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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Terrible Parchment\*

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

*The author describes this as "a Necronomicon story to end all Necronomicon stories"*

"HERE'S your WEIRD TALES," smiled my wife, entering the apartment.

"Thanks, Gwen," I said, rising and taking the magazine she held out. "I say, it's surely not the first of the month."

"Not for two days yet," Gwen assured me. "But, just as I came to the front door, a funny old man bobbed up with an armful of magazines—advance copies, I guess. He stuck a copy of W. T. right under my nose. I gave him a quarter and—oop!"

I had opened the magazine, and a page fluttered to the floor. We both stooped for it, both seized it, and we both let go.

Gwen gasped and I whistled. For that fallen page had such a clammy, wet feel to it. *Dank* is the word, I should think. Still stooping, we frowned mystifiedly at each other. Then I conquered my momentary disgust, took hold of it again, and lifted it into the light of my desk lamp.

"It's not paper," Gwen said at once.

No more it was, and what could it be doing in WEIRD TALES?—though it looked weird enough, in all conscience. It was a rectangle of tawny, limp parchment, grained on the upper side with scales, like the skin of some unfamiliar reptile. I turned it over, revealing a smoother surface with pore-like markings and lines of faint, rusty scribbling.

"Arabic," I pronounced at once. "Let's phone for Kline to come over; he reads the stuff."

"There's one Greek word," Gwen pointed out. Her pink-tipped forefinger touched the string of capital letters at the upper edge:

## NEKPONOMIKON

"*Necronomicon*," she spelled out. "That P would be the letter *rho* in Greek. *Necronomicon*—sounds woogey, what?"

"That's the name of H. P. Lovecraft's book," I told her.

"Lovecraft's book? Oh, yes, I remember. He's always mentioning it in his stories."

"And lots of W. T. authors—Clark Ashton Smith and Robert Bloch and so on—have taken it up," I added.

"But Lovecraft imagined the thing, didn't he?"

I laid the parchment on the desk, for my fingers still rebelled at its strange dankness. "Yes, Lovecraft imagined it. Describes it as the work of a mad Arab wizard, Abdul Alhazred, and it's supposed to contain secrets of powerful evils that existed before the modern world. It's already become legendary."

Again my wife touched the thing, very gingerly. "But what's it for? Some sort of valentine or April Fool joke, stuck in to thrill the subscribers? If so, it's cleverly made—looks a million years old."

We pored over the rusty-looking scrawl of Arabic, our heads close together. It must be a fake, we agreed, yet there was every appearance of age-old fadedness about the ink.

\* To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft, with all admiration.

"Kline must come over and have a look at it," I reiterated. "He may give some clue as to where it's from, and what it was doing in WEIRD TALES."

Gwen was studying the last line of characters.

"This part isn't faked," she said suddenly. "Look, the ink is fresh—almost wet. And it's not Arabic, it's Latin." She paused a moment, slowly translating in her mind. "It says, 'Chant out the spell, and give me life again.'" She straightened up. "How about a spot of cribbage?"

We both sighed with genuine relief as we turned our backs on the parchment. Light as had been our talk, we had been somehow daunted by the sense of mystery that had ridden in upon us. I got the board and the cards and we began to play on the dining-table.

Ten minutes later I turned suddenly, as if a noise had come to my mind's ear, and gazed at the desk. The parchment was no longer there.

"Look," cried Gwen. "It's blown off on the floor."

I rose and picked it up. It felt even more unpleasant than before, and this time it seemed to wriggle in my hand. Perhaps a draft stirred it, but I could detect no draft. Dropping it back on the desk, I weighted it with an ash-tray and went back to the game.

Gwen beat me soundly, adding to her household money thereby. I taunted her with suggestions of a girlhood misspent at gaming-tables, then turned idly to the desk once more.

The rectangle of parchment was *beside* the ash-tray, not *under* it, and—that undetectable draft again!—was sliding ever so deliberately toward the edge of the desk. I swore, or so Gwen insists, and fairly jumped over to seize it.

"This is getting ridiculous," Gwen pro-

tested, fumbling nervously with the cards on the table.

I was studying the thing again. "I thought you said the last line was in Latin," I remarked.

"Why, so it is."

"No, it's in English." I read it aloud: "'Chant out the spell, and give me life again.' Hello, the next to the last line is in English, too."

It also was written with fresh ink and in a bold hand:

*"Many minds and many wishes give substance to the worship of Chthulhu."*

GWEN had come to look over my shoulder. "By heaven, dear, you're right. 'Many minds and——' But what does Chthulhu mean? Does it have anything to do with the chthonian gods—the underworld rulers that the ancient Greeks served in fear?"

"I shouldn't be surprized," I replied, and it sounded even drier than I had intended. "Chthulhu is a name that Lovecraft and Smith and the others used in their yarns. He's a god of old time, they tell us, and a rank bad one at that."

She shuddered, but gamely turned the shudder into a toss of her shoulders. "I suppose," she hazarded, "that the 'many minds and wishes' have given substance to this page of the *Necronomicon*."

"Nonsense, the *Necronomicon's* only something in Lovecraft's stories."

"Didn't you just say that it had become a legend among readers of weird fiction?" she reminded, utterly serious. "What's the next step after that?"

"What you're trying to suggest," I said, trying to be gayly scornful, "is that so many people have thought and talked about Lovecraft's book that they've actually given it substance."

"Something like that," she nodded thoughtfully. Then, more brightly: "Oh,

it'll turn out to be a joke or something else anticlimactic."

"Right," I agreed readily. "After all, we're not living in a weird tale, you know."

"If we were, that would explain why there was one last line in Latin before, and now two last lines in English." She warmed to the idea. "You see, it was turning deliberately into a language we could read. When we hesitated over the Latin——"

"——it kindly changed into English," I finished.

Again she nodded. "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

"Trite but true. Still, my name's not Horatio, and it's bedtime. Let's not dream any philosophies that will turn into nightmare." Once more I picked up that clammy parchment. "As for this creation of many minds or what have you, I'm putting it under stoppages." Opening the big dictionary that lies on a stand beside my desk, I laid the parchment inside and closed the heavy book upon it. "There it stays until we get Kline here tomorrow. And now to bed."

**T**O BED we went, but not to sleep. Gwen squirmed and muttered, and I was weary in every portion of my body save the eyelids. We got up once for sandwiches and milk, and a second time for aspirin. A third time we lay down, and I, at least, dozed off.

I started awake to the pressure of Gwen's fingers on my shoulder.

"I think——" she began tensely. Then I heard what she had heard, a faint, stealthy rustle.

I reached for the light cord above the bed and gave it a jerk. The room sprang into radiance, and through the open door I could see the parlor. I sat up in bed, staring.

Something hung down from between the leaves of the dictionary by the desk, something that moved even as I made it out. Something that would be rectangular if laid flat, but which was now limper, more flexible than the wettest rag, that seemed to *flow* from its narrow prison like a trickle of fluid filth.

"It's getting away," breathed Gwen almost inaudibly. "It's going to come here for us."

The parchment worked its last corner free and dropped to the floor with a fleshy slap, as though it had soft weight. It began to move across the rug toward the bedroom door. Toward us.

I dare say I might be able to describe painstakingly its appearance as it moved—how it humped up in the middle and laid its corners to the floor like feet. But how can I convey the heart-stopping nastiness of it, how visualize for you the animosity and sense of wicked power that it gave off in waves almost palpable? You might get an idea of how it looked by draping a sheet of brown paper over the back of a creeping turtle . . . no, that sounds ludicrous. There was nothing funny in the way that parchment moved across the carpet toward us, not a single atom of humor.

Gwen had slipped out from under the covers and crouched, all doubled up and panicky, against the headboard. Her helpless terror nerved me to defense. Somehow I got out and stood upright on the floor. I am sure that I looked most unheroic with my rumpled hair and my blue pajamas and my bare feet, but I was ready to do battle.

Yes, do battle with what? And how?

That crawling scrap of parchment had reached the threshold, hunched over the door-sill like a very flat and loathly worm. I could see the writing on it, not rusty and faint but black and heavy. Snatching a water-glass from the bedside table, I

hurled it. The foul thing crumpled suddenly sidewise. The glass splintered to atoms where it had been. Next moment the parchment was humping and creeping faster, almost scampering, toward my bare toes.

"Smash it," Gwen choked out. She must have been ready to faint.

Against a chair close at hand leaned her little parasol, a feminine thing with a silken tassel at its handle and a ferrule of imitation amber. I seized it and made a violent stab at the horrid invader. My point thrust the center of it against the floor, and for a moment I pinned it there.

Then I was able to see in what manner it was changed.

At the top was still the Greek word NEKPONOMIKON in aged ink; but the Arabic writing that had filled the page below was gone, or transformed; transformed into English, written large and bold and black as jet. Stooped as I was above it, I read at a glance the first line.

A thousand times since I have yearned to speak that line aloud, to write it down, to do something that would ease my mind of it. But I must not, now or ever. As it was, the world escaped all too narrowly.

Who shaped so dreadful a thought? Abdul Alhazred is but a figment of Lovecraft's imagination. And Lovecraft is human—he could never have dreamed anything like those words, those words that lie upon my mind, I say, like links of a red-hot iron chain. And they were but the beginning of the writing. What could it have been like in full?

I dare not surmise. But this much I suddenly knew for the truth, as I tried to crush that horribly alive parchment-scrap beneath my inadequate parasol—the formless evil of the centuries had taken form. An author had fancied the book, hundreds of others had given it fuller being by their own mental images. The new-hatched legend had become a slen-

der but fearsome peg on which terror, creeping over the borderland from its own forbidding realm, could hang itself. Once hung there, it could grow tangible, solid, potent.

"Gwen," I warned, "hide your eyes. Don't look. Don't read."

"What do you mean, don't read?" Her pale face moved closer as she leaned across the bed.

"Don't read!" I raved at her. "Remember what you've seen already—'Chant out the spell and give me life again!'"

The parchment slid slowly out from under the down-pressed parasol. I could hold it no easier than if it had been a moist melon seed. It reached my foot—*ugh!* It was climbing my leg.

What was it up to? Merciful heavens, would it scale my body as a squirrel scales a tree, would it drape itself upon my face and force its unspeakable message into my eyes and my mind? Because then I'd *have* to speak.

The burden of it would be too great. My lips would open to ease the torture. "Chant out the spell"—chant it out, and the world would be crushed again under the fearsome feet of Chthulhu and his brother-horrors of the evil eld. What sins and woes would run loose, at which Satan in hell must hide his shocked face? And it would be I, I, who spoke the words that released them.

I felt faint and dizzy, but I tore the repellent sheathing from my leg. For a moment it clung against my strength, as though with tendrils or suckers. With all my force I dashed it into a metal waste-basket, among crumpled heaps of paper. It tried to flop out again, but I pushed it back with the parasol. At the same time I clutched my cigarette lighter from the bedside table. Thank heaven it worked, it burst into flame. I flung it into the basket.

The whole mass of paper burst into fire and smoke. Up from the midst of it rose a faint, throbbing squeak, to be felt rather than heard, like the voice of a bat far away. Deeper into the little furnace I thrust that outcast messenger from the forces that threatened my world.

The flames worried it, and it crinkled and thrashed as if in agony, but it did not burn. Prodding it back again and again, I must have shouted something in my despair, for Gwen hurried to the telephone and jabbered into it.

"Father O'Neal!" she cried. "Come quick, with holy water!"

Hanging up, she turned to me.

"Is he coming?" I panted.

"Yes, he'll be here in two minutes."

Her voice quavered. "But what if the holy water doesn't work?"

It did work. At the first spatter, the unhallowed page and its prodigious gospel of wickedness vanished into a fluff of ashes. I pray my thankfulness for that, every day that I live. Yet, even as I offer thanks, my troubled mind forms again the question that Gwen asked:

What if the holy water had not worked?