

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume
35

CONTENTS FOR
MARCH, 1940

Number
2

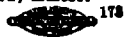
Cover Design	Hannes Bok	
<i>Illustrating "The Horror in the Glen" (page 13)</i>		
The Horror in the Glen	Clyde Irvine	7
<i>A story of dreadful doom, and the "little people" of Scotland</i>		
The Dweller	H. P. Lovecraft	20
<i>Verse</i>		
Train for Flushing	Malcolm Jameson	21
<i>Curious tale of the Flying Dutchman, in which time reverses itself</i>		
The Song of the Slaves	Manly Wade Wellman	30
<i>What weird chant sounded its blood-chilling message through the night?</i>		
The Golden Spider	Seabury Quinn	39
<i>Fourchette over-reached herself when she made a compact with the Devil</i>		
Slaves of the Gray Mold	Thorp McClusky	56
<i>A powerful weird tale, about a parasitic fungus from outer space</i>		
"Broken is the Golden Bowl"	Virgil Finlay	79
<i>Pictorial interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's "Lone"</i>		
A Million Years in the Future (Part 2)	Thomas P. Kelley	80
<i>The weirdest interplanetary story ever printed—a tale of the Black Raiders</i>		
Bramwell's Guardian	August W. Derleth	110
<i>An odd story about a Druid ring found on Salisbury Plain</i>		
The Specter of Virginia	Clive Leonard	115
<i>A short ghost tale of the American Revolution</i>		
It Happened to Me: A Department of True Weird Stories:		
The Centurion's Prisoner	Lindsay Nisbet	119
The Eyrie		121
<i>Our readers interchange opinions</i>		

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter September 24, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. Single copies, 15 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian, postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF THE MONTH



"To the unspeakable horror of the silent watcher, he lunged upward with the sharp blade."

The Specter of Virginia

By CLIVE LEONARD

A brief ghost tale of the American Revolution

WHEN the defeated army of Lord Cornwallis surrendered to the forces under George Washington, an enemy officer named Captain Alastair Graham found himself paroled in the custody of a namesake, Lieutenant Gerald Graham, a Southerner on Washington's staff.

They soon discovered that they were descended from the original Grahams in Scotland and, in consequence, discussed many of the family characteristics.

The American, on his part, found a

depth of spiritual belief in the war-hardened Scotsman, while the Scot discovered, in his kinsman, one who was as keenly interested in the strange and sometimes weird legends of the family as he was in describing them.

Thus, with this bond established, it was but a matter of time before Gerald Graham confided in Captain Alastair Graham the story which had become known as the "Specter of Virginia."

"I was ten years old," began Gerald, "when, rummaging among the collection

of oddments in the attic I found a rusty, stained dagger, such as you wear in your stocking-top and which is called a '*skean dbu*' or black knife, in the Gaelic. I was surprised that my father had not added it to his prized collection of heirlooms, which included scarred claymores, battered shields and ancient armorial equipment.

"I saw that it was a valuable weapon. A blood-red ruby was set in the handle and it was chased with silver. I realized that my father would not approve if I purloined it for my own room, but, boy-like, I coveted it.

"So I began to clean the rusty blade. The harder I rubbed those stains the deeper they seemed to become. The sun, slanting into the attic, made me almost drop the weapon in horror, for those stains were crimson!

"At first I thought that the effect of the sun, shining through the ruby, was playing tricks with my eyesight, but you can well judge my revulsion when I saw that the stains were *piling up*—piling up to actual blood which suddenly spilled over and ran on to my fingers!

"I was young, a mere child, and I could have been forgiven if I had run screaming from the attic. But, curiously, no sooner did that red stream strike my hands than my racing pulse slowed. I found that I was deadly cold and calmer than I have ever been since.

"I stayed up there with the dagger dripping for a long time until, hearing sounds below, I suddenly thrust it beneath some old papers, when it stopped pouring its scarlet drops as quickly as it had begun.

"Nevertheless, the attic had a powerful fascination for me. An eery, nerve-tingling excitement called me insistently, and although I fought it as something ghastly and dangerous, I found myself submitting to an overpowering impulse to fondle that bloody knife as another might fondle a cat.

"IT WAS a habit by now, and even through my school and college years, whenever I managed to get home, I found my way to the attic and once again drew forth the dripping *skean dbu*. It never failed to pour out its grisly liquid and the sensation of coldness that rushed over me on these occasions was almost like a drug.

"I struggled against the impulse, but eventually surrendered myself to its baneful influence. On these occasions I overheard guests declare that they had been subjected to harrowing experiences beneath our roof and, in time, many of them refused to sleep there or to remain with us after midnight.

"Now I must revert to an incident which, painful as it was to all of us, was extremely so to one whose love and affection were most precious to me.

"On the occasion of my sixteenth birthday, which took place on a Sunday, my family had invited Miss Stella Manners, the lovely daughter of a near-by neighbor, to spend the week-end with us. She was a most beautiful and lady-like girl and it was understood that, in due time, our families and estates would be joined when Stella and I were married.

"The festivities were continued until well past midnight, when I bade Stella good-night. We kissed on the stairway and then, with her candle shedding a glimmering light on the old pictures that lined the walls, she retired. I was very tired myself and in a very short time was fast asleep.

"Somewhere between two-thirty and three o'clock in the morning a frightful shriek rent the quiet of our home. Again that unearthly shriek rang out and I made haste to throw on a gown.

"Dashing into the hall I stopped in terror and amazement.

"Stella Manners, her hair like a black banner behind her, was flying down the

hallway as if the fiends of Hell were after her.

"The stark terror in her eyes struck me motionless so that I was rooted to the ground. The great pupils of her eyes were wide in horror—a horror such as I have not seen upon the faces of the dead in battle.

"And now—as she suddenly caught sight of my face—her shrieks were redoubled, ringing in my ears like the doleful screech of some eldritch witch. Her head snapped back to stare with mad eyes at whatever shade pursued her, and then she covered her face to blot out the sight of me and screamed again.

"Our other guests, aroused by this terrible scene, were quick to aid her. Trembling in every nerve, she broke from their tenderly restraining hands, leaping into the air and shrieking again and again.

"It was very fortunate that among our guests was the family physician, Doctor Elton, who administered a sedative, and, under the watchful gaze of my mother, Stella drifted off into a troubled sleep in a room adjoining that of my parents.

"Since that day I have not spoken to Stella nor she to me. But through my parents I discovered that she had experienced a most awful and nerve-racking vision in our house that night.

"SHE had awakened to find a cold, almost icy draft sweeping across her bed. Involuntarily, she had stretched out her hand to pull the coverlet higher—and had stopped, immobile and nerveless, at the sight which met her eyes!

In a patch of greenish light from whose center it seemed the icy draft emanated she saw the figures of two young Highlanders, one of whom, she had tearfully told my mother, was exactly like me!

"The other, slim and dark and dressed in vivid garments that had a French influence, seemed related to him, for he had

the same high cheek-bones and the same bearing of arrogant pride.

"As she watched them, fascinated as to whether they were of this world or the next, they began to quarrel—in silence. Their faces contorted savagely and they gripped their long claymores. Suddenly, both weapons flashed from the scabbards and in an instant they were fighting madly, bitterly, silently—but *to the death!*

"The fight swayed this way and that. They pressed with deadly eagerness. Both swords, swung with demoniac energy, crashed together and snapped off short, and as if moved by a common impulse both men threw the shards away and drew their shining dirks.

"They circled, each seeking for a lethal stroke, and their rage-distorted faces and the black hatred that seemed to stream from their eyes chilled Stella with mortal dread. She sat up in bed, clutching the clothes around her knees, and watched with fascinated eyes, while the deadly duel continued.

"Finally one of them, the one least like me, was victorious and twisted the other's dirk from his hand. His opponent fell to the ground on one knee and in the instinctive motion allowed his grasping hand to drop on the ready hilt of his *skean dhu*.

"To the unspeakable horror of the silent watcher he lunged upward with the sharp blade, tearing into the entrails of his antagonist who, at that instant, was about to deal him his death blow.

"The man with the dirk must have let his soul go out in a scream of agony, for his mouth shot open instantly and his eyes stuck from his head in a frightful glare. In the same motion the other rose and with swift, slicing strokes reduced that face to bloody ribbons before plunging his *skean dhu* into his enemy's heart.

"That was the final blow also to Stella. What happened after that you already know."

Gerald Graham, breathing deeply, ceased speaking.

"It was, indeed, a frightful experience," said Captain Alexander Graham wearily. He rose, his face gray, and tugged at his belt. "And, naturally, you want to know what it portends, why you and yours are subjected to this awful visitation?"

Gerald nodded. "Yes!" he answered eagerly. "Can you tell me?"

"I can!" the Scot said quietly. "But first you must promise me that you will either send word home to do it, or do it yourself. And what I want you to do is to burn that *skean dhu* you found—burn it in a fierce, hot flame so that no vestige of it is left!"

"Certainly!" Gerald promised, wonderingly. "But why?"

"If this is not done," Alastair said seriously, "neither you nor your people will ever know freedom from this horror. It will be with you as long as that dagger is with you.

"We know of it at home," he continued. "We call it the bloody *skean dhu* of Colin Graham, one of our wildest ancestors, one from whom you are descended. This Colin killed his cousin in that awful duel many years ago and fled the vengeance of the family.

"Perhaps your father knew of it. Perhaps he did not wish to shadow your life with the guilty knowledge of your forebears. In any event it is on *your* side. Had it been us—we would have suffered in like manner.

"I am glad you told me this story, for it explains, improbable though it sounds, the death of my younger brother, Ian. He was the standard-bearer of the regiment in our last battle with your army."

"I was in that battle," Gerald said.

"You were not always with George Washington's staff, then?" asked Alastair, and receiving a negative shake of the head smiled bleakly.

"Did you then cut down the standard-bearer?" he asked. "Was it you I saw on a bay horse, dashing into the battle and leaping madly over the fallen to run your saber through my brother Ian's body?"

Gerald nodded, dumbly. His face was a mask of horror.

"You could not help it," the Scotsman said sadly. "It was beyond your control. That 'enemy' was your own blood-kin. And in appearance he was as like the victim of that bloody duel as you, Gerald Graham, are like that long-dead clansman, Colin—*his murderer!*"

His hand stretched across the table and Gerald seized it eagerly. Tears were in his eyes as he gazed at his war-weary kinsman, noting without shame that he also was in tears.

IT IS pleasant to report that when the American forces achieved final victory, Gerald returned to his home and, meeting Stella again, told her the whole story, omitting nothing. She, loving him through all these years, and comforting his mother when his father died during the campaign, stood with her arms about him as the fateful *skean dhu* was given to the flames.

On the instant of the final dissolution of the dreadful danger, a faint scream echoed from the furnace, startling them so that they drew quickly apart. But, realizing that the baleful weapon was now gone and its hateful influence removed from their lives forever, they came together again, smiling into each other's eyes, their lips meeting in a long kiss.

The Grahams of Virginia, even to this day, travel to a lonely grave up North, where, beside a small stone inscribed: "Here lies the body of Ensign Ian Graham, the Royal Highlanders, who fell bravely on the battlefield," they reverently place a wreath of flowers in which, all the way from Scotland, a spray of heather finds an honored position.