devil lay dead on the ground. His tribesmen tried to carry the body as they fled away, but they dropped it and ran as if the devil himself was after them when Chew jumped from behind the tree and started in again with his automatic.

"He stopped beside the body of the dead man, which was lying face down.

I came up just as he rolled the thing over, and that's when I first saw this brand—The Soul Mark. I asked what it was but Chew wouldn't tell me much about it. He seemed to have reverted for the moment from his half-civilized state, for he was going through some sort of rite over that enemy's body; talking, waving his hands—gave me a queer sort of feeling.

"At last he took out a sheath knife and began to strip away the hide where it was marked. When the job was finished he made a little roll of the piece of flesh and we started on.

"We reached a coast settlement that night, where we stayed until morning, then got a boat to take us back around the island to Miamoa.

"Altogether the trip had been a tame one, except for this business of The Soul Mark. I thought about that thing several times. At Miamoa, which is nothing but a dirty native trading port, I was to wait ten days until a tramp trader came along to pick me up.

"Chew went on to his own village a few miles inland. I didn't see him again until the day before I left the island. In the meantime I had learned more about this brand and was curious to know what Chew had done with his piece of hide. So I called on him.

"As usual, his greeting was, 'Got chew 'bac'?' The first thing I noticed was the branded hide, which he had cured and made into this pouch, hanging by a cord from his belt. I noticed something else, too.

"Along his neck, just below the left ear, was a long welt, like a swollen bruise. I asked Chew how he got it.

"'He come back,' was his explanation.

"'Who?'

"'He,' pointing to the pouch. 'He come for self.'

"And that was all I could get out of Chew. According to what I understood, that dead savage had come back for his 'self' or soul, and Chew had fought him off. Of course, I didn't believe the old liar, and yet I was more interested than ever in the pouch, and I wanted it.

"Chew wasn't anxious to sell it. But his tobacco was almost gone, so I traded him six plugs for the pouch, put the thing in my pocket and went back to Miamoa, thinking I had an interesting trophy to take home. Lord!"

Jack sat for a moment gazing into the dying fire. He seemed to be lost in his thoughts. He had talked as if no one were listening; as if he had been going over this past experience step by step,

trying to find a reason in what had happened.

Grayham studied him thoughtfully. It was not like Jack Holt to let fear of any sort enter his mind, and yet—the sudden realization sent a tingle of excitement over Grayham—he was afraid!

Certainly there must be something—Grayham rose to throw more wood on the fire.

The candles near the opposite end of the room flickered. One of them went out. Jack turned suddenly, gripping Grayham's arm.

"Harv!" he whispered. "Did you open that window?"

Grayham looked. One of the windows was slightly raised.

"Yes," he answered. "Do you want it closed?"

His voice betrayed none of the feeling within him. He had not opened that window. He felt his own nerves tighten as he crossed the room, closed the window and locked it.

RETURNING to the fireside he attempted vainly to force away the cold tingling that was creeping over his body. No doubt Marge had left the window open, he told himself, as she cleaned the house.

"You've been going too hard these last few years, Jack," he said, dropping again into his chair. "You're all on edge. Here, have a smoke. Never mind the rest of the story; it seems to upset you."

Grayham was not thinking entirely of his friend as he made this last suggestion.

Jack looked up, smiling, refusing the offer of a cigar. "Might as well tell it all to you—I'll think about it anyway. And I'm not so greatly upset. I don't believe in the idea of a body running around hunting for its soul, that Chew maintained. There is something more than that, but just what—"

He turned the piece of leather over and over in his hand as he continued his story. "A trader touched at Miamoa the next day and I got ready to leave.

"I went down to the market intending to get some trinkets to bring home. I found something, don't remember what, and drew out this pouch, which I was using as a money bag. When the old beggar who had sold me the things saw this he grabbed his stuff and backed away, muttering and waving his hands. He wasn't looking at me, but behind me.

"At first I laughed, then I felt queer, for I was aware of a peculiar rancid odor that seemed to be coming from this

leather. But it wasn't, because I smelled of the thing. And the next moment the odor was gone.

"The market-place was crowded and that smell could have come from any of the dirty half-naked natives there, yet as I pushed my way through them I didn't get so much as a whiff of that peculiar odor.

"At the time I wasn't bothered about that part of it, but I did wonder what had struck the old peddler who had backed wild-eyed away from me. No doubt he had seen the marked pouch and had some superstitious fear of it, although he was not of the branded tribe.

"I decided not to display the pouch again while in Miamoa, so I emptied the money out of it and packed it in a bag that was being sent to the ship.

"That afternoon I went aboard and was bunked forward near the captain's cabin, in a room that had probably been for a steward in the ship's better days.

"It was devilish hot, so I stripped to my trousers and stretched out on the bunk listening to the rattle of loading; the clank of winches, mates bawling orders to the ship's crew. I must have dozed because evening came before I knew it. The long blast of the whistle that meant 'clearway' woke me up. It was not yet dark enough for me to need a light—just a murky gray over the water.

"There was a scurry of men running along the deck. We were making ready to cast off. I rolled from the bunk, then picked up my bag and put it on a chair, intending to get some clean clothes. When I opened the thing, there on top of my stuff was the pouch, just where I had packed it.

"The incident of that afternoon was pretty well out of my mind right then. I tossed the pouch to the top of the table and thought nothing of it.

"Harv, you're going to think I'm crazy—I can't help it." Jack's voice had dropped to a whisper. "That pouch hadn't been there more than a minute when I smelled the same rancid odor; it seemed to be filling the cabin, coming from nowhere. I tried to find a lamp. My match went out.

"Then I saw the face. It was the face of the dead man, right above the pouch, staring at me as if from the other side of that solid steel bulkhead! God! I jumped back, stumbled through the door and went sprawling on the deck.

"That jolted some sense into my head. I crept back to the cabin, looked in. There was nothing, not even the odor. The light of a match showed the pouch

still lying on the table. There was no one on that part of the deck near me.

"I just can't explain it, Harv. The next morning I saw that there was a mirror in the wall about where I had seen the face. And yet that didn't explain anything. I couldn't have seen the reflection of a man's face, because there was no one around.

"My first thought was to throw the damned pouch overboard, but it would have seemed like drowning a man. Honestly, that's the way I felt. So I packed it in the bottom of my trunk and left it there.

"During the rest of my trip nothing actually happened. But I had the feeling—can't explain it—that I was not alone in my cabin. I would wake up at night, half-conscious of that odor—you know how it is—the next morning I couldn't tell whether I had smelled it or dreamed it. I was mighty glad when we finally got here—although I'm not relieved. I still have that watched feeling, but I will not give in to it."

Jack stopped, gazed at the fire and sat for many minutes without speaking. "Well, do you want it?" he finally asked, holding out the pouch.

Grayham shrugged. "Yes, I'll take it." His acceptance was not enthusiastic. He took the pouch and gingerly studied the marking.

Jack leaned back in his chair, one hand pressed against his forehead.

For some minutes neither man spoke. The house seemed very quiet. A night breeze blew from off the sea. A door rattled. Grayham started at a sudden movement of his companion. Jack was sitting rigid in his chair, his hands gripping the seat, his head thrown back. He was taking short quick breaths, as if testing the air.

Almost unconsciously Grayham too sniffed, then leaped up, crying, "Cut it out! Man, you're hypnotizing me!"

Instantly he saw his mistake. To Jack this was an admission that Grayham had also caught the odor. He cringed deeper into his chair, his nerve seemed completely shattered.

Grayham tried to laugh, but even with the intake of his breath he drew in the full force of a suffocating rancid odor that was filling the room. His laugh was a weak gasp. He dropped the pouch to the floor, where it lay red in the glow of the dying fire.

THEN, breaking a moment of deathly quiet, there came a scream from the room at the rear of the house where Marge, the housekeeper slept. Just one piercing cry, cut short, then silence.

Grayham leaped toward the mantel over the fireplace, clutching a revolver that lay there, and crossed to the doorway at the side of the room.

"Stay here," he ordered Jack, then opening the door, he slipped into the darkened corridor leading to the back of the house.

At the far end of the passageway he could see a thread of light coming from beneath the door of Marge's room. As he crept ahead he was aware that the odor was growing stronger.

Stopping at the door, one hand reaching for the knob, he listened. There was no sound within. He flung the door open, at the same time flattening himself against the passage wall. But nothing happened; nothing rushed out upon him, none of the many terrible things he had imagined as he had approached came out of that room to clutch him, or strangle him, or attack him as he thought unseen devils might.

Neither did he see Marge. He peered into the room. It was reeking with the rancid smell. Then he saw the woman, cowering in one corner, her eyes wide with fright, her mouth moving convulsively.

He crossed to her, and she shrank away, covering her face with her hands. Then recognizing him she pointed to the other side of the room.

Grayham turned and saw nothing but an open door leading into the darkened kitchen. Before he could again face Marge to ask her what she had seen, he heard a noise in the front room, like the thump of an overturned chair. Then Jack's voice, a terrified cry, suddenly muffled.

Marge started to scream. Grayham silenced her with his hand.

"Stay here—don't move," he whispered. He blew out the lamp, crossed to the hallway and started back to the front room.

His legs were weak; he was trembling. He wanted to run out of the house, away from that odor, away from—the thought of Jack in there, sent him on along the hallway toward the closed door.

Blindly, pushed by a courage he had never realized was in him, he threw the door open, leveled the gun in his hand, and stepped into the room.

There he stopped, straining his eyes in the darkness, listening for a telltale sound. Both candles were out, the fire had died to a few scattered embers. For a moment he stood motionless, and vaguely he realized that he was no longer trembling, he felt calm, his grip on the revolver was steady.

Even as he expected at any instant to be fighting for his life, he marveled at the strength of will that held him there, waiting, unafraid.

These thoughts had taken but a fleeting moment, then in the dim light of the fire Grayham saw the form of Jack lying face down upon the hearth. He realized at the same time that the odor had almost vanished from the room; and the presence of danger seemed to have vanished with it.

He struck a match, held it high, holding the revolver in front of him. The room was empty, save for the figure in front of the fireplace.

Lighting a candle Grayham knelt by the side of his friend. A hurried examination showed that Jack was not dead, apparently he had fallen from his chair in a swoon.

Fainted in fright? Grayham forced the thought from his mind. Jack was no coward, and yet perhaps his nerves were pretty well gone. Grayham thought of his own trembling and faintness that had come upon him before he had re-entered the room. But he had forced it back—and he was supposed to be a nervous wreck!

Thus was he thinking as he worked over Jack, bringing him again to consciousness. And he was filled with a new joy in the realization that he had not given in to fear.

Soon Jack opened his eyes and sat up, staring about. He groped on the floor beside him, searching for a moment, then he said, almost like a sigh, "Thank God!"

Grayham looked, remembering that he had dropped the pouch to the floor at the first scream from Marge. The Soul Mark was gone.

He helped Jack to a chair, gave him a drink then whispered, "What happened, where is—"

"I can't tell you." Jack's nervous tension seemed to relax. "I can't tell you," he repeated. "I'm glad that damned thing's gone."

"You think there will be no more trouble?" Grayham asked doubtfully.

"I know it."

Grayham wondered at the confidence of this reply, and at the apparent relief that had come over Jack. Yet he too felt this relief, and although unable to understand what had happened, he believed that their danger had vanished with the pouch.

Leaving Jack for a moment he went to the back room where he had left Marge. She was sitting in a chair and looked up wonderingly as he lighted her

lamp. When he plied her with questions she could not tell what she had seen; whether she had been dreaming or in the grip of one of her frequent hallucinations.

She said something about an odor. Grayham convinced her that she had been dreaming. Then he returned to the front room.

Jack's prediction that they would have no more trouble proved to be correct. He stayed with Grayham for a week, that passed uneventfully, and his interrupted visit was a pleasant one after all.

When he announced his intention of "moving on" Grayham said he too was going back to the city, and his business.

"What, already?" Jack exclaimed. "I

thought you had planned to stay here for some time."

"I am anxious to get back to work," Grayham replied.

It would be hard to say whether he left San Marco because he was anxious to get back to his business, or to his club where he could tell the tale of The Soul Mark. At any rate, for several weeks he was often the center of an interested group.

The most impressive part of Grayham's story was always at the point when he told about that moment in the hallway, just before he returned to the front room from which had come Jack's muffled cry.

"Boys," he would say to his circle of spellbound listeners, "I tell you a man

doesn't know how much nerve he has got until he gets in a place where he's forced to use it!"

Which was exactly the thing Doctor Jack Holt had believed when he had planned his visit with Grayham in San Marco. As he wrote, in reporting the interesting case to his medical society—"My friend was in a condition common to many men who get into the eat-sleep-work rut. He was giving himself no time to get out and fight; not even the battle of a two mile walk on a wintry day. From sheer lack of using his nerve he thought he had lost it.

"My treatment was unusual, as it was simple—a flask of foul-smelling oil, a thrilling tale and a bit of stage acting—but it was effective."

Table of Contents

The contents of *Weird Tales* is fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All communications should be addressed to the publishers' main office at 854 North Clark St., Chicago, Ill. Subscription, \$2.00 a year in the United States; \$2.50 in Canada. Single copies, 50c.

Why <i>Weird Tales</i> ?— <i>Editorial</i>	1
Imprisoned With the Pharaohs— <i>Houdini</i>	3
"Whoso Diggeth a Pit"— <i>Vida Taylor Adams</i>	13
Deep Calleth— <i>Gordon Burns</i>	16
The Malignant Entity— <i>Otis Adelbert Kline</i>	19
The Sixth Tree— <i>Edith Lichty Stewart</i>	27
The Haunted Mansion in the Pines— <i>Leonard F. Schumann</i>	29
Spirits— <i>J. M. Alvey</i>	32
Hypnos— <i>H. P. Lovecraft</i>	33
Ebenezer's Casket— <i>J. U. Giesy and Junius B. Smith</i>	36
Draconda— <i>John Martin Leahy</i>	41
The Hand— <i>H. Francis Caskey</i>	50
The Loved Dead— <i>C. M. Eddy, Jr.</i>	54
The Vow on Halloween— <i>Lyllian Huntley Harris</i>	58
Eyes— <i>Galen C. Colin</i>	59
The Man Who Thought He Was Dead— <i>Granville S. Hoss</i>	61
Called Back— <i>Dan W. Totheron</i>	65
The Sunken Land— <i>George W. Bayly</i>	69
The Dancing Partner— <i>Guy L. Helms</i>	74
The Last Entry— <i>Meredith Beyers</i>	76
The Purple Death— <i>Edith Lyle Ragsdale</i>	77
The Impostor— <i>Norman Springer</i>	82
Weird Crimes— <i>Seabury Quinn</i>	87
Just Bones— <i>Samuel Stewart Mims</i>	91
First Degree— <i>Robert Cosmo Harding</i>	96
The Latvian— <i>Herman Fetzer</i>	101
The Machine from Outside— <i>Don Howard</i>	106
Dr. Grant's Experiment— <i>H. A. Voureddin Addis</i>	111
Tea Leaves— <i>Henry S. Whitehead</i>	116
An Egyptian Lotus— <i>Mrs. Chetwood Smith</i>	121
Deep Sea Game— <i>Arthur J. Messier</i>	127
The Soul Mark— <i>H. C. Wire</i>	131
It— <i>E. M. Samson</i>	135
The Man Who Lived Next Door to Himself— <i>Frank Owen</i>	139
Mystery River— <i>Elwin J. Owens</i>	143
The God Yhuano— <i>Marjorie Darter</i>	145
The Cellar— <i>Paul L. Anderson</i>	147
In the Weird Light— <i>Edward Everett Wright and Ralph Howard Wright</i>	152
A Glimpse Beyond— <i>H. M. Hamilton</i>	164
Ask Houdini.....	167