

# EERIE

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## STORIES

AUGUST



### THE SOUL SCORCHERS' LAIR

*Adventure of Midnight Horror*

Saunders

# EERIE STORIES

*Startling Adventures  
in Chilling Horror*

AUGUST, 1937

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*Cover by Norman Saunders  
From "The Soul-Scorchers' Lair."*

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# The Soul-Scorchers' Lair



*By Ronald Flagg*

*He had a mad desire to scorch his wife's soul through her body, using the intense heat of a blowtorch's searing torture flames.*

**T**HE big man in whites and sun helmet pushed briskly into the *Cantina La Paloma*. Just inside the flapping doors, he came to an abrupt stop. His bleak, darting eyes raked the boisterous throng of Filipinos, Malays, Chinos, Japs, Moros, and half-castes.

Here was every type of woman that the intermixing of races could produce, all imbued with the age-old wisdom of the female to please the

male. In the foreground a half-caste girl from Burma walked casually by a group of Japanese men, pretending that she didn't know the split in her divided skirt of silver tinsel had slipped overly much so that the upper roundness of one thigh showed boldly. Watchfully she would wait for notice, then smile sly invitation. Other women of different hues plied the booths and corner tables.

The Filipino orchestra died with a twanged discord of their long-stemmed instruments. Shuffling feet scratched to a stop on the sawdust floor. Swarthy seamen in greasy sweaters looked uneasily about. Then they saw that big man in white linen and cork helmet.

With glowering, suspicious eyes they watched that hard-faced *Americano* look searchingly among them. Some of them furtively pulled their caps over their faces—for they did not relish the close scrutiny of the governor general's chief investigator.

Then "Flint" Warren looked over their heads to the balcony at the far end of the lantern-lighted room. It was there he saw the white head he had been searching for. Under that thatch of white hair was the red face of Old Man Nolan. And perched on Nolan's knee was a lithe Filipino girl. Warren said something through his teeth, and started down the room.

A path was quickly made for him. Something like a sigh of relief rippled through that motley throng of mixed races. The instruments once more whined forth their chantlike rhythm. But the swarthy seamen kept suspicious eyes on that big man in white, and hostile hands close to knife hafts.

Flint Warren ducked under a cobweblike fishing net dangling from the rafters, and climbed the rickety steps to the balcony. Old Man Nolan saw him coming. With a hasty shove of his arm, he dislodged the dark-skinned girl.

The Filipino girl tossed her head indignantly, shrilled a string of savage swearing on the floor where he had let

her drop. Then, provocatively, she pulled her brief skirt down over lithe, smoky-brown legs before she got up and moved away.

"Evenin', sir." He respectfully got to his feet.

Warren frowned at the girl, then looked hard at Nolan.

The red-faced Nolan pointed to the liquor on the grimy table. "Jus' buy-in' Infanta a drink."

"Sure," said Warren. "Now tell Infanta to beat it."

Nolan blustered a dismissal to the girl. Then he jerked his head toward a secluded corner table. "We can talk over there, sir."

Still frowning over his shoulder at the girl, Warren walked to the table and sat down. He cuffed his helmet back on his head. His eyes bleak again, he coldly studied the red-faced Nolan. In a low voice, he said:

"Maybe you're getting too old for this job—and weak!"

"No, sir," hastily protested the seaman. "Gals come an' go—but Old Man Nolan keeps his hatch battened down."

Flint Warren said nothing. He dropped a cigar on the table, and lighted up another for himself. When it was going, he asked, "Ever heard the name—Aranda Pombal?"

Nolan rolled that name silently on his tongue. He nodded his head a little uncertainly. "Pombal—that the lubber what murdered his wife, an'—"

"And got away with it," finished Warren. "He's up here in the Luzon—not many hours ahead of me. It's pretty well known that before he killed his wife he tortured her fiendishly. There were rumors that leaked out among house boys that he used to strip her naked and torture her. One spying native told others that, not many hours before Pombal killed his wife, he stripped away her clothing, chained her up and used a blowtorch on her—took fiendish glee in gradually searing sensitive parts of her body. Seems he had a fixation that he wanted to scorch her soul right through her body. But

he got away with it—claimed her death was accidental, the devil only knows how. The madman is said to have started a whole cult on his soul-scorching insanity—used to have a lot of half-castes helping him with his torture business.”

Nolan shook his head. “Ain’t seen no one what looks like a murderer. To be tellin’ the truth, sir, I’ve been havin’ troubles of me own. Manuel out there at the lighthouse—”

Warren’s hand clamped down hard on Nolan’s arm. “Not so loud, man! When you have anything to say about Manuel—*whisper it!*” The big Manila agent drew evenly on his cigar. Without taking it from his mouth, he said tersely, “I put Manuel out at that lighthouse for a damn good reason. And I told you to keep a tight mouth about it.”

“That I have, sir,” responded Nolan firmly. “An’ I’ve been skipper of the lighthouse tender for a good many years, an’—”

“All right. All right,” said the flint-faced Warren. “But get this—I’m grappling with a man who never makes a slip. For a leak to spring in my organization— Hell, Nolan, I can’t afford it!” he ended in a hoarse whisper.

**S**UDDENLY Warren looked over to see the sleek Infanta edging back along the balcony railing. Their eyes met. Then Infanta tossed her tawny shoulders, and padded down the steps. The musical tinkle of the spangles on her sleazy, transparent skirt was soon swallowed in the ribald hilarity below.

“That girl’s got something on her mind,” frowned Warren.

“Jus’ wants another drink.” Old Man Nolan attempted an easy smile.

“The hell she does,” muttered Warren. “But tell me—what’s all this trouble with Manuel?”

Nolan leaned closer. “The old trouble, I guess. The natives say the lighthouse is haunted. Maybe Manuel figures the curse is gettin’ at him. Always he’s complainin’ that some-

thin’ or other’s the matter. Yesterday I carried him a month’s supplies. The lubber started complainin’ again—an’ wanted a doc. So today I ships him one.”

“That’s fast service from Manila,” said Warren. “Doc Reynolds must be getting ambitious.”

“But,” put in Nolan, “I didn’t take Doc Reynolds.”

Flint Warren craned his neck as if he hadn’t heard correctly. “You didn’t take Doc Reynolds?” he asked incredulously.

Nolan shook his head. “I carried over a doc from here. Manuel was complainin’—”

“There’s no white doctor at this jumping-off place,” said Warren impatiently. “Who in the name of—”

“He was a perlite Spanish lad,” faltered Nolan. “He was motorin’ north—but didn’t mind the run out to the light. Said that a doc should go where duty calls—”

“Never mind that!” gritted Warren. “What did he look like?”

Nolan gulped the liquor in his glass. “He was a gintl’man, an’ you may lay to that. Always bowin’ an’ smokin’ fancy cig-rettes, he was.”

Warren flung his cigar on the sawdust floor, spiked it with his heel. “Did that Spanish doctor of yours have a small, waxed mustache?”

“Aye, sir, that he did. You know the lubber—?”

A short bark of a laugh came from Tom’s throat. “I know him—sure! He’s Aranda Pombal!”

“The lubber what murdered—”

“That’s him. And the last man in the world to be alone with Manuel! . . . Come on, we’re going to that Cavalier Isle lighthouse . . . Maybe we’ll find Manuel—alive.”

Pushing the squat, stubble-faced seamen right and left, Flint Warren gouged a lane through the chattering crowd of the *cantina*. Out of the tail of his eye he caught sight of the supple-bodied Infanta. The girl’s black eyes held a mocking taunt. Then

Warren was at the heavy swinging doors, with the lumbering Nolan puffing up behind him.

**A** MOONLESS night is black in any part of the globe—but it is blackest in the murky maw of the South China Sea. And straight out into this great cavern of darkness chugged the creaking lighthouse tender. Dropping off its stern were pin-points of light dotting the countless bays and inlets of Luzon's Asiatic shore.

Warren sat in the bow, fingers restlessly drumming the helmet between his knees.

"How far out is that light?" he asked.

"Better'n six leagues, sir. It'll be after dawn before we heave anchor."

"That," said Warren harshly, "will give Pombal all night to work on Manuel. It's not pleasant to think of—when you know Pombal."

Old Man Nolan spread his hands out. "That Pombal lubber can't pull nothin' rough—when every one knows he's out there."

"He can do anything," said Warren flatly.

Nolan was silent as he lashed the wheel due west, straight for the coast of French Indo-China. This done he took out his ancient pipe. Flint Warren volunteered no conversation, so Nolan suggested:

"Maybe you're steerin' the wrong course, sir. Maybe this Spanish doctor ain't the murderin' devil—"

"Tell me, Nolan, did you walk up to this doctor and say: 'Are you a doctor, mister? And if you are, will you make a trip to Cavalier Isle? Did you say that to him, Nolan?'"

"Well—now—sir. Jus' didn't come 'bout like that. It was Infanta what told me 'bout the doc. She—"

"Sure," cut in Warren, "after she got you drunk enough to shoot off your mouth about Manuel being at the light—she rings in the doctor." Warren's face was flint-hard in the dim glow of the port and starboard lights.

He shook his head grimly. "I've got to hand it to Pombal."

A long silence ensued, finally broken by Nolan's:

"Don't you be worryin' too much 'bout that Pombal, sir. He didn't look none too vicious to me."

Warren stopped his restless finger-drumming to ask, "Know anything about the tortures of the ancient Chinese and Romans?"

"Aye, sir. They had divilish ways of stretchin' an' cuttin' people."

"Right. And Pombal knows 'em all." Warren jutted his rocklike jaw. "Something else—he gets away with 'em." Again Warren went to drumming his helmet. "He got away with murdering his American wife. Did her up in hellish shape. But left nothing to incriminate himself."

Nolan ignited his pipe with a spluttering sea match, illuminating the paint-chipped tub with its chugging engine amidships. He smoked in silence.

Flint Warren went on in his abrupt manner. "I got one of his servants to testify against him. Almost hanged him. But again Pombal was one jump ahead of us. He bribed the native jury. I've been looking for him since." Warren swore harshly. "He's a murder maniac. He can do anything!"

Old Man Nolan suddenly became alert. He scanned the darkness off the bow. Then he tested the rope-lashed wheel. "She hasn't run a point off her course," he muttered.

"What's up?"

"Dunno, sir. By all rights we oughta be seein' a speck of that light."

Warren said, "The way this tub crawls we'll never see the light." Then he added, "Or maybe Pombal is talking to Manuel about the ancient Chinese."

Nolan wagged his head. "This Pombal may be all the devil you claim—but he's not fool 'nuff to murder Manuel. Anyway, sir, what's he got agin' the lad?"

"Nothin'," spat Warren, "except—that Manuel is the servant who testified against him." Warren slapped a cigarette to his lips. "The Manila government offered to protect Manuel—and hid him out at the lighthouse. Hell! Can't this damn tub go faster?"

"She's doin' her best, sir." And Nolan lapsed into silence. Seemed there was nothing more he could say. Then suddenly he sat bolt upright. "There's the light! Burnin' high, too, sir. Manuel's wastin' his wicks. Oughta know better'n that."

Warren sucked on his cigarette, said nothing.

Hours later, the light went out—and stayed out.

Dawn came up behind them, as the laboring craft nosed her bow toward the reef.

**C**AVALIER ISLE had carried its noble name for many centuries—but its reef was as low and treacherous as nature could sink. Like tiger's teeth, jagged fangs of rock jutted out of the sea. And for every rock above surface, there were three more beneath eager to rip out a ship's vitals.

Old Man Nolan knew this well, as he zigzagged his tender to the miniature wharf built out on the reef.

It was then that Flint Warren got his first look at the lighthouse. About one hundred yards back from the wharf he saw the lightkeep's shack. Above the shack rose the great iron scaffolding which supported the oil tub and glass cupola of the lantern.

While Nolan docked the tender, Warren dog-trotted up to the shack.

The chug of the tender must have awakened some one in the shack, for a freshly-shaven man in whites appeared at the door.

Warren went up to him. "Get out of that door."

A quirk of a smile flicked across Pombal's dark features, showing twin rows of gleaming teeth. He stepped to one side, bowing slightly.

The flint-faced Manila agent shoved

him further out of the way, and went into the shack.

Manuel lay in his bunk dressed in trousers, soiled undershirt, and heavy shoes. To all appearances he was merely resting.

"Manuel!" barked Warren.

There was no answer.

Warren touched the young Filipino. Then he swung on Pombal.

But the Spaniard spoke first. With bowed head, he murmured, "Poor Manuel has passed on to his ancestors."

Flint Warren's jaw jutted aggressively. "You knew that I was some hours behind you—and still you murdered him. You won't get away with this!"

"Manuel died a natural death," politely corrected Pombal.

Warren quickly stripped the body. Expertly he went over every inch of the dark skin.

"No wounds," he muttered to himself. Then he carefully tested for signs of poisoning. Twice he went over the body. He shook his head grimly. Without a word he went over to a chair and sat down.

Pombal started to do likewise.

"On your feet," said Warren.

The Spaniard sneered thinly.

From his chair, Warren asked, "How did Manuel die?"

"He just stopped living," explained Pombal matter-of-factly.

"You have no other diagnosis?"

Pombal lifted his shoulders eloquently. "My limited medical knowledge can find no cause for death—other than a natural one." He pinched his tiny waxed mustache, and blandly suggested, "If my word is doubted, why not take the body to your government doctors?"

Warren nodded slowly. "You've done a perfect job, Pombal—so far. I know the lad hasn't been wounded or poisoned."

"Then," asked Pombal, "how could he have been murdered?"

"Let me ask the questions," cut in the big Manila agent.

Old Man Nolan, who had been standing in the doorway, came in. He looked at the body. "Aye, sir, Manuel was always complainin'. If he ain't been murdered—maybe the curse of this hell-place got him."

Pombal smiled. "I've neglected my studies in superstition. But I must say there is a possibility—"

"Rot!" grunted Warren. "Manuel was educated. Trouble was he got lonely here and imagined things were the matter with him." Then the big investigator looked sourly at Pombal. "Could your limited medical knowledge set the time of death?"

With an obliging smile, Pombal bent over Manuel. From where Warren sat, he could see the Spaniard's profile. And Pombal looked as though he were laughing—laughing at the dead body!

**B**UT when Pombal again turned around, his dark face held a calm, professional expression. "This unfortunate fellow has been dead about three hours."

Warren's face was devoid of expression. "Of course, you were with him—when he peacefully passed on?"

A gleaming flash of teeth. "I'm afraid I don't know. Manuel rested in his bunk. I couldn't tell whether he was dead or sleeping. Naturally, I expected nothing was wrong, and didn't investigate."

"You worked the light?"

"I did my best."

Flint Warren smoked another cigarette, his eyes roving about the shack. In the corner opposite the bunk squatted an iron, pot-bellied stove. In another corner lay the newly-opened boxes of the month's supply of food, water and several huge tins of oil. The walls were decorated with a numerous assortment of rapiers, cutlasses, pikes, battle-axes, daggers and muzzle-loading blunderbusses.

These antiquated weapons took Warren's mind back to the naming of the Cavalier Isle. Long ago, an ill-fated Indianman had lost the route to India. For months it was buffeted around

stormy seas, until finally wrecked on the reef six leagues off the Philippine Islands. Here her cavalier company perished. Native legend gave the reef a curse, and her superstitious sons shunned it. The United States Government gave it a name and a lighthouse to safeguard South China Sea shipping.

Warren's eyes went from the weapons to the corpse. Seemed strange that a weaponless death should take place in so warlike a setting.

Then the big government agent looked bleakly at Pombal. "Your clothes are soiled," he pointed out.

Pombal nodded toward the iron ladder running up the scaffolding to the lantern. "I did my best with the light."

"It was sure tough on your suit. Did you slide down the ladder?"

The Spaniard drew himself up. "I've never taken the trouble to make a study of lighthouse keeping."

Warren said nothing. Getting to his feet, he made two careful rounds of the room. On the second trip he stopped at the newly arrived supplies. He examined them minutely. Then looking up, he spoke to Old Man Nolan:

"There's no wicking here."

"Manuel had 'nuff to last for a coupla days," hastily explained the tender skipper, "so I didn't overload the boat. Fact is, sir, I have it aboard right now." Nolan glanced sharply about the shack, then pointed to a box near the bunk. "There oughta be some in that, sir."

"There is," said Flint Warren. "And Manuel's been careless with government property." The Manila investigator made another round of the shack. Once he turned sharply to find Pombal's mocking eyes on his back.

The Spaniard's twist of a smile tightened in contempt. "I trust this farce will soon end, Lieutenant Warren. I would like to get back to the mainland."

"Maybe to see Infanta?"



"Infanta?" repeated Pombal. He shrugged his slim shoulders. "There have been so many—names elude me."

"And in the morning," Warren went on, "the Luzon would learn that Infanta had died a 'natural death.' Right?"

Pombal sneered openly. "This has gone far enough. I demand that you take me to the mainland. If you persist in your foolish idea—take along the body, too. Have it examined. I wish to leave at once!" He faced Old Man Nolan. "Are you ready?"

The skipper of the lighthouse tender looked to Warren. "Aye, sir, I told you right along that nothin' was amiss. You said yourself that Manuel ain't been shot or poisoned. If I may say, sir—"

Flint Warren shut him up with a wave of his hand. "Pombal is so damn anxious to pull out—I'm going to stick around awhile." Warren tossed away his cigarette. "I'm beginning to like the place!"

**H**E TOOK hold of the iron ladder leading to the light. "I'll get a better view of things from up there." The big investigator quickly ascended the ladder. And every step he took he could feel Pombal's sinister eyes boring into him.

Up and up went Flint Warren, the scaffolding narrowing as he climbed. He paused at the great oil tub which was filled by hand ladling. Far below him he could see the full stretch of the treacherous reef stealing out into the billowing expanse of the South China Sea.

Then Warren studied the construction of the light. Eight flat wicks ran from the tub of oil up through a slitted iron sheet. Each wick was operated by a thumb-screw on top of the metal sheet. Also on the metal sheet was a glass cupola with a window for each wick.

Warren had to climb up on the catwalk circling the lantern to see the thumb-screws, for the glass was piled high with millions of moths. The

wicks, he noted, were screwed up clear of the oil tub, and had burned out for lack of fuel. This explained the sudden glare of light he had seen on the water last night. The wicks had been turned up too high, and not replaced.

Slowly, Warren went down the scaffolding. Not far from the roof of the shack he paused to inspect the ironwork. Minutes later, he started down, slowly—and very thoughtfully.

In the shack he slid into his chair and fired another cigarette.

"Well," demanded Pombal, "are we going?"

"We're going all right," said Warren flatly.

"Good," grinned Pombal.

"You can sit down now," offered Warren. "I don't think you've got the guts to take it standing up."

The Spaniard eased himself into a chair and relaxed comfortably. "Gracias," his teeth flashed genially.

"Manuel's testimony almost stretched your neck, didn't it?" asked Warren.

Pombal nodded. "The poor fellow suffered under a delusion. But justice triumphed."

"Anyway," continued Warren, "suppose we say—just for an argument—that you were guilty of your wife's murder. Then your best way of getting hunk—would be to hang Manuel. Right?"

Pombal pinched his mustache. "Suppose you prove that Manuel was hung. Suppose you prove that he was strangled—that his neck was broken." The Spaniard nodded his head toward Manuel. "His neck was not broken. Even you—can see that."

For several moments Flint Warren studied the walls of the shack. Then he looked up at Pombal, saying:

"You must have made a specialty of Roman history."

The Spaniard eyed him silently.

"Specially the Christian era," went on Warren. "The Romans didn't like 'em. Fed 'em to animals—burned 'em—and—"

Pombal got out of his chair, backed to the wall.

Then Warren smiled for the first time since he had set foot on the reef. And it was not a pleasant sight to see. He pointed up to the lantern and said slowly:

"Why didn't you replace the wicks in the lamp—when the light went out?"

He got no further. With a twisting leap Pombal snatched a rapier from the wall. Thrusting it out before him, he lunged at Old Man Nolan, who stood nearest the door.

Warren's hand, still pointing upward, flicked off his helmet and scaled it at Pombal's face. The visor struck the Spaniard's nose, momentarily blinding him.

And in that moment Warren crossed the room. His knotted fist thudded against Pombal's jaw. Pombal went down, moaning. The rapier clattered to the floor.

"Couldn't chance a bullet," said Warren to Nolan. "I want him to hang in good health." Warren bent over and clicked handcuffs on Pombal's wrists. "By the way, Nolan, I want your tender to run Pombal back to the mainland. Tomorrow I'll send out an-

other lightkeep. You watch the light tonight."

"Aye, sir, that I'll do. But tell me, sir, how was the lad killed? I can't get the course of things."

Warren took up a handful of wicking. "The reason Pombal didn't replace the wicks last night—was because he was using them for another purpose. Look at the rust stains on this wicking—and on Pombal's suit. He used the wicking to hang Manuel from the scaffolding above. And he got himself all mussed up doing it."

"But Manuel's neck—" began Nolan.

"Manuel was hanged the Roman way, Nolan—by the feet! And the heavy shoes he wore prevented any marks of the wicking showing on his feet."

"It was a horrible death. Blood rushed to his brain—and slowly killed him. Then Pombal laid him in the bunk. He knew the Filipino's body would have the appearance of a natural death."

Pombal sat up groggily on the floor. Flint Warren jerked him to his feet. His eyes were bleak when he said: "Manila will treat you to a hanging, Pombal. It's shorter than yours—but the result is the same."

