

Weird Tales

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Contents for November, 1928

Cover Design.....	C. C. Senf
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Mystery in Acatlan"</i>	
The Eyrie	580
<i>A chat with the readers</i>	
The Mystery in Acatlan.....	Rachael Marshall, Maverick Terrell 582
<i>It happened in Acatlan, and the horror of it drove the American to seek forgetfulness in strange drugs</i>	
The Polar Doom.....	Edmond Hamilton 589
<i>From under the polar ice a horror out of long-dead ages is loosed upon the world to spread terror and destruction</i>	
The Head From Ecuador.....	Robert Lee Heiser 608
<i>The sight of that shriveled head and red hair, with the tattoo-marks he knew so well, was too much for Dan Hack</i>	
Flame of the Ages.....	Robert Choate Albright 616
<i>Shabad Nagaur, high priest of the Fire Temple of Oudh, let the sacred flame expire on the altar</i>	

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

- The Cave of Spiders**..... **William R. Hickey** 619
*Into the wilds of South America went Seton and his wife—
and there in a ghastly cave a terrible thing happened*
- Sonnets of the Midnight Hours:**
8. **The Creatures**..... **Donald Wandrei** 624
Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin
- The Last Test**..... **Adolphe de Castro** 625
*A superb novelette, through which, like a cold breeze from
the tomb, sweep suggestions of unearthly horror*
- Satan and Lilith**..... **George Sterling** 656
Verse
- The Werewolf's Daughter (Part 2)**..... **H. Warner Munn** 657
*A three-part serial of the weird adventures that befell the
daughter of the Werewolf of Ponkert*
- The Flying Death**..... **B. Wallis** 669
*A dread monster comes from the sky, and the horror of its
coming robs mankind of its age-old sense of security*
- The Tryst in the Tomb**..... **M. J. Cain** 685
*Sardinossa's bride lay dead in the tomb, while Sardinossa
lurked in ambush for the young gallant who came to visit her*
- Folks Used to Believe:**
- The Fairy Court**..... **Alvin F. Harlow** 689
One of the strange beliefs of our ancestors
- The Tenant at Number Seven**..... **August W. Derleth** 690
*The ancient Roman medallion was bought by a strange man
who lived at St. John's Wood—a bizarre little ghost-story*
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- The Legend of Sleepy Hollow**..... **Washington Irving** 693
*The story of Ichabod Crane's tragic misadventure with the
headless horseman—a favorite tale with our grandparents*
- Haunted**..... **Earl W. Scott** 711
Verse

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"His cavernous eyes were fixed on the statuesque dead."

THE Signora Beatrice lay dead, perfumed and enshrouded, in the Junetime of her life; and the proud old Neapolitan, who had been her husband, sat near, dumb with the love of his young bride.

Silent forms passed in and out. They made no attempt at speech with the master of the palazzo; his look and attitude forbade it. Even the entrance of Carmina and the Countess Valeria, who had been very dear to the dead, drew from him no sign of recognition. They passed over to the bier and hung shaken with sobs above the beautiful form. Carmina, a tiny, passionate creature, stooped and touched the darkly fringed lids.

"Oh, I know, *carina*, these glorious eyes could not go on longer, smiling a lie; so you closed them forever. You were forced to give up Don Or-lino for the wealth you despised. Now, all we have of you is this." Again she bent, and passionately kissed the cold, still face. "Why did you do it, darling, why, why?"

The countess tenderly slipped an arm about the hysterical girl and gently drew her from the death-chamber.

By some magnetic current, some miracle, an echo of the words reached the grief-stricken husband, hitherto deaf to all around him, and, had they two glanced back, they would have seen a changed man. His form stiff-

ened into a sudden erectness and flames leaped to his olive cheeks.

Don Orlino! Don Orlino! The name rang on his emptiness a deeper knell.

Ignoring her love for another, he had won through the pressure of her parents and claimed the hand of the radiantly beautiful Beatrice. He never dreamed, in his vanity and self-complacency, that the heart of his bride would yearn in the midst of the splendors he could provide, for the summer hours spent with her forsaken love. He took pride in her beauty, grace, and intellect. Rapidly and gloriously, for him, the days flew by. In his fevered happiness, he could not see the decline in his wife that was visible to all. The shock of her death froze his heart, and he, too, had been as one dead from that first dark instant, until the words of Carmina touched him like a flame from hell.

He strode across the room and gazed fiercely down, on the lifeless eyes. All the blood in his body seemed striving for outlet at temples and throat.

"Say they so? Say they so?" His voice sounded strangely thin and sharp like the cut of a lash. "That Don Orlino had thus effectively snatched my heaven from me? If I believed it true, I would kill him—yes, kill him miserably." The words trailed away to a husky whisper.

After that, he no longer sat unnoticed. He eagerly scanned everyone who approached the lovely dead. But no soldier form with martial bearing entered to offer itself to a jealous husband's vengeance; and finally they laid the Signora Beatrice in the family vault without Don Orlino having looked on her dead face.

DAILED Sardinossa wended his way to her resting-place and put fresh flowers on her satin shroud. This duty he reserved for himself alone;

no other hand was allowed to touch the adored form. Agonizingly he waited for the first sign of the deadly decay. Those who served him feared for his reason, when it should make its appearance. But it tarried long, and, every day, new-blown flowers were necessary to match the surpassing loveliness of the dead woman's face.

Finally the strange truth was evident to all, and, with overwhelming joy, was borne in on the dotting husband. She was petrifying. Petrifying! He cried the word aloud and asked in wild-eyed exultation, of those about him, if they realized that the ravaging worm had been held at bay; that the cycling stars could record no destruction of her beauty; that the face of his Beatrice would be his to look on, as long as life was allowed him. The vault became for him a shrine, and many trancelike hours were spent within its silent precincts.

One evil day the rumor reached him that the shrine had a rival devotee, that one came often during the reign of the full moon, who feasted long on the beauty of the dead bride's face. A horrible suspicion thrilled through him like the touch of a live wire, and mad passions, unleashed in his heart, rendered him deaf and dumb and blind.

That night the moon would be full. In a fever, he waited the waning of the day. He seemed hours within the moon-drenched tomb when, at last, a quick step without made him hastily regain his place of concealment behind a fluted column.

A key grated in the lock, and the stalwart young form of Don Orlino stood silhouetted in the entrance. Evidently he knew the exact moment to come, the moment when the moon would serve him, when no artificial light would be necessary, that might betray his tryst with the dead.

The moonbeams had just crept through the barred window and softly outlined the marble form. In its

light the white shroud shimmered and the still face shone wondrously, hauntingly beautiful.

Only the dawning of a ghastly, hideous determination kept the bereft husband from springing upon Don Orlino and choking him to death, as he watched him rain kisses on the beloved eyes and lips and hair. A fury of fiendish hate shook his heart almost audibly, as the minutes of the strange love-*tryst* waned, and there was a mad hilarity in his eyes as he watched the reluctant departure of Don Orlino.

He crept from the shadows and leaned, ghastly pale, above the shrouded corpse. All the love, all the worship, were gone from his eyes. Only a searing, withering hate for her, too, shone in them.

"So you went to him through death, as they said." The tremulous quavering of his tone manifested the descent of a sudden insanity. "Well, by the most terrible God, through death he shall go to you!"

The following day, and two thereafter, workmen were busy within the tomb, at a task over which they greatly wondered. What did the grand *signor* want with the carefully hewn-out niche in the vaulted wall and the heavy iron gate that enclosed it from ceiling to floor? Did he intend to place the gentle Signora Beatrice erect within it, after the fashion of the ancient Egyptians? Two shook their heads gravely over the contemplated desecration, but the third shrugged his shoulders indifferently and went on with his work, arguing that there was no accounting for the vagaries of the rich and powerful.

When their work was completed, Sardinossa came to look it over, and astounded the three with the munificence of his reward. A diabolical exultation swept over him as he tested the working of the iron gate. It swung to, swiftly, easily, with a click that spoke for the security of its

fastenings. Then, consumed with a malignant eagerness, he watched the daylight die.

It is inconceivable with what satisfaction he dwelt on the carrying out of the horrible purpose that possessed him. He had a task before him, a diabolical task, which must be performed. His soul was on fire to accomplish it speedily and well.

MOONRISE found Sardinossa in the region of the tomb, and a smile, or rather, a hideous grimace, wrinkled his countenance, as Don Orlino's shadow fell long on the silvered grass. He allowed time for the caresses that maddened him, then moved in the direction of the tomb.

At the sound of his footstep, Don Orlino, surprised and startled, stood erect and faced the entrance. The two men stared at each other for a full half-minute.

Sardinossa was the first to break the silence. "Rather a tardy visit, this, Don Orlino. You never honored us so during the lady's lifetime." His voice was steady and betrayed no sign of the black purpose hidden in his soul.

"That it was impossible will always be counted my greatest regret," replied Don Orlino.

"One can readily believe that, who sees you take this time and this place to recompense yourself for impossible or neglected visits."

The biting sarcasm of his tone sent the hot blood to Don Orlino's face and warm words to his lips.

"Sardinossa, Beatrice was, as you know, once the dream of my life. If she ever was of yours, then you knew the ecstasy of its realization. This"—he pointed dramatically to the moon-bathed figure—"was its nearest fulfilment for me. Of course, I do not expect you to approve—"

"On the contrary," interrupted Sardinossa, "strange as it may seem, you will find that I shall expend spe-

cial effort in assisting you to a fuller realization of your dream. Do not think I shall forbid you the place. Indeed, you may consider it yours from tonight forth."

The tenseness of the voice, the cold light in the eye, like the flash of steel on steel, the ominous calm before the storm—all were lost on Don Orlino in the joy of the privilege granted. His cherished love, with its mingled grief and pain, made him, the soldier and strategist, like an unsuspecting child in the hands of this finished master of cunning.

"They tell me you come always at night, when the moon is full." Sardinossa's cold, even voice again woke the echoes of the tomb.

Don Orlino started. Sardinossa had been aware, then, of the stolen vigils. For the first time, Don Orlino, somewhat distrustful of the apparent calm, searched Sardinossa's face for a sign of suppressed passion, but it was bland, smiling.

"I thought, perhaps," the almost sarcastic tones went on, "the moon might enhance charms already more than heart-breaking, so I came to see."

"That were impossible," Don Orlino returned passionately. "Beatrice was, and remains, beautiful in all lights, at all times. I come at night because she gave you the right to come in the daylight, to love, to adore before men. For me, she left only this tryst in the tomb, these stolen moments. Can you not understand? Can you not pity?"

The old eyes flamed with a horrid mirth. "Yes, I can understand, I can pity. You will not long be without an evidence of the fact." A short, hard laugh finished the remark. Evidently the laugh was involuntary and instantly regretted, for he went on with an undue haste and overdone affability. "Of one thing I have assured myself: that the cold, damp atmosphere of the vault at night is not

for the old. It has stiffened my knees painfully." He stooped and pressed them in a helpless manner. "My stick, I left it there." He pointed toward the newly made niche at the foot of the casket.

Don Orlino sprang in the direction indicated and felt about for the stick. Unable to find it, he moved closer to the wall and felt about more carefully.

Like a flash, the old form unbent, and, with the speed of a tiger in action, Sardinossa had crossed the little space and swung shut the gate on his victim.

Startled, Don Orlino struggled about in the narrow enclosure and faced a fiend incarnate. Blue lightnings leaped from Sardinossa's gloating eyes, and his voice was like the taunt of a demon.

"Now realize to the full your dream—look your fill." Sardinossa spat out the words. "You see I have placed you conveniently at her feet, and when the extremity of hunger and thirst begins to burn and torture, curse her, curse love, curse God, and die."

He darted a final glance of undying hate at Don Orlino, who stood, magnificently defiant, like an American Indian at the torture. Going out, he locked the tomb and turned his back on it forever.

YEARS after, when the body of Sardinossa was brought home from a foreign land for burial, those who entered the tomb with the remains shrank back in terror. There were sharp cries. With a thud that echoed dismally, the coffin slipped from their trembling hands; and, powerless to withdraw their eyes, they gazed with unutterable horror on the ghastly monument Sardinossa had raised to the green-eyed monster.

Behind the bars of the gate, gleaming white and ghostly, and hung with

tatters of moldering garments, was the skeleton of Don Orlino.

His cavernous eyes were fixed on the statuesque dead, and dangling

down against the protruding ribs, just where the noble heart once beat, was an ivory miniature of the laughing girl-face of the lady of his worship.