

Weird Tales

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"The dagger quivered above him, and he collapsed against the hangings."

The Treasure of Almería

By MARIAN THORNTON

The Spanish count directed the will of Don Carlos by hypnotic suggestion, but he pushed his mastery too far

DON CARLOS, picking a numb way through the darkness of the cobbled streets of Antequera, did not pray. It was useless. He had tried it often, so often! And always the Call brought him back, dazed as a tranced bird, back to the serpent lying in wait. He fastened his thought stumblingly on his wedding. Tomorrow! He must hold to that!

It was hard to obey the Call; impossible to defy it. It rose in his mind teasing as the humming of insects; it sapped his strength; it dragged him in its undertow.

For a glorious year now he had been free of it, living like any other happy, well-to-do Spanish youth of this year 1600, glorying in the sunshine of a Castil-

ian summer and the happiness of love. For a year he had tried to forget what had gone before: the *conde*, and his cursed black eyes, his thin voice, his oily words.

For a year he had known peace; and now—*now*, the night before his wedding—turmoil was claiming him again, shackling his soul, dragging him to where his guardian, the count, waited in hateful luxury. His guardian? *Dios!* his *jailer* rather! His persecutor! His torturer!

If only one could fight the Call, pitting his strength against it! Don Carlos clapped a hand to the rapier at his side, but the Call was too slippery a thing to fight, and his hand dropped helplessly. With an effort, he called to mind a picture of soft
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eyes and an arch, sweet smile under a mantilla. Constance! The sweetness and fragrance of a red rose! And it was from her that the Call was taking him.

Drowsily he pondered the idea of turning and running, running, running through the winding streets. Absurd! One did not run from the Call. One hated and obeyed it, even as one had in boyhood, on that dread day of the plague, when the *conde* had crossed himself and sighed, "Ah, they have gone from this world. And they have left you to me. Now you shall be *my* son."

Night hung heavy in the air, drooping into every crack and cranny. He felt a need for resistance, but it was easier to let his drugged steps go forward, carrying the leaden body where they willed.

Thoughts wavered like drunken moths around his mind's flame, shut in behind the blank curtain of his eyes. Dully he centered attention on his feet, moving reluctantly, resistingly, but in direct line; moving toward the black velvet room where the *conde* was waiting, entrenched. Was all life a fighting and a surrender? He tried to look up at the white stars of Spain, but darkness pressed his eyeballs.

He felt himself turning, and knew he had come to the grilled iron door. His stupid feet, obedient to the Call, went up, up, up. His hand reached out against blackness to push aside folds and folds of stuff, soft, clinging, hateful.

He stood in the black velvet room. For an instant all his thoughts spun in a dizzy orbit, flaming and hissing through his mind; as they crystallized, only a great hatred was left.

The little *conde* had shrunk since the day of their parting, a year before. His parchment skin was more mummified, but his eyes shone with the same sinister light, as though all the life had flowed from the

shriveled hands, from the yellow body with its jet velvet coverings, from the strange, immobile face, into those two somber pools. They were fixed on Don Carlos as, the giddiness passing, the boy came to recognize his surroundings.

With the soft melting of velvet into velvet, the *conde* arose. A green-shaded lamp on the ebony table before him, struggling in vain against the monstrous shadows of the apartment, hit at length on emeralds lurking in the folds of his suit, and struck from them malignant sparks.

"You are late, Carlos." Vaguely the count's voice hinted the smooth passage of a rapier through human flesh.

Don Carlos shuddered. "You have broken your oath," he accused.

The count raised a yellowed hand. "My son," he protested, "you speak so to one who has cared for you as a father? Must I remind you of gratitude?"

"Gratitude!" The boy choked back a hysterical laugh. "You cared for me because I was a tool! Would the plague that took my father and mother had——"

"Carlos," warned the *conde* suavely, "beware the sin of blasphemy!"

"You swore if I would recover the treasure of Teruel to release me forever. Yet tonight you have called me, snared me, forced me to come!" Carlos' voice trembled with agonized reproach.

"My son! I called you, and you would not come. Is that the act of a dutiful child? I needed you, but it has spent me to bring you here." Unctuously he bowed his head. "For that I forgive you."

"I ask no forgiveness!" Don Carlos stood erect, his eyes tragic against the pallor of his face, but his wine-red velvet a gallant note of challenge in the somber room.

The malign eyes opposite him narrowed, the voice took on a slight edge. "I

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know of a treasure. Will you help me?"

The boy clenched his hands for strength against the preying glance. "No."

"You refuse unalterably?"

"I refuse."

The *conde's* thin lips twisted grimly. "Let us be frank. Without your consent I can not control your mind, for it has grown strong in this year. It tired me to bring you here tonight, and it would tax my utmost resources to use you against your will. So much you can not fail to recognize. But, Carlos, there are ways of forcing your consent."

Don Carlos stood immobile, save for a quick breath.

"You will reconsider, perhaps?" suggested the count silkily.

"I will not."

"No? Ah, it is a pity! But a dungeon, it may be, will cool that hot head. A year—two years—who knows? There is no hurry." The yellow hands rubbed together in satisfaction.

The boy cried out. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Dare? Ah, my son, my walls are protected by gold. No one would interfere."

Carlos faced him with gathering horror, like storm-clouds, in his eyes. He spread his hands. "In the name of the Saints," he implored, "have pity! You are taking back my soul when I have only now found it. Let me go, as you hope for mercy!"

"I should dislike disappointing your bride on the morrow," the count murmured sorrowfully.

Don Carlos clapped a hand to the slender dagger in his belt, then quite unexpectedly capitulated, his eyes haunted with despair. "I can't fight it," he cried. "I can't! I surrender. Do your worst."

"Ah, that is better," purred the old

man. "That is my good son." He put out a hand, but Carlos drew back sharply.

"The terms of my surrender," he said coldly, "have not been settled."

"Ah?"

"An agreement, written and signed, releasing me, on your Christian honor, from any further oppression, the paper to be filed with a court of law."

The ghost of a thin, malicious smile played over the count's lips. "I shall prepare it," he agreed.

"Secondly, your written promise that three-fourths of whatever treasure we may recover be distributed among the poor as my wedding gift. The fourth part you may keep."

The *conde* assumed a mask of sorrow. "Bueno," he sighed.

Carlos recognized the mask and was darkly troubled. The somber draperies seemed closing in on him, stifling him in their folds, laughing silently in the evil pleasure of their master. The count, whose greedy yellow fingers were never still, had acceded too easily.

THE count dipped a quill, and covering a white sheet with spidery writing, handed it to Don Carlos, who read it swiftly and fastened it within his doublet. In the meantime, the count brought forward an ebony chair, carved in death's-heads and serpents. Carlos had occupied it before, but its sinister lines appalled him now with a sense of foreboding.

The *conde* sat opposite, a living, yellowed death's-head, against the blackness of velvet and ebony. His emeralds spat fire as he leaned to take a manuscript from the table.

"I have here," he began softly, "the record of one Juan Castro, a soldier of Spain in the capture of Almería from

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the Barbary pirates in the year 1589. It was a splendid surprize attack, that capture, and our Señor del Castro comments with amazement that although the action was so swift that the pirates had barely time to fly for their lives to the galleys—that although they had no opportunity to carry away the rich loot garnered up the whole coast from Murcia to Alicante—yet not a trace of it was found by the victors. *It is that treasure I want you to find.*" The count's voice hissed with greed.

Don Carlos drew a long breath, as a swimmer who is about to dive under green waters. "*Bueno,*" he consented, and yielded his mind quite passively.

At first he felt only the whirling maze of thoughts which had come to him when he entered the black velvet room. Objects spun giddily out of sight and back again in sickening succession. The shrouding velvet all about him shut out light until he gasped for it as a man under water gasps for air. Emeralds, gigantic and malignant, flashed before him in dazzling array. He saw miles of saffron yellow, wrinkled and unreal.

Then a whirling kaleidoscope of color, green, yellow, converged and gained in intensity until he wanted to cry out. It bore on his heart like a weight of stone. Black! A luminous, compelling black, in twin pools; dark morasses where his soul was drowning. Relief came in a drowsy wave, and the morasses grew vaguely pleasant with the thought that one might sleep in them and forget. He was about to plunge into them when a disturbing voice came to him. He fought it off, but it persisted, shattering his peace.

"Are you ready?"

"I am ready, master," something answered, without his having moved his lips.

"It is June of the year 1589—June the fourth. You will go back, please, to that year." The voice was no longer disturbing. It was pleasant now, droning along with grateful monotony. Even its sibilance was delicious, like the song of insects on a hot afternoon. "You are traveling back. Back to 1589. That is eleven years ago. Eleven years that you must retrace. Are you traveling back?"

"Yes, master."

He was no longer oppressed with blackness. Sunshine was covering him now with glorious warmth.

"Eleven years ago," the voice persisted. "Are you there?"

"I am there."

"*Bueno.* It is the coast of Almería, our neighbor to the east. The ocean is blue, and the sands stretch away to the purple uplands. It is a sunny morning, yes?"

"It is a day of glorious sunshine."

"On the beach a band of men are busy with great chests of gold. Can you see them?"

"Not yet, master."

"It is the beach of Almería. The ocean is blue, and a light wind has come up with the early sun. The sands are flecks of gold. Do you see it?"

"A moment. . . . Yes, I can see it."

"What else do you see?"

It was amusing, this telling what he saw. He merely stood on the beach and watched the great, hardy brown men at work. They could not see him, and he did not even have to talk. Something inside answered all the questions without effort on his part.

"Are they excited?" queried the soothing voice.

"No. They sing as they work, loud, boastful songs in a strange tongue. They are ragged, but beautiful in colors like the sunset. Out on the water four galleys are rocking at anchor."

"Do you see chests of gold?"

"Chests, and golden objects—crucifixes, censers, beads." A disturbing wave of cold swept his sun-warmed mind. Crucifixes should not be on a beach!

His pleasant illusion was shattered for a moment, and the voice jarred further, for it was higher-pitched, with an edge of excitement. He clenched his hands, and could not know that only the finger tips curled, minutely.

"Gold," the voice gloated. "Yes, yes! Is anyone coming down from the highlands?"

"No, master."

"Wait on the beach. Tell me when anything occurs."

"Yes, master."

The *conde* sat with mask off, his fingers tight-gripped around the carved ebony arms, his lips twisted with greed. "Is there any movement?"

"No—yes—yes! A horseman is coming down to the beach, swiftly. He wears the uniform of Spain. He has thrown himself from the saddle and he runs to the tallest of the brown men. He speaks in Spanish to the Barb, calling him Sakr-ed-Din. He warns him of an approaching army. He is gasping for breath. There is great excitement. The Barb turns black with fury and calls orders in a voice of thunder. The men look furiously to the uplands."

"The gold? The gold?"

"The gold is on the beach, master. Hoards of it, in great heaps, shining in the sunlight. They are about to load it in boats to take to the galleys, but the Spaniard shakes his head. He tells that swift vessels of Spain are coming also. He motions to the beach, and Sakr-ed-Din laughs a great, terrible laugh and calls out orders.

"The big men fall to digging out a hole where sand and underbrush meet.

They carry the gold to it, object by object. They are huge men, but the weight tries them."

The count licked his thin lips.

"They finish the gold; then one approaches from behind the spy and cuts him down with a simitar. Sakr-the-Hawk nods approval, and the slayer carries the body to a hole. There it is buried with the gold, and they set fire to the underbrush to cover the spot."

"The spot!" cried the *conde*. "Mark the spot well!"

"They are marking it on a chart, master. It is near the foot of a crag which springs from the beach in the likeness of a carved face. One angle of the crag juts out beyond the rest, casting a pointed shadow. The tip of that shadow at high noon is the spot."

Feverishly the count nodded. "They never came back," he muttered.

"The brown men are in small boats, pushing off to the galleys, when the soldiers of Spain break over the crest and swoop down on them, their horses foaming and black. The battle begins——"

"You may leave the battle," the count interrupted. His sallow face, in the feeble glow of green light, contracted into a grimace of satisfied cupidity, and his fingers stroked the ebony serpents of his chair arm.

"You are in the present," he said softly. "It is the year 1600. You are still within my control. Within my control."

"Yes, master."

"In your doublet you have a paper of mine. Give it to me."

Don Carlos' lips parted slightly, his finger tips bent in a faint, miniature gesture of menace. The count fixed his terrible eyes on him. "You are in my control," he repeated distinctly, feeling the other's mind like a living being at war with his.

The boy sat rigid, motionless, almost without breath. "Give me the paper," the count insisted grimly. His eyes flamed with a destroying light.

Don Carlos made no move, but his arm muscles, under their velvet covering, rippled with the effort of restraint. The count rose and crossed to the opposite chair. "You are under my control. Under my control." Monotonously he spoke, standing like an angel of ill omen over the dark boy. Then smoothly he stooped, unfastened the doublet, and delicately extracted the paper. Don Carlos quivered when the hands touched him; quivered like an angry war-horse, curbed against his passionate will.

Trembling, the count returned to his chair. Too strong. Too strong. How a mind could grow in a year! Restively, he tore the paper across, time and again. Too strong. The dam had broken, and who could tell where the flood would lead?

DON CARLOS stirred. The coma was ending, trailing out to a fine tenuous point which would snap. And what then? The withered yellow hand beat softly on the ebony chair arm. Something to break that will! Something to shatter the mind and lay it broken at his feet. To shatter the mind?

With a guttural cry of rejoicing the *conde* sprang to his feet, his crooked shadow falling menacingly over Don Carlos like an unclean bird. "You are mad," he said quite distinctly, but with careful monotony. "Mad. Mad. Mad."

In Don Carlos' mind the words were slow drops of oil on the surging waters of revolt. Injustice rankled darkly, and the need for resistance. But the voice, flowing with friendly smoothness, lulled him and set at rest all disturbing emotion. Resistance? And why? To hear the voice droning away to some dim horizon of

consciousness, to obey it and drift with the swelling tide of drowsiness, that was peace.

Rebellion and hatred raised tiny hammers and beat against the wall of thought. He should hate the voice! Desperately he caught at the hammer blows trying to shatter peace. It was too easy to be a friend to sleep. He must fight, fight, fight, against sleep. He struck out with force that left him sobbing and weak, but sleep was too impalpable to battle. It flooded him like a wave, drowning and fleeing, dragging him in the undertow. Or *was* it sleep? Was it not more a surrender?

At least it was a gentle thing, soothing to frayed thoughts and bleeding emotions. The hammers still beat warningly, but sleep, in a vast, calm ocean, stretched before him, and with a sobbing breath of defeat he hurled himself into it.

At first the *conde* scarcely realized that the battle was won. His brain was reeling with exertion, and his hands, clenched about the chair arms, seemed of yellow marble, carved in straining veins and tendons. He was rocking slightly with the monotony of his own voice. "You are mad. Your will is crumbling. You feel the joy of surrender, the great peace of relaxing. You must not struggle. You are mad. Mad. Mad."

The heavy air of the room, weighted with blackness, seemed compressed about him by the intensity of his effort. How strong a mind could grow in a year! How strong!

But wait! He no longer felt resistance. His mind, staggering forward under the very momentum of its exertion, was unchecked. The form before him had lost its rigidity, and was drooping. As he watched, anxiety drawing back his lips in a ghoulish grin, he saw the gallant shoulders sag and the firm lines of the

face melt almost imperceptibly into the loose contours of insanity.

He laughed, beating on the chair arms in monstrous glee, even while his brain spun with exhaustion. "No more!" he gloated. "No more. Oh, this will weaken that mind of yours! Never fear, my boy. A touch of inferno till I choose to waken you!" He leaned back, laughing weakly, shaking with weariness and gratification. "No more!"

The boy was speaking now, brief, broken sentences in a whining voice. "A merry comedy! A wedding? I know no wedding. The world is a great joke, is it not? Trees of black—black velvet. They are beating me. I could hate black velvet trees."

The count intertwined his thin fingers and twisted them.

"My master is—is gold. An image, I think. You shall not talk against my master. I hate him, but you must not. Hush!"

Cackling with breathless laughter, the *conde* closed his eyes to listen.

The whining voice answered his laughter with a mocking, high-pitched counterfeited. "A joke! My master is gold, yet he had blood like any man. And once he had a heart. Hush! You must not tell him how I love him!"

THE voice broke off abruptly and a great silence fell on the room—a silence as tenuous and melting as black velvet. The *conde* heard his own labored breathing, and with a sudden fear upon him opened his eyes.

Don Carlos stood over him, with a dagger poised above his breast. The *conde* loosed a scream and his eyes went dull with fear.

"Hush," whispered the boy. "Do not disturb my master! I love him so I would see his blood. So simple!" He motioned downward suggestively with the dagger.

The count huddled in his chair. "You must not hurt your master," he chattered shrilly.

"It will not hurt him," breathed the other gently. "He is of gold, you see." The red velvet arm, poised above, was like a streak of blood against the darkness.

The old man shuddered back. "Stop!" he shrieked. "You are not mad! You are sane! Sane!" He gasped and beat at the air with his hands, then like a hunted weasel slipped from under the raised arm and ran stumbling to the draperies. He clawed at them, fumbling for an opening, but he felt a hand on his shoulder and screamed aloud. Turning, holding to the velvet for support, he faced the expressionless eyes and shining dagger.

"About here, perhaps?" the boy mused, touching the keen point lightly above his heart.

With hysterical laughter bubbling on his lips the count summoned all his giddy faculties. The blade was rising again, in a deliberate arc at the end of a blood-red arm. Fascinatedly he followed it, but a pounding terror at his heart warned him. He tore his eyes from it, fixed them in whirling concentration on the demented eyes before him, "You are not mad!" he choked. "You—are not—in my control."

The dagger quivered above him and he collapsed against the hangings in a half-faint, waiting for the blow, his parchment face distorted with horror.

When an eternity had passed, he opened his eyes haggardly. Don Carlos stood before him, dagger in belt and the clear light of sanity shining in his eyes.

The *conde* swayed and choked for words, left numb by the brushing of the wing of death.

"You are recovered, *señor?*" inquired

Don Carlos. His face, ghastly white, was lighted by the trace of a glorious smile.

"You know, I suppose," he continued softly, "that you are wholly in my power? Even without the paper which you destroyed—a generous document, *señor*. A thousand pities you destroyed it!—even without it I have outstripped your power forever. I have found a mind of my own. I am free!" His voice was vibrant with joy.

The count found speech. "'Twas by way of experiment that I took the paper, my son," he stumbled placatingly. "I remember the wording—an instant and I will replace it. Pen—papers——" He started forward nervously.

Don Carlos motioned him back and he relapsed wordlessly against the hangings. "The document is useless, *señor*. Even without it I am free, and as to the treasure, the whole is to be delivered to the poor to celebrate my wedding. I shall not hurt you further, for I think you have suffered today."

Sweeping a clear glance over the other's haggard face and broken attitude, he straightened.

"I bid you farewell, *señor*, for the wedding must not be delayed." He bowed ironically, his diamonds catching the evil light in a gleam of pure beauty; then he turned and strode through the black velvet darkness into the full sunlight of a Spanish day.