

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME X

NUMBER 6

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, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 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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The WITCH-BAITER

By R.
Anthony



"Spectral figures floated, threatened and mocked."

MYNHEER VAN RAGEVOORT did not like the dark! There were things he could not see in the dark, but which he knew were there. But there were also things that he knew did not exist, which the darkness nevertheless conjured before his eyes. Faces! Spectral figures that floated and threatened and mocked! Many faces, many figures! And those of women chiefly, and girls! Of course, they had been witches and he had condemned them to the torture, to the stake, to the rope. But why should they trouble him, dance about him, beckon him? He had not executed them; he had merely been their judge, the administrator of the Law! The Law forced him and he was helpless! Still they bothered. Sometimes they seemed so real! . . .

W. T.—2

Emphatically, Mynheer van Ragevoort, the Justice of Hegemonde, did not like the dark! Worse, noises often came from the night, noises that were mysterious and unaccountable. Sounds like the voices of people, especially sounds of women in pain, shrieking in torture, gasping brokenly!

There! The Justice started. He seemed to recognize a voice—yes, he heard it distinctly! It sounded like—ah, now he remembered!—the voice of Melisande zer Honde, a slight girl, pale and pretty, a child of scarcely twelve. How she had screamed when the rack drew out her joints and stretched her muscles and ripped the ligaments! Yet she had confessed! He had been amazed that so young a child should be a witch! But witnesses had stated so,

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and under the torture she had admitted it. So he was forced to sentence her—to burning at the stake! How she had pleaded for life! How she had shrieked when the flames enveloped her! And then that appalling stillness, broken only by the crackling of fagots and the rush of the flames!

And there was the sweet, innocent face of Gertrudis Bourdelaide. No, he doubted her accusers. He had known the girl since her birth, in fact, he had lifted the child over the baptismal font as her godfather! Terribly she had been accused—and *had confessed!* They had to carry her away from the torture. He remembered how her crushed legs had quivered in agony, the white, bloodless features, the maimed hands. She had endured much, but she had confessed! The rope and quartering! But those moans, long-drawn, haunting, unending! Never a shriek, never a cry, only moans! Would he ever forget?

The Justice shook himself. He flung his cloak around his head and moved down the road, carrying in his hand a small lantern, from which a candle shone weakly. "Not much good in this thick gloom," he muttered. There was a fog in the air, which scarcely stirred with his movements. Yet the stillness, the lack of motion made him feel unsafe, restless. What was behind the gloom?

Hurriedly he trod the road toward his castle, his home. This stood somewhat apart from the city, as became the overlord and Justice. Not for him to live among gossips and small tradesmen! Besides, it was the home of his fathers.

A faint rustling sound made him pause. He peered around intently, but perceived nothing. Even his candle seemed unable to pierce the fog beyond his arm's reach. Silence around him! Well, he must move on, toward home, toward rest—perhaps.

At least he would see his daughter . . .

Something huge and light fluttered from the fog and fell over his head, covering him with soft folds. In fright he dropped his lantern and gurgled a shriek. He fought back the folds, but they enveloped him tighter and tighter, drawing around him till his arms were helpless.

And then hands seized him, on the right and the left, and a voice whispered: "Come! But say naught!"

"What—what——" he began. But an insistent prod of some pointed weapon made him move forward.

FORWARD! But where? Where were they taking him? And for what purpose? The cloth covering his eyes made little difference; he had been unable to see anything without it. They left the road, moved across ditches, over the veldt. Stops when he was lifted over some obstacle—a hedge or boundary mark, he thought. More veldt! And around him the faint thuds of numerous feet, slithering noises of mantles brushing against each other, muffled clinks of metal. God! what was in store for him?

The Justice stumbled through a ditch. Then hard and rounded bumps under his feet—ah, he was back in Hegemonde, in the city—among people! If he called——!

A sharp point pressed his side and a warning hiss apprized him of what would happen. So he was silent.

Some steps up which he stumbled, then a chamber. He felt himself led to a seat. How familiar that seat felt! With his feet he cautiously felt about himself. Yes, there were the legs of the table, and there his own footstool. It was his own: he was in the Court of Justice, his own court!

"Your own court! Your own dais!" came in deadened tones beside him. "We are here to try the witch of witches, to try her under the Law! But she must not know us lest sorrow

come to all of us. So speak not above a whisper!"

Routine! But why in the night? And who was the woman they called the witch of witches?

"Begin!" the dull command was given.

Routine! Well, he would go through with it! "In the name of the Lord on High," he intoned in a penetrating whisper, "and in the name of His Majesty, the King of Spain and the Netherlands! There stands before us a—a——"

"A maiden!" prompted the voice.

"——a maiden, accused of having sold her immortal soul to the foul fiend in unholy conspiracy and of having exercised her black power in wanton sorcery and witchcraft to the detriment of man, woman and child, upon their property, their goods and possessions and upon their produce." A pause, then: "Woman, do you confess?"

Silence.

"Who witnesseth against her?" he continued.

"We all do witness against her," whispered someone in front of him.

"Aye! Aye! It is true!" whispered many voices.

"We vow she hath bewitched us or those of our families and contributed to our loss, even the death of our loved ones," said the accuser.

"Aye, she hath! We so vow it!" chorused the others.

"Doth the witch confess?" asked Mynheer the Justice.

Silence.

"Then to the rack with her—till she confesses!"

A scream of terror, quickly muffled, a sardonic cackle whose uvular tone seemed familiar, then the shuffle of many feet.

The Justice remained seated. No need for him to enter the torture chamber. Besides, he would not be able to see. In fact, he did not care to

see. He had seen too many, too many! And they always confessed!

Through the open door he heard the spinning of rolls, the weak clatter of winding drums. A hush replete with indefinite sounds—they were fastening loops around the ankles and wrists of the witch. Then the squeak of turning handles, a pause, another squeak, a moan, a stifled shriek! A wait, then the splash of water! Another squeak of the drums . . .

In accustomed routine the Justice leaned to one side of the great chair. Another twist of the rack, then would come the familiar sounds, and then—confession! He listened inattentively. For there was a bigger, a personal question. What were they intending to do to him? And why this secret trial? If they would only talk in loud voices, and not in those awful whispers! It was unreal—unreal!

Again the splash of water, then another squeak, followed by faint clicks and tears, joints giving way and flesh ripping! A ghastly shriek! "God! I confess," in a pain-shocked voice. "A-a-h-h!" and silence.

Yes, that was the usual result, sometimes a little slower in coming, but not often. There! That quiet cackle! He knew it! No wonder—the skilled hands of the executioner were in charge!

The shuffle of feet once more and then a voice. "Your Worthiness, she hath confessed her guilt! Your sentence?"

Mynheer van Ragevoort roused himself. Sentence! Very well! "To be hanged by the neck until death do claim her! At once!" This would be sufficient, and few preparations necessary! A rope and——

He must be short, he wanted to be away! Let them hurry and free him!

For a long time he sat there and waited—waited silently, for around him all noise had ceased. There had been a little shuffling of men entering

the prison enclosure—to see the witch hung, of course—but nothing more. So he sat and pondered. He felt stifled. The cloth over his head impeded his breath and drowsiness overcame him.

THE tramp of feet aroused him. A moment later the fetters were removed from his arms and the cloth lifted from his head and shoulders.

He blinked in the sudden light of torches. Before him he saw a number of hooded figures, all with voluminous cloaks, faces hidden behind black veils. Were these the same men? he wondered.

“So it is here we find you, Sir Justice!” said the leader.

Mynheer did not recognize the voice.

“We looked for you in the castle. You were not there!”

Hm! So they looked for him. What did it mean? Why should they look for him when they had him already? And why no longer the whispers? At least he was thankful for that!

“Arise, sir, and take your place. You are to be tried!” said the leader.

Nine men in all, noted Mynheer. Two of them pushed him from the chair and led him down to a bench before the dais.

The tall leader at once occupied the chair of justice.

“Sir Justice, note what I say! You have been tried in secret trial and found guilty! We came tonight to execute sentence! We went to your home and waited for you! You did not come! Later we searched and found you absent! So at length we thought to look here! And here you are!” with sudden humor.

Mynheer van Ragevoort said nothing, only gazed bewildered at the mummer.

“Sir Justice, we are the *Vehmgericht!* In secret we met and considered you and the justice meted out

by you. Sir, you have been an unjust judge. You have been a plague to this land! Like a wild beast you have persecuted the innocent and condemned them to death. Nothing has held you back—not friendship, not pity, not justice, not even the ties of blood! You lusted only to kill!”

He paused and seemed to wait for an objection. Mynheer found the words. “They were witches all! They confessed! The Law gave me——”

“The Law!” scorned the leader in stinging tones. “Your wild superstition was the Law. Not the written Law! With you an accusation was the equal of proof! You never gave fair trial!”

“They confessed!” the Justice muttered.

The leader stood up and pointed an accusing finger at him. “They confessed—under insane torture. They confessed—to escape further torture! They confessed—what you wished them to confess! Confession, indeed! So would you confess! Can an innocent child of ten—for such was Gertrudis Bourdelaide—know anything of wickedness, of sorcery, of witchcraft? Yet you forced her by the vilest tortures to say she was guilty. Did Melisande zer Honde know of witchcraft? She confessed to it—after you tore her on the rack. Did Roberta Deswaarters ever perpetrate any wickedness—she, a patient little saint, who spent most of her young life in pain? Yet you forced her to admit unholy practises—by means of the rack, the stocks! Did Margaréte Van Voelker, or Pieta der Groote—oh, why name them all, the dozens of decent folk you put to death! For years you have sown terror in the land, you have revolted minds with your unheard-of cruelties. You were the scourge of the people until they wearied of it!

“Men came together and in secret protest asked the *Vehmgericht* for

justice. When the Law is in unjust hands, man may—and must—take the Law from those hands and punish them! That is what the *Vehmgericht* has decided. Sir Justice, stand and hear your sentence!”

Mynheer van Ragevoort arose stiffly. It was all like a dream and still terribly real. For some reason he could not muster his thoughts to utter a protest. Pictures of trials, of tortured women, of executions, raced through his mind. It was true, terribly true, what the leader had said. But he had not meant to be unjust. He, too, had suffered, because of his duty. He had wanted to rid the land of the plague of witches, he had wished to make his land free of sorcery and witchery for all time to come. Many times he had wavered when friends, and even relatives, proved guilty; but resolutely, without fear or favor, he had administered the Law.

The leader was speaking. “You were sentenced to torture and death!” he said in somber tones. “Such was the sentence decided on!”

A pause—Mynheer twisted his hands, his face suddenly pale and beaded with cold drops.

Again the leader spoke, solemnly, impressively, and the eyes that gleamed blackly through the veil held something of pity. “Torture and death! Such was the sentence. But—this sentence will not be carried out—not completely! You shall not die through our hands!—For there is worse than death that has struck you! Perhaps it is the Hand of God! We assembled tonight to carry out the sentence on you. But we found that others had been at work! We found that they had seized you—grief-stricken fathers they were, men fully as crazed with fear of witches as you—they had captured the witch of witches, as they thought—had tried her before your court, tortured her

and hung her. Their vengeance is gruesome!”

What did it all mean? Mynheer van Ragevoort seemed paralyzed. His eyes were wide, his mouth open, all his features expressed complete lack of understanding.

“You know not,” continued the leader, “who the witch of witches was? Nor will I tell you. They blinded you, Sir Justice, and blind was your judgment. But a taste of the torture shall be yours, and then you will be freed. Perhaps—perhaps you will be more forbearing hereafter. To work, men!”

STRONG hands seized Mynheer van Ragevoort and quickly stripped him of his clothes. In a trice, so it seemed, they bore him to the torture chamber and looped the ropes around his wrists and ankles.

A spin of the drums, the ropes tautened and squeaked, pain unbearable shot through his limbs and scorched his joints.

“Another turn!” commanded the leader.

Agonized sweat rolled over the Justice’s body, his mouth sagged and a croak came from his throat. “I—I—confess!” he moaned.

“Confess!” exclaimed the leader in chill tones. “Confess—what?”

The taut body could not even writhe—could only quiver. “I—I—know not!” Mynheer gasped.

“Nor we!” the leader made a gesture, the drums swung back a half-turn and tightened with a jerk.

Suffering indescribable tore into him—the Justice fainted. Water splashed over his head awoke him. God! Now he knew that crazing agony! He had sometimes wondered why the accused gave in so readily, after a few whirls of the drums! He had been inclined to despise them as weaklings. Guilt alone could not endure, innocence certainly must! But

now he knew! Oh, to escape this torment! Anything, anything—even death! But to escape!

A searing pain at his sides, yet he knew not whether it was hot or cold metal that touched him! And then the ropes became slack. What they did with him he scarcely knew—his whole body ached with tearing pains! And his head! It pounded and pounded and pounded.

A raw pang on his forefinger seemed to swell and swell until his arm—no, his body—grew large with the torment. What were they doing? He saw it—a pincer was plucking at a fingernail, slowly pulling it from its foundation. God! What could he do to get away from such torture? Waves of pain welled forth from the finger, greater than his body could endure!

Something else! They had bound his wrists behind him; his ankles also were bound and heavy weights attached. Why this? Why didn't they simply kill him and be done with it?

A hook slipped under his fettered wrists, there was a pull, and suddenly he soared, his weighted body suspended by the wrists. And then he dropped. Again they drew him aloft and dropped him. Shoulders twisted and cracked and ached, his body seemed an immense pain. He fainted.

A rocking motion aroused him. He was dressed and covered with a cloth; they were carrying him! He felt strangely numb, conscious of ever-present but subdued pain. And so weary, so weak, so exhausted!

At last the motion changed. They had entered some dwelling and now they laid him down. Steps moved away, and then someone spoke—the leader!

“The sentence has been executed, Sir Justice! May it teach you to be more merciful hereafter! We leave you now—with your victim!”

Half-conscious, he wondered. “My victim?” he asked, his voice muffled by the enveloping cloth.

“Look and see!” in a chilling whisper. There were quick steps, the slam of a door, and then silence.

Mynheer van Ragevoort scrambled painfully to his feet, weakened hands tore at the enshrouding folds. There!—he saw light—the cloth fell away. But he knew that room—those paintings—that table, the chairs—why, he was in his own home! So they had carried him to his house, his castle!

He was thankful for even that. But why this strange, oppressive silence in the house? Where were the servants? And his—

His roving eyes caught sight of something. Over there, on the great divan, lay something very limp and still, covered with a white drape. That—that—his victim, the leader had said! But in this house—was it—everything was so silent—was it his—? No, no, it must not be!

He crept weakly to the divan and tore the sheet from the still figure. “God! Anne-Marie! My daughter!”

He stared at her, unbelieving, uncomprehending. His victim? Oh, no! Not that, not that! But it was his daughter that lay there, lifeless, features frozen in an eternal mask.

Slowly he inspected her. Quivering fingers felt the soft flesh, not yet rigid in death. He saw raw welts around her wrists and bare ankles. Around her neck an irregular stripe—they had hanged her!

His victim! It was she—Anne-Marie, his daughter!—that had been tried as the witch of witches that night! They had tortured her and—and he—he had ordered the torture! “*And she confessed!*” he groaned. “I—I ordered—her execution—*as a witch!* God!”

The room reeled and he crashed to the floor.