

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 22

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. 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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Weird Tales issued 1st of each month

The Thing From the Grave

By HAROLD WARD



"I see myself taking life
with my bare hands."

A goose-flesh story of the hideous fate that befell a judge who had sentenced a murderer to death

WE HAD finished dinner and were enjoying a bottle of Judge Thompson's excellent old port in front of the big, stone fireplace in the huge library. As is often the case when one has dined well, conversation had suddenly ceased and for several minutes we sat smoking in silence, each of us occupied with his own thoughts. A deep sigh from the judge stirred me from my

revery and I looked up with a start. His kindly face had taken on a drawn and haggard look.

"Tired?" I demanded.

"Not particularly," he responded. Then: "Dudley, I'll bet every penny I've got against a plugged nickel that you can't guess what I was thinking about."

"Not taken," I smiled. "It must have

been serious, though, from the look on your face."

"Serious—damned serious," he said slowly. "I was wondering how long it would take me to choke you to death and whether your dying struggles would arouse the servants."

I looked at him curiously.

"Your humor has taken a new angle tonight," I said somewhat stiffly. "You surprize me——"

"I'm going to surprize you still more," he interrupted. "I invited you here tonight, doctor, not altogether as a guest, but more particularly because of your experience as a psychiatrist. You have testified in my court a great many times; I recognize you as one of the world's greatest authorities on mental diseases. I want you to listen to me. I must talk to some one. . . ."

He stopped suddenly. Leaning forward, he peered into my face as if wondering whether or not to continue. Then, as I nodded, he went on.

"It has taken me a long time to make up my mind to take this up with you. And now that you are here I—I hardly know where to commence."

"At the beginning," I said sharply, putting on my best professional manner. "Only by knowing everything can I diagnose your case."

Again there was a long, painful silence. Thompson slowly relighted his cigar and took a sip from the glass of port at his elbow.

"You psychologists tell us that every man has a phobia—a morbid dread of something," he said finally. "Mine is the thought that eventually I shall kill somebody."

"Nonsense!" I snapped.

"It may sound like nonsense to you, but to me it's plain reality," he growled. "I was telling you the truth when I said

a moment ago that I was thinking of murdering you. Murder! Murder! God in heaven, doctor, the thing is never out of my thoughts! Day by day the—call it obsession if you will—is growing on me. Within my brain two ideas are constantly at war, one urging me to throw aside these wild imaginings and be my normal self, the other telling me that I am the victim of metempsychosis—that I am no longer Joseph J. Thompson, the jurist, but Jake Lauts, the arch-killer—the man I sent to the chair a few months ago and who now is, or should be, festering in his grave. And may God have mercy on my soul, the latter thought is slowly, but surely, gaining the ascendancy."

"I want you to come to my office the first thing in the morning for a thorough physical examination," I said severely. "You are overworked——"

"Bosh!" he interrupted. "No judge is overworked. And to hell with your examination tomorrow. You're going to hear me out now—while I feel in the mood. Tomorrow——" He shrugged his shoulders. "Damn it!" he continued, "I've got to talk to somebody. Imagine, if you can, my mental condition. I'm not insane; I can diagnose my own condition well enough to make that statement positively. My nights are a succession of nightmares. I see myself taking life with my bare hands. I am throttling, stabbing, clubbing, shrieking with glee at the sight of the blood flowing from my victims. By day I sit in the security of my chambers and scan the newspaper accounts of every hellish crime, fearful that I will recognize some detail which will prove to me that my fearful imaginings are something more than dreams.

"Yes—and here is the worst of it all—I, who have always been one of the most kindly of men, am gradually longing to taste crime. Fight as hard as I will, I am

constantly haunted by the desire to kill, to rend, to feel a human form grow limp, beneath my throttling fingers. I gaze upon every man who is brought before me for trial and think of him as a potential victim. I envy the executioner who, for a paltry hundred dollars, pulls the switch which sends some poor wretch to eternity. I would gladly pay for the privilege of doing the job. What a satisfaction it would be to watch the dying struggles of a man strapped in the big, black chair and know—*know*—that it was my hand that caused him to twitch and squirm and writhe as the hot current shot through his body. . . .”

He arose and took a short turn about the room, his face twisted into a look of malignant ferocity.

“Doctor, you’ve got to drive these hellish thoughts out of my mind!” he exclaimed. “It’s awful—horrible! Will you do it? Can you do it?”

“Certainly,” I responded gruffly. “Your nerves are unstrung. I will write a prescription shortly and send one of the servants to get it filled. Meanwhile, let me question you a bit. Sit down. You mentioned Jake Lauts. I remember him very well; I was one of the medical experts called in during the trial. Tell me where he fits into the case.”

JUDGE THOMPSON dropped wearily into his chair again and passed a trembling hand across his brow.

“I’m beginning to wonder whether I am really myself or whether I am Jake Lauts,” he said with a groan. “I have a feeling that I am possessed—possessed of a devil—the one that was in Jake Lauts before I ordered him electrocuted. There are spirits, you know,” he went on earnestly, “that belong neither to heaven nor to hell; perhaps they have escaped from the latter place. Be that as it may, these

spirits must, in order to prolong their existence, seize upon the body of some one else when their abiding-place is taken by death. . . .”

“Nonsense!” I snapped. “Rubbish and superstition! You have been listening to some old woman’s tale.”

“Call it what you like,” Thompson sighed. “I sentenced Jake Lauts to death and, standing in the courtroom, he shook his fist at me and swore to high heaven that he would come back from the grave in order to be revenged. I laughed at his threats and ordered the bailiffs to drag him from my presence. Dozens of other men have made similar statements. But Jake Lauts kept his word. Oh, hear me out”—as I raised a protesting hand—“then give me your opinion when I have finished.

“A few weeks after the execution of Jake Lauts, my wife and I attended a social function at the home of a friend. A part of the evening’s entertainment was a spiritualistic demonstration. I will not bore you with the details. Suffice to say that, as usual, the room was in total darkness. We listened to ghostly voices and the like when, in the midst of a long-winded speech by one of the medium’s so-called ‘controls’, the woman suddenly uttered a wild shriek.

“‘The lights! The lights!’ she screamed.

“Our host turned the switch and the room was once more bathed in light.

“‘There is an alien presence here,’ she asserted. ‘I am a trumpet medium; my controls never materialize. Yet something touched against me in the darkness—something that was horrible, cold and clammy—something direct from the grave. It must be that one of you is psychic and that through you the materialization has been produced. I am afraid to continue. My experience tells me that

there are many, many things in the—shall I call it *Between World?*—which are better left alone.'

"There was a general demand that she continue, for her statement had naturally aroused our curiosity. I confess, however, that I considered the whole thing only a bit of flapdoodle, put on to give us a thrill. A single glance at the woman's face told me different, however. She was genuinely frightened. She argued with us for a long time, and it was only when our host demanded that she either continue or receive no fee that she finally agreed. Again we took our places in the circle and our host again turned off the lights.

"Almost immediately a prickling sensation swept over me—a feeling of coldness and terror. It seemed as if I was alone in some vast cavern or charnel-house. I tried to shake the feeling off, but it persisted. It was followed by a sort of lethargy. Yet I realized where I was and what was going on about me and, at the same time, I was unable to move; I was numb, paralyzed. I can't describe how I felt. Only I know that I was scared; great beads of perspiration gathered on my forehead and trickled slowly down over my cheeks. I tried to call out, but my lips were sealed.

"Then out of the darkness appeared a vague cloud. It floated toward me, growing plainer and plainer until it took on the shape of Jake Lauts. He was different from what he had been in life, yet there was no mistaking him. He stopped just in front of me and crouched to spring—a vermin-gray, slouching figure, bestial, macabre. He was dead; that was plain to be seen. His face was bloodless and bloated, dotted with dark spots where decomposition had set in and covered with the mold of the grave. His baleful eyes gleamed with a greenish-yellow phosphorescence; piggy little eyes, they

were, filled with demoniac fury and blood-lust.

"He crept forward, almost on all fours, his blunt fingers working convulsively, his thick lips drawn back over his gangrenous fangs, a white, frothy slaver drooling from the corners. I tried to draw back—to shriek. But as I have already said, I was paralyzed. Suddenly he launched his great body at me. His fingers closed about my throat. They were cold and clammy—the fingers of a corpse.

"Something must have given the medium the power to see—or *feel*. She screamed. God, how she screamed! Her shriek brought the others to their feet. Our host jerked the light-switch just as I crashed backward beneath the weight of the ungodly thing.

"And when the lights came on there was nothing—positively nothing—there.

"The other guests crowded around us, plying us with questions. They could get nothing out of the medium. She was in hysterics and would not talk. As for myself—well, I didn't care to be taken for a fool, so I laughed the thing off. I told them that the affair had become boresome and that I had dropped asleep in the darkness and, losing my balance, had fallen backward.

"I could not, however, laugh off the horrible stench with which the room was filled. It was the smell of decomposition and death."

JUDGE THOMPSON stopped suddenly. For a moment we sat there. I noticed that the sweat was pouring from his face and that his hand shook as he reached for the wine-glass at his elbow and drank deeply. I was frightened in spite of myself. Yet I knew that he was merely suffering from hallucinations—that his nerves were shot to pieces. He got up and paced the floor with quick, agitated

strides. I waited for him to gain control over himself.

"Again and again during the next few days I had the feeling of some alien presence close beside me," he resumed, sitting down again. "You, perhaps, understand what I mean. You know how it is when you think some one is looking at you from behind. I tried my best to throw it off, but in vain.

"Then I was taken ill. You probably remember the time, although you were not called in. For days I tossed, mumbling and shrieking, my brain filled with weird, adumbral horrors. A consultation of physicians was held. They declared themselves baffled. But eventually I grew better until I was fully recovered. . . ."

He leaned forward, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"I said that I was fully recovered," he resumed. "Physically — yes. Mentally? . . . what shall I say? Since that illness I have never had that feeling of some one being near me. Instead, there commenced to creep over me this other sensation—this desire to kill—this phobia, if you want to call it that.

"Now do you understand? It was while I was sick—my brain filled with the maggots of fever—that the metempsychosis began to take place. Then it was that the devil that had been in Jake Lauts started to take possession of me. . . ."

Again he stopped. Then:

"Dudley," he said in a slow, impressive voice, "Jake Lauts, dead though he is, is gradually gaining the control over my mentality. My subconscious mind tells me so. But why? Is it my body that he desires? I answer yes. His spirit has failed to find an abiding-place either in heaven or in hell, and to perpetuate itself it must—*must*, I say—seize upon some living person. Eventually—and the time is not far distant—I shall be Judge

Thompson in name only. In reality I shall be Jake Lauts. And when that awful day finally arrives I—I shall commit some foul crime. . . . God, what a revenge that will be for him! . . ."

I leaped to my feet. "Judge Thompson," I said severely, "this has gone far enough. I can enjoy a good yarn as much as anybody, but——"

"Damn your pig-headedness!" he roared, and glared at me balefully for an instant as if tempted to leap at me. Then he dropped back against the cushions again with a little sigh.

"I didn't expect you to believe me," he resumed. "But as God is my witness, what I am telling you is the truth—or, at least, I believe it to be the truth. Now will you permit me to finish?"

I grunted assent and sank back into my seat. The man was either stark mad or else he was trying to play a gigantic hoax upon me. I knew Judge Thompson well enough to believe the latter, and as a cold-blooded, hard-headed man of science, I resented it.

"It's hell—hell, I say," he went on. "It is getting so that I measure with my mind's eye the rounded throats of little children when they climb upon my knee. I want to take them between my hands and squeeze and squeeze until they are dead. Every nerve in my body twitches when I touch the warm flesh of the women with whom I dance. . . ."

"I have sent my wife away on an extended visit lest I kill her while she sleeps. The thought has been with me a great deal of late. Night after night I have lain awake fighting back the desire to creep into her room and throttle her.

"I am afraid to trust myself alone with any one. Right now my butler is standing outside the door. Why? Because I—well, I was fearful of being alone in here with you. I have issued instructions that there

must always be two of my servants on duty at one time. They think that I am frightened because of the many threats that have been made against me. God, if they only knew! . . ."

He picked up his dead cigar and re-lighted it. For a moment he puffed at it nervously, then laid it down again.

"Last night," he said slowly, "something happened. . . . At the beginning I told you that I was haunted by the thought that *eventually* I would commit some atrocious crime. I know—*now*—that the horrible things I have dreamed about are not dreams at all. I am a night prowler, Dudley—a slinking creature of the darkness, preying on what I may devour. I am a murderer—a fiend!"

Stepping to his desk, he picked up a copy of *The Gazette* and pointed to an article on the front page. The screaming headlines told of the murder of a young woman in an obscure part of town. Her throat had been torn, her head battered to a pulp.

"*I killed that girl!*" he said slowly. "I am certain of it. Yet I can not prove it. Can I go before any group of sane men and tell them that I know I killed a woman because I dreamed it? No. This morning when I woke up my hands were covered with blood. There were scratches on them. Perhaps, you will say, the blood came from the scratches. How, then, did I get the scratches? And my shoes were muddy and soiled. Some time during the night I must have gotten up and—"

"Yet I have no recollection of murdering her," he ended piteously. "I can not swear that I am guilty. But I am guilty—as guilty as hell."

THEN the lights went out. It was then that I knew the meaning of fear. Something swept over me that set every nerve to tingling. I was engulfed in terror. For an instant it seemed as if my heart stopped beating as I sat there in the dark. I heard a rasping chuckle—cold, demoniacal, cruel. Two yellow eyes gleamed at me. . . .

"Judge!" I shrieked. "Judge Thompson!"

My only answer was that throaty chuckle again. The eyes were drawing closer to me. It seemed as if I could see a form crouching to spring. I tried to move; every faculty was paralyzed. Then it was upon me—a greenish-grayish horror with slavering jaws and red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes. Its foul talons seized me by the throat. . . .

Then the lights came on. Wilkins, the butler, stood in the doorway.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but a fuse blew out," he began.

He stopped suddenly, his eyes fairly bulging from their sockets, his body stiffened, a look of horror creeping over his face. "The judge! The judge, sir!" he exclaimed.

I turned. Judge Thompson still sat where he had been seated when the lights went out. He was dead; that much was apparent. Even as I gazed, the process of dissolution was going on with terrible speed. His eyes, wide open, were sinking far into their sockets. His face was mottled. The room was filled with a horrible stench. . . .

Together, Wilkins and I ran shrieking from the room.

