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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"Zarchon stared down at the white-haired doctor."

The Spider's Web

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

An eery weird detective story of grim happenings and stark, panic terror

ONCE more the maze of roads brought Jeff Lawton back to the entrance of the forbidding-looking estate. The big, rough-hewn detective braked his coupé with a snort of disgust. Through the single opening in the stone wall, he glimpsed a weather-beaten mansion set in a wilderness of unkempt shrubbery and winter-denuded trees.

"Deserted, probably," Lawton growled. Suddenly, however, he saw his mistake. A thin, blue exclamation point of smoke rose against the bank of black thunderheads. An occupied mansion out here in this wild, desolate section of the Catskills! Strange at this bleak period of the year!

Spirits lifted, Lawton drove through

the entrance and along the grass-grown drive, finally coming to a halt under a porte-cochère. Blinds drawn over dirty windows, peeling paint and decayed-looking steps gave the place an air of desolation and desertion. Stout iron bars at the windows added a prison aspect.

The big detective stepped out of his car and mounted the creaking steps. He pulled a rusted bell-knob, and heard a jangle somewhere within. Minutes crawled as he waited, and an inner foreboding warned him to be on his way. With a strong man's contempt for fear, he ignored the uneasy feeling.

An insurance company had sent him into the region to try to discover the reasons behind the disappearance of cars which, driving through this district, had vanished completely. Not only cars, but drivers! Lawton had learned nothing. The maze of roads had taken him past one deserted summer place after another; always, however, he had come back to this entrance, unable to find his way out. The approach of a storm was evident in the thickening air, and Lawton was anxious to reach the main highway before darkness fell and the storm struck.

Abruptly a heavy step sounded, and the door was opened to a crack. Lawton stiffened with surprize. In the crack was a glimpse of a crimson uniform, worn by a gigantic negro. The Nubian's countenance was sullen, and a grayish scar was drawn from one ear to below the ugly, twisted mouth. Interest flickered in the sullen black eyes. The negro opened the door wide and motioned Lawton to enter.

The detective shook his red head. "I'm trying to find my way to Ruyskyll," he started to explain, only to have his voice die on a choked note as the negro opened his mouth and pointed at the red interior,

His tongue had been cut out!

THE negro indicated by gestures that Lawton should enter the living-room to the right, and that he would bring someone who could talk. Astonished at his discovery, Lawton obeyed without question.

The room was large and cold and smelled musty. But a small fire burned in a grate, and Lawton crossed the room to stand before it. He had not reached the fireside, however, when he heard a *click* and wheeled. The door by which he had entered was closed!

His pulses pounding, Lawton strode swiftly across the room, trying the door. Locked! He pounded on the oak panels. No response!

Lawton reflected on his reason for coming to this region. Cars passing through here in winter had disappeared with their drivers. *And all roads, unless you knew your way out, led to this deserted mansion!* Alarm suddenly chilled the big detective's heart. He removed his automatic, released the safety-catch, and slipped it into his coat pocket. Then he made a reconnaissance of the room. Four windows, all barred in such a manner as to give a crowbar difficulties. Only one door.

And the lock clicked again in this door at that moment. Lawton's hand slipped into his pocket, closing on the automatic. But it was not the gigantic negro who entered.

The man oozing through the door weighed, Lawton guessed, at least four hundred pounds. Even so, his clothes were too large, the sleeves of his coat extending to his knuckles. His fat face was dark and oily-looking, and his black, unkempt hair framed the large face and straggled over eyes set under heavy brows. But the brow above the eyes was surprizingly high. And the eyes held a strange gleam of cunning or shrewdness

—the eyes of a fanatic, or a genius. Lawton's mind flashed to the grand piano in this room. A musician, perhaps?

"I must apologize for the actions of my servant," the repulsively obese creature said, his thick lips quirking. "Cloud mistrusts everyone, and I can not break him of the habit of locking people in this room while he goes to call me."

Lawton nodded. "Sorry to bother you, but I'm lost. Perhaps you could tell me how to get on to Ruyskyll."

"Certainly; certainly. But if you're a stranger, you'd never find your way out. I suspected the reason for your call, and asked Cloud to get my car from the garage. In a moment he'll be able to lead you to the main highway."

Lawton's apprehensions dwindled. "Kind of you, sir."

"Not at all, not at all." The sensuous lips were smiling again as the elephantine man crossed the floor, extending his hand. "Doctor Zarchon is my name. Perhaps you're familiar with my works on biologic chemistry?"

Disarmed by the exhibition of friendship, Lawton extended his hand. But the large, damp hand made a quick gesture, closing on the detective's wrist, instead. Cold steel circled Lawton's wrist, and he heard the *click* of a handcuff as he tried, too late, to draw his hand back. Impossible! The other end of the 'cuff circled the fat wrist of Doctor Zarchon!

The reason for the over-long sleeves became instantly apparent. They covered the handcuffed wrist and part of the hand in the palm of which the doctor carried his handcuff.

Lawton, however, had been in tight places too many times before to lose more than an instant in surprize. His left hand shot toward the pocket holding the automatic. If he could reach it, he still held the aces!

Zarchon anticipated the movement. A damp, surprizingly strong hand closed on Lawton's left wrist. A wrench, and the red-headed detective was thrown off balance. At the same moment, the fat doctor threw himself forward. His enormous weight was too much at an instant when Lawton was trying to keep his footing.

Lawton went down, the huge man on top of him. His head struck a bare space between small rugs. Lightning streaked before his pain-filled eyes, to be followed by a short interval of blackness.

GAINING consciousness, Jeff Lawton found himself lying on his handcuffed hands. Doctor Zarchon was speaking in French to Cloud. The giant negro now wore only the crimson pantaloons of his uniform; his gargantuan chest was bare to the waist.

"What's the meaning of this?" Lawton snapped.

Zarchon continued giving his orders in the tongue unfamiliar to the detective. The gleam was in Cloud's black eyes again, a gleam almost fanatical. The sullen countenance explained itself now. Cloud must be a Haitian, perhaps a follower of some voodoo cult.

Zarchon leaned over Lawton, and his half-circling hands gave the detective the impression of some large, fat spider. "You are to help us," he said, "by giving a blood transfusion. You do not mind?"

Lawton's blue eyes hardened. "Certainly I mind!"

"No matter," said Zarchon lightly, and went out.

Presently he returned with some instruments. While Cloud leaned a heavy knee on Lawton's stomach to hold him down, the doctor methodically rolled up the detective's sleeve, and, despite Jeff's effort to struggle, took a sample of his blood.

"Cloud will place you in a chair," said the doctor quite amiably. "I'll go to my laboratory and see whether your blood is suitable for the transfusion."

"I refuse to submit to a transfusion," Lawton flared.

Thinking of the vanished cars which had come to this region, he added fiercely: "It's known where I am, and if anything happens to me, you'll hear of it."

"Doubtless," said Zarchon soothingly. With a shrug of his sloping, fleshy shoulders he left the room.

The giant Nubian lifted Lawton as though he were a child, and deposited him in a chair. The detective was on his feet in a flash. Cloud's fist smashed against his chest, knocking him back into the chair. Twice more Lawton tried to rise, only to be struck by that big fist.

Realizing the futility of his efforts, he relaxed, watching the scowling negro, trying to plan. With his hands manacled, he was powerless against the negro with anything less than a gun. His own, he could tell by the lightness of his pocket, was gone. Perhaps bribery might work! Lawton attempted it, but the big guard showed no understanding. Then he attempted to question Cloud. The big face did not change expression.

Lawton next turned his mind to Zarchon. Why did he want the blood? Was it really for a transfusion or for some ghastly experiment upon which Zarchon had fixed his disordered brain? Was this the place where the other cars had vanished? Had other drivers, caught in this maze, stopped here to ask directions and been caught as he was caught?

It was a long time before Zarchon returned. His eyes glittered strangely, and he rubbed his damp hands together. He removed another pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and while Cloud held the de-

tective's legs, snapped them on the prisoner's ankles.

"Zarchon," Lawton snapped, "you can't get away with this."

"Out here in these mountains?" Zarchon laughed sardonically. "Who could know? Besides, you are to be my guest. For a while, my friend, for a while!"

Speechless with fury, Lawton could do nothing when the big negro raised him to his shoulder like a sack of grain, and walked toward the door. Cloud climbed the stairs two steps at a time. Zarchon puffed along more slowly behind, pulling himself up each step by the banister.

At the top, the Nubian passed down a hall, waited at a door at the end for Zarchon. The doctor unlocked the door, and Cloud walked into a long, narrow, bare room.

FROM his elevated position, Lawton could see a number of peculiarly constructed hammocks. Four were limp and empty, but the fifth, in the darkened corner of the room, entirely circled an emaciated figure. Lawton saw the man's white hair and wide, staring eyes, and a shudder passed over him.

What chamber of horrors was this? That hammock was like the skeins which a spider draped around the body of a fly to trap it. Were these hammocks spiderwebs for humans? And what was the inhuman purpose for which these human flies were being kept in this bare room?

Lawton had seen enough to fear the worst. He kicked convulsively, breaking Cloud's grip. He struck the ground hard on his side. Pain couldn't dull his senses, however, in that moment of desperation. He got his feet under him somehow, and was half raised to his feet when Cloud struck at him. Ducking, Lawton dived head first at the big negro's belly.

His head seemed to be wrenched from

his shoulders. But Cloud bellowed with pain—a deep, formless sound which came from his throat. Before Cloud could recover, Lawton butted again. The negro reeled backward, somehow keeping his feet.

A flash at one side! Lawton's eyes shifted. Zarchon was smashing down with an automatic butt. The red-headed detective tried to jerk his head away. Failed! Stars burst before his eyes, and his knees buckled.

As he struck the floor, Cloud was upon him again, his eyes blazing. He jerked the detective erect, and struck him with the flat of his ham-like palm. Lawton thought his jaw must be broken.

"Cloud!" Zarchon thundered, raising his automatic.

The negro dropped Lawton, cowering from the weapon. Zarchon pointed it at the big, black chest, and roared in French. Cloud promptly picked Lawton up, carrying him to the hammock at the opposite side of the room from the white-haired man. At least it was by the single window.

Dropping Lawton into the wide hammock, Cloud brought the two sides together until they overlapped, and then tied the two ropes fastened to either side together, knotting them on the under side.

Zarchon then motioned the negro away. His thick lips curved in the smile of a hungry beast; his dark eyes glittered. He spun the hammock swiftly half a dozen times, as a spider spins a fly which has blundered into its trap. Thus closing the two ends to make escape impossible, Zarchon tied each with a rope. The bottom of each rope had a hook which fitted in a ring below each end, making any but the slightest movement of the hammock a thing too difficult to achieve.

"Now," said Zarchon in his hoarse

voice, "we will see to the transfusion, since you fall in with my plans."

Lawton glared. His blood seethed.

While Cloud waited with big arms crossed on his chest, Zarchon departed into an adjoining room, returning with a table, glass tubes, bottles, and the other appurtenances of a transfusion.

Lawton was grimly determined to make the thing impossible; but he soon saw that his own wishes did not enter into the question. The hammock gave him no chance to brace himself for resistance. And when Zarchon, pushing his sleeve up by reaching through the strands of the hammock, had bared his arm, Cloud held it in a grip of steel.

Zarchon then bared his own hairy arm, and Lawton saw that it was pitted with scars. Nausea sickened the detective. What was this fiendish, elephantine man—a vampire? Instead of sucking the blood of his victims, he apparently resorted to frequent transfusions, taking the blood of any hapless victim who stumbled into his web, when that blood matched his own.

Lawton's brain checked with disbelief. Vampires! Spiders! Spider's webs! Were these the reflections of a sane man? It flashed through his mind that he must be losing his reason. Such things in 1935? He must be going mad!

No, it was Doctor Zarchon who was mad! Blood-mad! The explanation of the man's elephantine proportions became clear. Into his body had gone the blood of countless victims. As a spider sucks the blood of a fly, so had Doctor Zarchon, by more modern methods, sucked the blood of his human flies.

Sickening revulsion filled Lawton's heart, and he struggled afresh. But he could not prevent the transfusion. It went forward with a hideous precision which bespoke a practise in taking the blood of

men—and perhaps women—who, like flies, resorted to ineffectual resistance.

And in the end, despite Lawton's efforts, the blood began to flow through the tube—a red stream of life to feed the inhuman passion for blood which motivated this mad doctor. Lawton watched the process, his eyes smarting with fury. That his blood should go to prolong the life of such a monster!

THE transfusion completed at last, Doctor Zarchon staunched the flow of blood from Lawton's wound, and wiped his arm with alcohol—a gesture of solicitude which might have been devoted to better motives. But the big detective knew the gesture was not concern for him. To Doctor Zarchon, he was merely a fly whose life he would prolong as long as possible so that he might supply that monstrous need for blood.

The operation over, Doctor Zarchon motioned Cloud to remove the equipment. His eyes burned feverishly now, as if he had new life.

"I did not take much," he said. "You are a strong man. You should last many weeks. You will be treated well, fed well, for I must keep you in good health."

Weak from loss of blood, Lawton turned away his face. Through the barred window he could see a spot of what must have been garden. It alone was not covered with the rank growth which had overgrown the place. And in that cleared spot were a score or more of little mounds. Graves?

Lawton's heart leapt, then sank. Yes, graves! The graves of Doctor Zarchon's victims! In a few short weeks, he too would occupy one, unless——

It came to Jeff Lawton with a dismaying feeling of emptiness inside that he had solved the mystery of the disappearing cars and disappearing drivers. His

agency had sent him out to solve this problem which had baffled the insurance company. He had solved it, but they would never know that he had.

With a harsh chuckle, Zarchon waddled out of the room. When his steps had died away in the hall, the white-haired man said in a thin voice, "You, too!"

Lawton turned his head. "Surely there's some way we can escape from this maniac?"

The white-haired man forced a pale smile and shook his head. He informed Lawton that he was Doctor Ernest Sawyer.

"Doctor Sawyer," Lawton whispered, "we'll have to plan an escape before this madman kills us."

"There is no escape, my friend. Is there a single object in this bare room that could be used either for escape or as a weapon?"

Lawton had to admit there was not. "But you don't mean to say you have been trussed up that way for weeks, doctor?"

"No, Lawton. Each morning I am released for an hour to pace this room. Cloud stands at the locked door with a club. And I am too weak from Zarchon's damnable transfusions to prove any match for that giant negro when he's armed and I am not."

"But with both of us, if we attack at once."

"We will not be released at the same time," the doctor said heavily. "There was a man here before me, but he died many days ago. There will be others after us to feed this vampire. But no two will ever be released for exercise at the same time."

Lawton shuddered. "You don't mean to tell me, doctor, that this man lives on human blood? Surely you don't believe in vampires——"

"I have to believe in Doctor Zarchon's

type of vampire, or question my own sanity. After all, is not seeing believing?"

"But can a human exist on blood alone?" Lawton asked incredulously.

"Not on blood alone, no. Doubtless he eats prodigiously. As a member of his profession, he confided in me when I first lost my way and came here for information. He declared that he had some serious unbalance bordering on a chronic anemia. His body could not produce sufficient red corpuscles. To supply the want and prevent anemia, he resorted to blood transfusions. The unbalance, he claims, became more pronounced, until his very life depended on a larger and larger quantity of blood."

Lawton felt his flesh crawling. "Such a monster should be destroyed! Surely there's no truth in what he says."

"I'm afraid," said Doctor Sawyer, "that there is an element of truth in his assertions. But I believe he exaggerates his condition. I think his craving has become an obsession which has upset his reason. Blood has become a drug to him."

"A great mind dethroned can produce the greatest monsters. And Doctor Zarchon's work in biologic chemistry was world-famous before he vanished. His perverted appetite for blood suggests a great mind which had gotten out of control."

Lawton's jaw muscles showed white and strained. "He should be destroyed!"

"True. But who can do so? We are merely flies in his web! I have planned escape since the instant I entered this fiendish chamber. And now I shall die without effecting it. Another transfusion, I think, will finish me."

Lawton, however, was no fatalist. He began to plan his escape, and it soon became evident to him that he could do nothing until he could escape from the hammock. But how? His pockets had

been stripped. And the hammock was of stout weave.

Nevertheless, it must be accomplished somehow. Lawton began to pluck at the fibers. Steadily, persistently, he filed at one strand with his finger-nail. After what seemed ages to his cramped, aching fingers, he broke the strand.

WITHOUT stopping to rest, he started to work on an adjacent strand. Minutes later, it broke. He saw that it would take days, perhaps weeks. At the end of that time, his finger-nails might be so worn down and broken that they would no longer serve him to complete the task. The broken strands might be discovered, and he would be removed to another hammock. And, if he eventually freed himself from the human spider-web, he was still prisoner in this chamber of horrors—without means of defense or escape. He was still handcuffed.

Hopeless situation! But Jeff Lawton believed in meeting one problem at a time. Better at least a fight for his life than Doctor Sawyer's fatalistic resignation to death.

Darkness fell, and the brooding storm struck at the same moment. Lightning flashes slashed open the black sky, throwing the room into bluish-white relief. The shadow accompaniment of the thunder drums followed, rumbling, clapping sharply, rattling the frame house. And, as the storm continued and the night wore on, Lawton was grateful for the angry elements. Lightning and thunder kept him from falling asleep, and he was able to work hour after hour, long after his aching hands and arms clamored for rest. But finally he could work no longer.

He was awakened by the entrance of Cloud. The negro carried a breakfast tray, released Doctor Sawyer, and permitted him to eat. Then Doctor Sawyer

tried to walk a little, but he was too weak to stand for many minutes at a time. When his hour of freedom was up, Cloud replaced the handcuffs, and trussed the dying doctor up in the hammock.

Allowed the same freedom, Lawton washed in a little bathroom a few doors down the hall, observing that there was nothing within that might be used as a weapon, ate heartily, and then flexed his muscles and paced the floor to renew his strength. But his heart was in his throat during this promenade for fear Cloud would observe the broken strands, and he confined his pacing to the darker portion of the room to keep the negro's eyes away from his hammock. Lawton went peacefully back to his web, knowing that he had no chance against Cloud's club, and any resistance on his part would lead to the discovery of the broken strands.

So it went for two more days, during all of which time Lawton continued working feverishly, praying his work would not be discovered during his morning exercise. And during all that time, Doctor Sawyer grew weaker and weaker, until his conversations were limited to monosyllables.

THE morning of the fourth day, Doctor Zarchon, paid them a visit. He gave Lawton a satisfied glance, and the red-headed detective's heart pounded heavily for fear the monster would turn him in some way and discover the broken strands. Presently he walked over to Doctor Sawyer, and after a cursory examination said:

"You can serve me but once more, doctor."

Lawton's blood boiled. "I'll give you your hellish transfusion," he snarled. One more transfusion, he knew, would kill the old man.

Zarchon's thick lips curled in a sensu-

ous grin. "You will keep. You will have that honor another time. Doctor Sawyer is going fast now."

Despite Lawton's furious words, Doctor Zarchon prepared his equipment for another transfusion from the diminished blood supply of the old man. Lawton writhed in helpless fury. He cursed Zarchon; but the monster did not appear to hear.

The transfusion accomplished, Doctor Zarchon stared down at the white-haired doctor from beneath his tangle of black hair. The room was deathly still, except for the moaning of Doctor Sawyer. And presently that moaning changed to a death-rattle. He was dying.

Zarchon rattled out an order in French, and Cloud hastened to obey. A few minutes later, Lawton saw him working in the cleared place below the window with pick and shovel. Digging Doctor Sawyer's grave!

Alone with the dying man, Lawton worked frantically with the strands beneath his hands. So many had been broken that it was easier now, despite his bleeding finger-tips and aching hands.

Presently Cloud had finished the grave, and he disappeared at the back. Hammering sounded. Was he building a coffin?

Lawton worked with desperate haste. Strand after strand parted in his bleeding fingers. The hole beneath him was growing.

Cloud came about an hour later with the coffin, placing it beside the dying man's hammock. The death-rattle still sounded, however, so Cloud went out, locking the door behind him. To Lawton's disappointment, he took his hammer with him.

Beads of perspiration stood out on Lawton's forehead as he struggled with the strands. Would the hammock part

now? He wrenched and shoved, twisted and squirmed. More strands parted. The hole widened. Another effort, and he felt space below him. Jack-knifing his body, he squeezed through the hole, head and feet last.

He struck the floor with a faint thump. Nerves taut, he listened. But no one seemed to have heard the sound.

Drenched, now that he had so nearly accomplished what he had set his heart on, Lawton drew his long arms down over his hips, and finally, by squirming and sweating, got his bound hands over his feet. His hands were now in front of him as he staggered to his feet, in a position where they might be of some use to him. If he only had that hammer!

Desperately, he scanned the room for a weapon. The board coffin! Lawton hobbled over to it, his heart pumping hard. If he could only tear off enough to use as a club! He wrenched at a board in the top.

And at that moment, he heard the stairs creak. Cloud! Lawton's heart jerked. He wrenched at the board, and the creak gave him away. A bellow sounded outside—a bellow that seemed to come from the negro's huge chest. The lock was rattling.

Lawton wrenched with all his strength, but Cloud had done too good a job of nailing. The board splintered off in a thin fragment. A blow from that long splinter would never bother Cloud for a moment!

But Lawton turned with it in his hands as the door swung open. A fragile hope! Cloud rushed toward him, his hammer raised for a blow.

The detective was raising his long, needle-pointed splinter. But he realized he could never get it up and down in time. Cloud's bare chest gave Lawton one

of those split-second ideas which sometimes mean salvation.

He brought the splinter up suddenly. Cloud either failed to see the movement or in his blind rush believed the splinter unworthy of consideration. His charge brought his bare waist directly against the point of the splinter with tremendous force. Cloud's huge mouth opened with surprize and horror. A howl of rage ended on a scream of pain. Blood gushed from his stomach in a crimson stream.

Lawton, on the blunt end of the splinter, was hurled backward by the charge. And before he could gain his feet, he heard Doctor Zarchon's voice on the stairs.

The detective flung himself across the floor, crawling, and slammed the door. Cloud was writhing in pain, lying in a pool of his own blood. Doctor Sawyer was already dead. And Zarchon's heavy steps could be heard in the corridor. He was shouting questions at Cloud.

Lawton grasped the dropped hammer, and stood by the door. His pulses were pounding hard as he waited. A moment later, Doctor Zarchon kicked open the door. At sight of Lawton, his thick lips parted in surprize. But his surprize was only momentary. He brought up his automatic, firing at the detective's head. But for that try at the difficult head-shot, Lawton would have died at that moment.

But the bullet whined in his ear. And before a second shot could be fired, Lawton's two manacled hands, gripping the hammer tightly, completed their swift arc. The hammer was buried in that tangle of wild, black hair. The black hair was strained with red as the vampire-man slumped on the floor, already dead when he touched it.

Lawton took the madman's keys, unlocking his handcuffs to free ankles and

hands. And then he turned his attention to Cloud. But the negro was in the last throes of death, his eyes already glazing.

"And so," Lawton muttered reflectively,

"the fly breaks the spider's web! And now, if I can find where Zarchon concealed those cars on his grounds, I can tell the boss that the case is closed."