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# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Strangling Hands

By M. G. MORETTI

*The story of the Eye that was stolen from an idol in a jungle shrine,  
and the weird doom that pursued those who stole it*

**T**HREE was no explanation, but just a brief telegram, which was delivered to me at the lake where I was spending the summer:

NEED HELP STOP FORGIVE PAST AND  
COME AT ONCE  
ANTHONY HENDERSON.

It took me some three hours to decide to leave my comparatively cool summer cabin for Tony Henderson's little apartment, but finally, curiosity overcoming my hatred of the man, I packed an overnight case and headed my Ford for the city.

I remember looking back at my little cabin with a twinge of regret; I wonder how much longer that look would have been had I known then it was to be my last! But personal danger had never entered my mind; danger to Tony Henderson, perhaps, but then I felt no sympathy for him. It was only curiosity that took me to him now—curiosity to know why he had appealed for help from me, of all people.

We had not spoken to each other for over two years; that telegram was the first direct word I had had from him since the day his book had come out. *His book!* The very thought sent a flash of red before my eyes, blinding them to the road ahead. And we had been friends before that, close friends, close as only terrific hardships can make men.

There had been five of us on the Clark-Milroy African Expedition in 1925. We had come back with tales of discoveries

and adventures which, though perhaps not the most important, were certainly the most interesting of the decade. They were tales that needed no fictional skill to make them gripping, no colorful adjectives to vivify them; they thrilled for the mere telling. And I was to tell them to the world; that was the point—I was to be the teller, but Anthony Henderson, in the end, was the man who told.

There had been no legal bond to keep him from writing that book, but it had certainly been a gentleman's agreement that I was to write it. Both Clark and Milroy had asked me to join for just that purpose, and Tony knew it. But what rankled chiefly was his not telling me, letting me prepare the lengthy manuscript only to find on submitting it to my publishers that his book was already on the press. Some said I took my bad luck too heavily; others called Tony Henderson a thief and a cad, but no one who heard that quarrel we staged in the lobby of the Metropolitan Theatre wondered that he and I did not speak again.

And here he was asking me to visit him. He had ten friends to my one, friends who would give him time, money, anything he needed. The only possibility was that something had come up about the expedition, and that he needed advice from someone who had been with it. Captain Clark, Bobbie Milroy, and the Persian—"Cheeky," we called him—they were dead. But what thing important enough could have brought Anthony Henderson to ask me to forgive the past?

I REACHED the dignified, conservative apartment-hotel at dinnertime. Tony's rooms were on the fourth floor facing a sunny, flowery courtyard. It was a strangely incongruous setting for what was to happen that night.

His secretary-valet let me in. I noticed that the man's face was unnaturally gray and that his eyes showed signs of a sleepless night.

"Mr. Henderson is expecting you, sir." He seemed grateful that I had arrived.

Tony turned abruptly from his position at the window.

"Mac! My God, man, but I'm glad

you came!" He came forward eagerly, with outstretched hand.

I ignored the gesture. "Hullo, Tony," I said. Then to cover the awkward pause, "You look damn sick."

He ran a hand across his white forehead. "Do. I?" he said, and laughed.

"Well, what's up?" I demanded rather sharply.

"I generally have dinner downstairs. That all right with you, or shall we go out somewhere?"

Our conversation was perfunctory until the head waiter had found us a table in



"The stone of Nyi was never found after the night of Tony's death."

a secluded corner and Tony had ordered the regular dinner.

"Well, what's up?" I asked again. "Something to do with 1925?"

He started violently. "How'd you know?"

"It wasn't hard to guess. You have friends to go to when you want other things."

He gave a rueful little smile. "Prejudices die hard around you, don't they, Mac? But you'll be glad—in the end—that I wrote that book."

"What is it you want?"

His smile vanished. "You have a lot of data on the religious beliefs and ceremonies of the Bhan-Guru tribe. I need your help."

"If I had had the opportunity of putting it in print, you could have gone to the public library," I said with some bitterness.

There was terror in his eyes. "I'm a dirty skunk, I admit it. I admit anything. But you've got to help me—*got to!*"

And that was the last time I thought of Anthony Henderson's book, until now, months later as I write trying to explain the unexplainable, because courts of law believe that when a man is killed, it must be by a human and visible agent.

"Well," I said, "let's have it."

Although there was no one near us, he lowered his voice.

"It's about the temple of Nyi, and death." He looked up questioningly. "You remember that temple?"

"Of course," I said. "Where the priests of Bhan-Guru laid human sacrifices to Nyi, their god of death. Nothing particularly interesting, as I remember, except the pretty visible proof that the custom was still extant, and the two eyes of the statue that shone a smoky greenish gray or blue at night. Captain Clark took

one out for his collection, as I remember."

Tony's gaze was riveted on my face.

"Well, what about it?" I demanded.

"Do you remember, Mac, how Nyi's victims were killed?"

After a bit I said, "Strangled. Some were throttled to death by the fingers of the priests; others had ropes drawn about their throats. Bloodless but unpleasant. I don't get the connection with you."

"I didn't, either, until seven days ago. We stole that eye, Mac; we ravaged the statue of Nyi. We were the enemies of the god of death. Oh, there's a connection all right."

"If you're going to start some nonsense about a curse running around the globe from one generation to another, you can save your breath. I may be a fool, but I'm not as big a one as that."

"Listen," he said. "On the seventh of July, 1925, we took a stone from the statue of Nyi. It was just after midnight, when the priests were sleeping below the altar steps. Captain Clark put it among his curios in the bank vault when he reached this country. In July of 1926 Captain Clark was murdered."

"I was in Europe at the time," I said dryly, "but I heard from reliable sources that Clark committed suicide."

"You heard that because the courts demand a material explanation of death. They found him locked in an empty boathouse, hanging from a crossbeam."

"Men have been known to hang themselves. It isn't a physical impossibility."

"That's true enough. But no one was able to explain what he stepped off from into space, and—"

"If the jury was satisfied, I am."

"Very well. His collection, including the eye of death, went to Milroy, of course, and a year later—again in July—Bobby died."

"But in a hospital bed," I said, "from a known disease."

"He died of strangulation, just as though the fingers of a priest of Nyi had been at his throat. He died at seven minutes after midnight on the seventh day of the seventh month."

"Good lord, Tony! I refuse to listen to that sort of rot. Bobby's death was tragic enough without having your morbid interpretations. Tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it, but I won't be drawn into admitting the possible power of a baseless superstition."

"Milroy died in July of '27. Two months before that my book had come off the press. That's why 'Cheeky' was the third to die—because Milroy, disgusted with you and me, had willed the collection to him." He fingered a salt-cellar to steady his trembling fingers. "In July of '28, just a year ago, the press got word from South America that a Persian, Hadji Cheekh ol-Molk, who had been with the Clark-Milroy Expedition, had been murdered—done to death by 'person or persons unknown.'"

"'Cheeky' had enemies," I reminded him.

"Yes, and he had the sacred stone of Nyi."

"That's beyond the point—mere coincidence."

"Very well. But 'Cheeky' had the eye; remember that. He was in an open two-seater plane flying from Rio to Victoria. The pilot swore he left the port the second 'Cheeky' had entered the cockpit behind him. Later, when the authorities badgered him, he changed the 'I know' to 'I think.' 'Cheeky' was dead when they landed—strangled to death, and no landings had been made. It was obvious he had been murdered before the plane left Rio at midnight. I thought so, too—

last July. But now—" His voice trailed off into nothingness.

**T**HE man's persistence was getting on my nerves. "That's what *you* think."

"That's what *I* know—now. 'Cheeky' left no will. His personal junk went to some relatives; Captain Clark's collection was sent on to me, because of the book. That's why you may be glad you never got the chance I stole from you."

"Don't be a damn fool, Tony!"

"The Eye is here now, in a safe in my room. And the month is July. It's the sixth day. After midnight it will be the seventh."

"There's absolutely no connection between what you've been telling me and that stone. Coincidence, I'll admit, but anything else is pure bunk."

"So I thought a week ago. But each night since then—" He looked around and then continued in a low, rapid voice. "The first night they came no nearer than the far side of the room."

"What came?"

"The hands" — impatiently — "the hands of a priest of Bhan-Guru. They were black, and the blue light made them shine like liquid jet. The nails were bluish green like the stone. They were there for perhaps a half-minute. Then I turned on the light and looked at the time. It was seven minutes after midnight."

He gave a convulsive shudder and went on, "The next night I waited up for them. At seven after twelve they were there again; this time within six feet of where I sat. And the next night and the next night I waited for them and always they were there and always a little nearer, and when I turned on the light it was always seven minutes after midnight. The fifth night I could reach out to where they were, but my hand touched

nothing—and still—my God!—they were there!"

His whole body was trembling. I put my hand across his wrist and he threw it off.

"Last night I made Johnson—he's my secretary, you saw him—I made him sit up with me. He was like you; he thought I was crazy. But now he knows. They touched my throat last night, gently like the wings of a moth; but they were there—I saw them—jet-black in the blue mist. And when we switched on the lights, it was seven minutes after midnight."

He leaned back in his chair, tipping his glass between trembling thumb and forefinger. "Johnson saw them. Now do you believe?"

I gulped down my coffee, lit a cigarette, and got to my feet before answering. "I don't know, Tony, whether you're a picturesque story-teller or just a damned liar, but I'm going home. Thanks for the dinner and the legend."

Tony's face lost its white tenseness for a look of blank surprise. "You're leaving me, Mac? You're leaving me?" He sprang up and caught me by the shoulders. "You can't go! Don't you understand? It's tonight I need your help—tonight! You've got to help me, Mac." His voice sank to a whisper. "Are you afraid to stay?"

My temper got the better of me. "I've had enough of your lying!"

He looked straight at me. "What I've been telling you is the truth, Mac."

"The truth!" But something in his eyes kept me from pure jeering, led me to explain. "There's a flaw in your tale that you overlooked, Tony," I said quietly. "Why if you were so afraid of hands, did you wait for them in the dark?"

"Not in the dark," he said without a moment's hesitation.

I drew him toward the elevators. "The room was lighted, eh? Very sensible precaution! Then why did you have to turn on the lights to find out the time?"

He turned to me in complete boyish amazement. "Why—why, I don't know. It must have got dark gradually. I don't remember."

"Next time," I suggested, "be more consistent in your story-telling."

"It's the truth," he said. "They must have gone off. I can't explain it, but that's the truth."

**B**ACK in his apartment, I continued to pick flaws. "Well, now, admitting it was light at, say, eleven-thirty, and that it was dark at twelve-fifteen or thereabouts, and that you didn't realize when the change occurred, tell me this: how could you see black fingers in a dark room? You don't suppose you fell asleep and dreamed it all?"

"You've got to stay, you've got to help me, Mac! Together we can keep them off. Alone—I'll die!" He looked suddenly nothing more than a boy, and I was sorry for him. "Think what you like of me, Mac, demand what you like. I'll pay anything to break their power. I want to live!" The high, feverish voice broke to a low, dead monotone. "You have to stay. You understand about the priests of that damned idol. You'll know what to do when they come to get me."

"Wouldn't half a dozen cops with guns be more useful?"

"You won't do that — you can't! They'd say I was crazy and lock me up. And when the time came, I'd be alone with no one to help me." He put his arm through mine. "You'll stay, Mac?"

"If only to prove you a liar," I said cheerfully.

He told Johnson that I was staying, and the man left us for his own room

with an expression in which relief and fear struggled almost comically for supremacy.

"Either he's a damned good actor, Tony, or else he drank too much last night."

But Henderson, fumbling with the combination to the safe, did not hear me. Presently, he closed the safe's door and turned around with a small jewelry box, which he handed me opened. The stone itself was a misty blue green, something like the powdered opaqueness of costume jewelry. About half an inch in diameter and not quite a perfect circle, it was as insignificant an object as one could find.

"It seems innocent enough," I said judicially, returning the box. "It looked more promising when I saw it on the statue."

Without answering, Henderson led me into a small study that opened off from his bedroom, shutting the door behind him.

"Sit down there." He pointed to a chair by the center table. He took the stone from its cotton bed and laid it on the empty table at my elbow. "Now watch it."

He turned off the center light from the switch by the door. I waited in the blackness of the curtained room for perhaps thirty seconds. Then quite suddenly a little blur of light appeared where Tony had laid the stone. It was only a misty blur at first, a fuzzy mistiness that seemed to waver in its own half-light. The colors, blue and green, came out as I watched, but instead of defining the stone they served rather to increase its indefiniteness. The light itself was larger than the stone, but was a part of it, as though the darkness drew from the stone an inner glow. No wonder those child-like jungle creatures had taken it for the eye of their god of death.

"Interested, Mac?" he asked. Then, picking up the stone and replacing it in the cotton-lined box, "Strange rather, isn't it?"

For a minute there in the dark I had felt that same awed wonder, but now I shook it off as absurd.

"No, as a matter of fact, it isn't strange. Any geologist could explain that light for you."

"Yes, but no geologist could explain the hands."

"A glass of whisky may have been the answer to those."

"Is that a hint, Mac?"

"No, thanks. And you're not to drink any either. We'll dispel this ghost theory tonight."

"I drank nothing last night," he said. "Really? Indeed!"

He left the room for a minute and came back with an armful of magazines and newspapers. "Try some of these. They'll interest you more than I will."

Without denying that likelihood, I opened a weekly and was soon feigning deep absorption in an article on salmon fishing, but my thoughts were for ever straying to the figure opposite me. His pipe in his hand, he had not once put it to his lips, but sat with it clenched between his fingers until the white knuckles stood out. His under-lip, drawn between his teeth, seemed strangely red against the grayness of his face.

I KEPT quiet as long as I could, then laid down the article as though I had finished and enjoyed it.

"You ought to take up salmon fishing, Tony. It's as interesting and much more profitable than ghost-stalking."

He turned with a start as though just wakened from a sound sleep.

"Salmon what? Mac, do you remember how Milroy's little dog howled when that

priest of Bhan-Guru tried to stroke her?"  
"Oh, forget it!"

"That man must have been a hundred—dried-up skin, bones showing through like a skeleton's, voice like a reed. But his hands were young and powerful—dark black with nails painted blue-green."

"Say, I agreed to stay here, but not to listen to your memoirs. I remember it just as well as you do; you don't have to tell me."

Tony was looking past me. "Remember, how he tried to tell us that the human sacrifice was an ancient custom not used any more, and how Captain Clark knew he was lying because he'd seen the skeleton of a man behind the altar steps, and how later we found twenty or more, with their necks twisted? And you said that the victims probably hadn't suffered because the execution had been done so skilfully. You still think that, don't you, Mac?"

"Heaven knows what I think, except that you're pretty much of an ass."

He straightened up in his chair, his eyes blazing. "You're the ass, damn you! Answer me: they didn't suffer. Tell me they didn't!"

I got up and went over to him, confident now that Tony Henderson was the victim of a mental delusion rather than the unskilful liar I had thought him.

"No," I said slowly, "they didn't suffer. I'm fairly sure of that. Why do you ask?"

He collapsed with a sigh. After a minute he looked up. "Why'd I ask? When you're in danger of death, it helps to know that it won't be painful." He took out his watch and compared his time with mine. "It's eleven twenty-five," with a shudder; "that means forty-two more minutes, Mac. It is the sixth of July?"

"As far as I know, unless the whole world's gone as coocoo as you seem to be. Now, look here, Tony, there's absolutely no danger of any kind; even if those priests did want to kill you, just wishing it couldn't do it. They're in Africa; you're in America; there are some five thousand miles of ocean between you."

"Miles! And you're quite ready to sit down any evening and listen to a man singing in London. And when you're told that no wires connect you across the ocean and that you're hearing it just as it's being given and at virtually the same time—that very same voice coming across thousands of miles of emptiness—what do you say? If you remember to marvel at all, you say, 'Science certainly is wonderful.' You don't begin to doubt that you're really hearing anything, do you? You don't question that a voice or picture can be sent through the air from anywhere to you, because scientists say it can be done. You don't know how, you just believe them. They talk about the possibilities of recovering the voices of the past or of sending thought-waves, and you believe them. But I'm telling you what I know!"

Unable to answer his arguments with any assurance, I picked up a newspaper and turned to the sports section, hunted in vain for my favorite columnist, and after a brief glance at the other periodicals, looked at my watch.

"It's eighteen minutes of midnight, Tony. What's the program?"

He looked up with a start. "Why, just sit here, I guess."

"I've been thinking, Tony," I said, "that, perhaps, you really did see those hands."

"I did see them, Mac."

"Have you any acquaintances who

might go to some trouble to play a practical joke on you?"

He frowned perplexedly.

"Listen here," I went on. "Ghost-like forms and hands without arms and headless bodies have been used before, you know. Lantern slides make very good connections with the other worlds."

"I would have known a lantern slide."

"You would, would you? Well, personally, I think everything points to it—the vague light that showed up the hands in an otherwise dark room, the fact your own hands passed right through them—everything. It's as clear as daylight."

"But lantern slide pictures don't feel like moth wings when they fall on your throat."

"Moth wings are as faint as imaginary wings. Well, anyway, that's my theory. And that's the one I'm going to test. We'll lock the door, pin the curtains across the window-shades, test the walls for hidden cupboards, move the radio out here—"

As I spoke, I began to carry out my plans of blocking the jester's chances of repeating. Tony at first refused to budge, but my energy became contagious and presently he went as far as disconnecting the radio, removing it from the room, and coming back with a package of safety pins for the curtains. I knocked on the walls, looked under the sofa, opened the desk top, and moved the bookcase to one side. Satisfied that no man or machinery could get into the room without our knowledge, I put Tony's chair against the wall on the side of the room that had neither door nor window.

"You sit there," I told him, "and don't go moving about. That wall's solid and nothing can get in behind you. I'm going to sit against the door to be sure no key's used."

Tony walked wearily to his place. "Okay, Mac. Just as you say."

IT WAS two minutes before twelve as I sat down with my back to the door. After a minute of inaction, I went to the table, extracted a bit of cotton from the box which held the Eye-stone, carefully replaced the cover, and went back to the door.

"I'm stuffing the keyhole," I said in answer to a question from Tony. "We've got to keep out any points of light."

Satisfied with my job, I put the chair back under the door-knob to further secure the door. Sitting slightly tipped, I crossed my legs and waited.

"What time's it now?" Tony asked.

I took out my watch and saw by the dim light that it was two minutes after the hour. It did not occur to me to put my hand to the light-switch by the door. As on the previous nights, the change had been so gradual that the half-light seemed the normal thing. Within two minutes it was to be pitch-black and seem as natural.

"Three hundred seconds, Tony."

He began to tap off the seconds with his foot. Subconsciously I counted with him—ninety—ninety-one—ninety-two.

"Say, Mac, are you there?" One hundred and three—one hundred and four. "Mac, did you take the stone out of the box?"

"No. I—"

But the stone was out of the box. From the center of the room came that faint blurred blue-green that had before turned into the form of the eye of the god of death. All my consciousness was focussed on that misty light, but somewhere in another part of my mind I was counting. One hundred and sixty-five—one hundred and sixty-six—one hundred and sixty-seven—one hundred and—

"Mac! Mac!"

I stiffened with a jerk. "It's all right, Tony. I must have left the stone out of the box. That's all it is."

Two hundred and four—two hundred and five—two—Couldn't he keep his foot still?

"Mac! There's someone in the room! By the table! Mac!"

I felt it, too, then, as a blind man must feel the presence of an alien beside him. I strained my eyes toward the table. Two hundred and twenty-six—two hundred and twenty-seven—two—The blur of green-blue light merged into the blackness as though a human hand had covered it. Then it appeared again, but this time faintly, for above it were two large mists of light, blue-green, but brighter and more translucent.

"Mac!" Two hundred and forty—two hundred and forty-one—two hundred and forty-two— "Mac!" They wavered, steadied, then gradually took shape. Black fingers like liquid jet, blue-green nails, lighted by a weird veil of mist.

And still I counted, rhythmically, mechanically, with no will of my own. Two hundred and sixty-nine—two hundred and seventy—two hundred and seventy-one—

"Mac!" They were moving forward slowly, regularly, as though held out by some living man. They were moving toward where Tony Henderson sat in the pitch blackness of the curtained room. Two hundred and eighty-four—two hundred and—

"Mac!"

"Tony, I'm coming! It's all right, Tony!"

I was coming, I told myself fiercely. I had to come, had to get up from my chair and cross the room to Tony. I had to! Two hundred and ninety-three.

I struggled. I put all my strength into that struggle, all my nerve, all my will,

but I was bound fast. And it was not by fear but by another's strength pitted against mine.

"I'm coming, Tony!" Nothing could hold me. Two hundred and ninety-eight—

They were there at the far wall, two glowing hands that suddenly moved together.

"My God! Mac!"

Tony's foot had stopped marking the minutes, and the silence seemed more terrible by contrast. I waited in a trance. There was a terrible shriek, and then silence again. The hands of the priest of Nyi had gone.

I was free; I could move. I felt limp as though leather thongs had pressed blood from my veins.

"Tony!" I touched the switch by the door. The room was as it had been. Tony sat against the farther wall, just as when I had last seen him, except that his head was dropped forward as a man's asleep.

"Tony, nothing happened. Nothing could have happened. I tried to come. Damn you, you've got to speak!"

I don't know how long I knelt there trying to awake him, or rather, how long I knelt there telling myself he was alive while knowing beyond all doubt that he was dead.

There were loud and repeated bangs and cries at the door. I had to get help, I told myself. I grabbed the key from the center table. The Eye-stone was not there, I noticed, and the cover was well down on the jeweler's box. Frantically I clawed the cotton from the keyhole. The door was pushed forward from the other side.

There were a great many people at the door. Some held my arms; others rushed inside to Tony.

THE State had a hundred or so witnesses to that quarrel two years before in the lobby of the Metropolitan; it had more than that to testify how I had resented Tony's theft of my book. Even my own lawyers do not believe the truth I tell them about the night that Tony died.

Johnson supported my story at first, but later, when he saw, as the pilot of "Cheeky's" plane had seen, that the truth would brand him liar or accomplice, he, too, changed his "I know" to "I think," and later lied that he had been drinking. Johnson knows that I know he is lying, but I don't blame him. What else could he do?

My lawyers are going to try a plea of self-defense, and, if the worst comes to the worst, of insanity. Strange thing, this having to lie that I killed a man I never touched.

If my release comes before July, I shall study out some way of outwitting the

hands. They may not even try to get me. There are two reasons for believing this. First, the stone of Nyi was never found after the night of Tony's death; it is possible that the priests of Bhan-Guru already have it back and will leave me alone. The second reason and the strongest is that there is no way for me to die. The Law said that Captain Clark committed suicide; the Law said that Bobby Milroy died from natural causes; the Law said that "Cheeky" was murdered by person or persons unknown to it; the Law said that Tony Henderson was killed by person and causes known to it. What way is there left for me to go? Fate, perhaps, has outwitted the strangling priests of Nyi, god of death, and will let me live.

\* \* \* \* \*

July 7, 1930 (by special correspondent): After losing a bitterly fought battle to have the time of his execution changed, L. C. MacKenzie, convicted last May of the murder of his one-time fellow explorer, Anthony Henderson, suffered death by hanging in the prison yard here at seven minutes after midnight this morning. . . .