

*A Story of Singular Power
That Holds You Spellbound
to the Last Word*

THE TOAD

By DONOVAN G. FITZPATRICK



I WORKED for him, I lackeyed him, I stooped and cringed at his every behest; yet how I hated him! Well I knew the passions that warred within my heart, and I felt the pain that told how deeply I hated my master. Yet there remained a something which multiplied my hatred ten-fold—I knew not *why* I hated him!

At first there seemed a clashing of our guardian spirits, a dumb combat, a struggle soul to soul, a sharp rout, victory! and his soul always won. And I slunk back in baffled defeat, stung by his easy aplomb, cowed by his overriding will. Then my rancor flamed! For the dull-witted fellow, despite that I shook with rage, did not even sense my ever-present hatred. But laughed in happy abandon, his lips purring a joyful hum, and frolicked about and chucked me un-

der the chin—even as I was on fire, and being consumed with hatred!

While I fawned and smiled and danced at his orders, I was murdering him in my mind.

“Get my spectacles, Gaston!”

“Very good sir,” said I, as I mentally pushed him off a cliff.

“Gaston,” a little later, “my shoestring has loosened. Latch it up.”

“Certainly sir!” I replied, as I buried my teeth in his leg.

“Tie my tie, Gaston!”

“Yes sir,” I said, as I strangled him to death.

By such diversion—it was serious, *deadly* serious to me—did I make my early servitude tolerable. But there came a time when my mind, stimulated though it was, could devise no new methods of wreaking my master’s downfall.

Then I was beside myself with despair.

My master loved no man, or woman, or child. But all the love within him went out to his toad. It was a great toad, more ponderous than a fowl, and far uglier than any other of that ugly race. Long folds of sickly skin drooped from its stunted frame. And bristling on that unhealthy surface was every manner of hills, valleys, volcanoes, all twisted and contorted as by a fiendish hand. Thin rivers of slime ran athwart its frame. It poisoned the air with its presence.

But this perfection of ugliness was marred by the eyes. Wondrous jewels of light, aflame with love and understanding, they sought the realm of the spirit, they cried for God and eternity. Thus, while its repulsive self made me loathe the toad, those eyes struck me

with fear—a fear that cut into my vitals, haunting my dreams. I hated my master; I dreaded the toad.

To my master though, the toad was all things dear. A mere glance at the creature would send the bloom into his cheeks. Hours at a stretch he gazed at the toad, as enwrapped, as impassioned, as any swain who looks into the eyes of his ladylove. For the toad was his life. Thrice the old fellow was drawn unto death. In his dying prayers he called for the toad, which, when brought, behold! like a miracle of old his life-force returned.

Throughout the day the toad was his bodyguard; it proved an elixir whose presence toned his being. When it strayed from his vision, the man was thrown into a torment; he shook, he trembled, he gasped like a dying fish. And only the toad's speedy return would ease him into security. Hours at a time, the fellow communed with the toad, his voice sunk in reverence, and his eyes blazing with affection. He patted its knobby head, caressed its horny back, rocked it in a mad orgy of love. Whilst the toad, in grotesque apery of a cat, circled about, wiping its scum on his clothes.

The master took an unholy delight in the toad's care. He rigged up a trap to catch flies, and fed them one at a time to the toad, smacking his lips in vicarious joy as the creature gorged. Each day the toad was given a bath. And its dotting owner flooded the foul body with perfume. Delicate scales told the daily story of the toad's health, while a doctor, skilled in the treatment of toads, awaited the master's summons.

Bismark—so the fellow named his pet—was allowed the full freedom of the house. On cool, damp days he plodded about the room, tagging at his master's heels, or squatting beside his arm-chair. When the weather was warm and sticky, he retired to a dark corner of the kitchen and clambered into a basin of water—his swimming pool. When it rained, he perched on the window sill, listening with drowsy bliss to the patter of the raindrops.

If Bismark was the privileged character in the house, he was indeed the lord of all below. A tiled runway, built for the toad, led to the cellar. Here was constant dampness, clamminess, mustiness. The ground was coated with black ooze. Girding this area were crumbling bricks with blotches of yellow moss. Time and the elements had here wrought a sickly little valley. For there was now a chiseled slope to a corner, toward which trickled a network of muddy streams. And, hidden beneath the overhanging

walls, in a tiny nook of darkness, was a cavelike break in the ground.

Into this hollow the miniature rivers fell. That hidden hollow, indiscernible in the full light of day to the acutest eyes, was the only outer manifestation of the ground's unsoundness. Winter after winter, great floods of water swept into the basement. Each time the underground cavity licked up the deluge. Thus was the cellar happily drained at all seasons. Another purpose the cavern served—it was the private home of the toad. Here Bismark passed the nights in peace. His voice was seldom heard, and even then it was filled with lazy content. So through the years the toad dwelt in the cellar.

Despite the calm that reigned over the house, I felt a deep, underlying distrust. Each day I became more nervous and suspicious. The close companionship of toad and master made me a stranger. I became convinced that they were plotting against me.

One night, as I was brooding over these affairs, my mind darkly abstracted, I stepped squarely upon the toad. The creature shrieked a blood-curdling cry, and I stumbled backward, leaning against the wall, while a nameless terror possessed me. The master arose on the instant, and with one leap he was upon me. His heavy cane beat me down, drumming upon my bones.

Then I regained my senses. With one movement I wrenched the cane from his grasp. Then I clubbed him to death.

THE murder accomplished, I endeavored to find a safe means of disposing of the body. I at once considered the cave in the cellar. It seemed providentially designed for my purpose. Not a particle of earth was brushed loose as I slid the short, thin body through the little cave. Presently, a dull thud—the corpse had fallen into the pit below.

I located some clay at no great distance from the house, and very speedily repaired the breach in the wall. So expertly did I work, that even the closest inspection defied discovery. It was spring, the rains were over, and the summer days would cake the new wall into lasting hardness. I felt secure.

I now hunted the creature that had caused my trouble, determined to kill it at sight. Even as I beheld the toad, I marvelled at my change of feeling. I felt something akin to pity as I noted its mangled form. Then, as I continued to gaze, my old dread of the toad swept over me. I quitted the spot and shunned the toad henceforth.

After a decent interval, I reported my master's disappearance to the police.

They responded at once, and as I had foreseen, made an exhaustive and rigid inspection of the cellar. Many times my heart sank as their sharp bitted axes struck within inches of the false wall. But I silently chuckled in turn. For my hiding-place stood the test and the wearied men at last gave up the search.

Then their attention was drawn to the toad. Bismark had been an interested spectator at this investigation. He wore a mournful expression, while a wild fever burned in his eyes. He camped in the fateful corner, clambered against the false wall, even brushed crumbs of dirt from the new clay. And by persistent cluckings, by most untowardly contortions of his body, by every means of communication save actual speech, he was trying, it seemed, to tell an awful secret.

The investigators were amused at the toad's antics; they gathered in the corner and watched him with heavy interest. They pulled the toad away from the false wall, and laughed as he invariably returned. Finally Bismark desisted, and, with a beaten air, faced about and looked fixedly at the investigators.

"Do you know," remarked one, "I think that toad is trying to tell us something!"

"Perhaps," responded another, "he is trying to tell us where the lost man is."

I nearly swooned. A confession of guilt rose to my lips, and I turned to beg mercy. Then I laughed outright. The investigators were joking about the toad and poking fun at the men who had made the remarks. Presently the investigators departed.

YEARS winged by, and my secret remained undiscovered. I became happy and carefree. The murder seemed a distant dream; at times I even persuaded myself that those black memories were but the offspring of my disordered fancy. The investigators returned, and returned again, all to no purpose. Confident of my safety, I greeted them with genuine welcome; I recounted at length the singular friendship of the man and the toad; I informed them frankly that I had always hated my master.

From a worldly standpoint, I had reason to be happy. My master had no heirs and he left the estate to me. I, as the executor, was charged to care faithfully for the toad. That was the only provision of the will. I congratulated myself on the crime that had elevated me from servant to master—from *servant to master!* Joyfully I repeated the phrase

and I chortled with glee that the authorities were none the wiser.

Every precaution was taken, you may be sure, to keep my hiding place intact. The winter rains with their influx of water into the basement, threatened to demolish the false wall. What if the investigators should call as streams of swirling water poured into the pit? Such a happening would seal my fate. I speedily acted.

Each night, over a period of many months, I added a pail of clay, no more, to the ground beneath the cellar steps. About the house I planted deep-rooted vegetation, crowding it as thickly as it would grow. I thus checked my enemy, the rain.

Through these years of calm I derived great amusement from my relations with the toad. I lost the dread that he had once provoked; he now moved me to merriment. Ofttimes I whiled away an evening with Bismark. Placing him on a chair, and taking an opposite seat, I carried on ironic conferences. I thanked him profusely for having caused my good fortune. I wiped imaginary tears from my eyes as I mockingly narrated my master's virtues. I asked Bismark confidentially, if he didn't think I had done a neat job in disposing of the old fellow. Then I would tell Bismark how much I liked him, and endeavor to shake hands.

The toad's reactions to this treatment were tragically comical. His out-reaching intelligence seemed to grasp the import of my speech. He would quiver and shake, and, if my eyes deceived not, be actually shriveled at mention of my crime. And, though I little heeded, then, he manifested a very deep hatred for me.

Bismark had visibly altered since his master's death. He ate little; for a long period following the murder, he had starved. He was now a sickly mass of folds and wrinkles. The light died from his eyes and they became hard and steely. He lost whatever animation he had once had. Sometimes I thought he was dead, as he lay stiffly on the floor, letting the ants run at will over his body. Yet—and at this I wondered and was strangely disturbed—he seemed to cling to life, defying death, for a set purpose.

At last the toad crawled away and returned no more. A vast relief upbore me; gone, now, was this ugly shadow of my master, gone the witness and constant reminder of my crime. Pleased by the thought, I hastened to blot out every association of the deed. I burned that emblem of murder, the cane. The dead man's arm-chair, and his picture which still glowered at me from the wall, were

fed to the flames. I called builders and had the murder spot converted into a closet—a closet which I took care never to enter. New floors, new furniture, new decorations, new wall paper, put a new and pleasant face on the interior. Coats of bright paint, on the sides and on the roof without, proclaimed that the dead past of the house was buried. So passed from view, and so passed from my mind, the relics of a less happy day. I reasoned with great logic that the murder, from a practical aspect, had never occurred.

OTHER years sped lightly by, and I grew fat and prosperous. The world greeted me with kindly eyes, and I beamed an answering beam upon the world. I completely forgot the past; I gazed with pleasant anticipation toward the future. Soon, if all went well, I would be happily married.

Then the rains broke forth! Driven by thunder and lightning, a great cataclysm, terrible in power, beat and shook and rocked the ground. Lakes piled over the land. Still unsatisfied, the downpour continued; days, weeks, months, the unending deluge descended. At length, with devilish malice, immense floods invaded my cellar. In a twinkling, they had burst the false wall and were hurtling themselves into the pit. I chilled with anguish—that secret which had withstood the years was uncovered at last!

Ah! but the disappearance, had it not been forgotten? Years before, the investigators had given up the search, had told me that they despaired of ever solving the mystery. Their reappearance, then, was unlikely. Thus I composed myself, resolving that, with the flood over, I would fill the pit with clay. Then I should defy the devil himself to expose my secret.

These meditations were broken by a jingling of my telephone. *It was a call from the police!* They would arrive directly! I beat myself in a fit of madness. What fate was this, that they should wait for years, and then swoop upon me at the exact instant my secret lay bare? I toddled to the cellar, and in a dumb trance, watched the rushing water as it tumbled into the pit.

Suddenly the water stopped its downward flow and banked itself beside the wall. Rapidly the false wall was being hidden by a sheet of water. Then I sank on my knees and thanked God. The pit had filled! Water screened the false wall! *My secret still defied discovery!*

Bliethly I entered the house, settling myself in an easy-chair, and resolved to welcome the police with the utmost non-

chalance. Gay and blustering, like a troop of picknickers they descended upon me.

"Guess what we came for!" cried an investigator, slapping me heartily on the back.

I read irony in his tone. "Why-y—," I stammered, "you came to search for the dead man! Of course! Of course! Go right ahead, gentlemen! and if I—"

The man bent a keen look upon me. "How do you know he's dead?"

I wilted. Luckily, I was struck dumb and remained silent.

"No," he went on in playful pomposity, "official duties did not inspire our mission. Our visit is purely social. We called to see Bismark! *Bismark!* the wonderful toad. Where is he?"

"Bismark," I echoed. "Yes! Yes! I might have known it. You are right sir!—he is a wonderful toad!—and a toad of great intelligence, sir. Did I tell you—"

"But," gently insisted the investigator, "where is he?"

"Ah, sir," I replied, "the toad was wretched after his master's—disappearance; he became sick and weak, and one day he crept away, never to return. Without doubt, the toad is dead."

At that moment a wild and terrible wail came from below. Age-long sorrows of earth and hell rolled from an awful throat, and it was *calling, calling—*

We rushed below. We stopped short and they gasped in wonder, and I gasped in knowledge and deep dismay. Half the cellar had caved in! Still-foaming water filled the ghastly pit! At length the water stirred uneasily and bubbles ruffled its surface. Then, from those depths, there rose a human skull.

It turned its leering face upon us and stared profoundly from its empty sockets. Slowly, then, the skull's jaw spread the water and it labored toward the shore. It grounded. It strained mightily to climb from the water. It pushed upward and shook and trembled on the brink. Then, with a sigh and a splash, back into the pit it fell.

Unwearied, calmly resolved to find a landing-place, the skull cruised and cruised about. Again and again, at many different points it flung itself toward the land; again and again with unvarying monotony it tumbled backward, down into the pit. Finally the skull retired to the opposite bank and, gathering speed, raced through the water. With a leap, it cleared the pit and thudded to the ground.

The skull steadied itself, dragged its thumping bones forward and halted at my feet. It raised its streaming face and
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THE TOAD

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its sightless eyes met mine. The grisly jaws sagged open as if to speak.

Then from beneath the skull, jauntily stepped the toad. It fixed me with a burning look of hatred. Turning to the police like a lawyer addressing a jury, and nodding sidewise at me, it made many strange sounds—sounds which were too well understood. At last the toad paused and waited expectantly as for a verdict. Comprehension stole over the faces of the police, and the toad swelled with satisfaction. Then, with one final and dreadful croak of vengeance, the toad sank to my feet, its life gone out.

I turned to the police and noted their silent question.

"Arrest me," I replied. "Yes, I killed my master!"

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