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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Witch in the Fog

By ALEXANDER FAUST

A brief tale of thuggee—and a beautiful English girl

IN HIS favorite chair at his favorite club, Mr. Blenheim Oranger enjoyed whisky-and-soda, a vista of Regent Street, and deep content of soul.

It had taken some years and quite a bit of cleverness to achieve all this.

He was holding the match to a cigar whose bland Sumatra fragrance added the final fillip, when Captain Jorgens, an old friend, sauntered in. "Hallo!" said Oranger, with almost the lazy purr of a cat.

Then Jorgens looked at him and paused.

Dread. Black dread, unreasoning and icy. Fingers squeezing his heart.

"Funny thing," Jorgens was remarking; "imagined I saw Elise Mayring stare at me out of the fog tonight."

Oranger's hand spilled half the whisky-and-soda over his collar. "Couldn't be," he said thickly. "Couldn't be Elise. She's in India." He said it wildly, assuring himself.

Jorgens glanced at him again, oddly. "I say, you're not looking too well. . . ."

Blenheim Oranger rose abruptly, leaving the other to stare and shake his head and shrug. Oranger took a cab to Oak Manse, his home. The cabby was a man

who had driven him before; he made sure of that.

In the big old house where he did his stately and luxurious living, he selected a blue steel .38 automatic from his collection of weapons, tested the mechanism and replaced the clip with a fresh one. In his bedroom he waited. She would come; and he would be ready.

His gaze lingered on the huge casement of leaded glass. Beyond it lay lawn and trees and a street. He couldn't see the street now. A gray fist clutched London. Fog writhed beyond the window, a myriad of shapes leering at him out of its depths. One moment he thought a gray unwinking snake stared at him. Again, it seemed a squatting woman with four arms and a necklace of pale grinning skulls.

Oranger's strained eyes smarted, his throat was tight and arid. Just beyond the casement, tentacles of fog twisted into another form: a woman, slight and shapely with deep eyes, tip-tilted breasts and slender hands. Her ghostly fingers pressed against the pane. Her outlines were shimmering fog, but he could see the scarlet-tinged spot of her mouth, the

certainty of her chin above the long, lovely throat-line.

THE casement shivered and a tentacle of fog writhed in, weighting the air with sinister damp.

Blenheim Oranger grabbed the phone and demanded Scotland Yard.

Then somehow she stood before him, very beautiful in a robe of some gray silken stuff that shimmered like the fog that followed her and clung about her. Her hair was loose and lustrous, tumbling to her shoulders, caressing the pale even ivory of her arms. She swayed toward him with a faint susurration of silk. She glided with a long loose-hipped rhythm that held him spellbound, his gaze preferring the loveliness of her body to the cold sardonic fury in her eyes.

Then she was so close that he could scent her, not her old familiar fragrance of gardenia, but some frangipani-touched odor that was dark and exotic.

His eyes traveled up, past the gray silken handkerchief that dangled at her wrist, past the pallor of her throat to the dainty firm line of her chin, her mouth with heavy under-lip blood-red. Suddenly he was tense with eagerness for her and yet very much afraid.

"Elise!" he spoke the name in a tentative hoarse whisper.

His hand groped out to touch her.

Her wrist flickered and the gray handkerchief whispered through the air. Like a vicious insect, it stung him. He jerked back, and she laughed, the mellow sound of bells in ancient temples.

He touched a finger to his cheek. "Elise," he said again, wonderingly.

"I have come back," she said. "You shouldn't be too glad to see me."

"I am. I'm as mad about you as I always was."

"Odd way you showed it—to sell me to that beast!" The smile bared her teeth.

He said, deprecatingly, "That's hardly the way to put it, dear. He was a prince, and pure Aryan blood, though his skin was dark. And he married you. What better match could any guardian arrange?"

She said nothing, but her veiled eyes challenged his justification.

"But you and I are still cousins, and more than cousins," he went on. "Shouldn't our greeting be a little more—tender?"

"You think you've kissed me," she taunted. "In India they've studied the art. There was a thing or two my husband taught me . . . one was kissing."

She swayed closer. Her mouth was flame and honey against his, wounding him and soothing the wound sweetly.

He clung to her, burying his face in the whiteness of her shoulder. For a space the glint in her eyes became softer.

A thin impatient voice somewhere was reiterating, "Scotland Yard speaking! Are you there?"

The telephone, forgotten, lay beside its cradle.

Elise leaned away. "You knew I'd come—you called them to protect you!" she surmised with something of contempt.

Oranger picked up the phone and looked at it as though he had never seen one before. "Blenheim Oranger speaking," he said, twisting with embarrassment. "Uh—really, there's no need—it was all a mistake——"

"Don't break the connection," her murmur cut across his fumbling. "There was another thing my husband taught me." She flicked the gray silk of the handkerchief. "Like this. Tell them—you're going to be murdered!"

Oranger's mouth fell open and he tried to laugh. He saw the soft lines of her face flatten into harshness and a mystic cruel ecstasy. His damp hand gripped

the phone and he shouted, "Scotland Yard! I'm going to be——"

A harsh heavy voice blocked his terror: "Drop that phone!"

His gaze darted up. A thick-set man whose beetling brows met across his nose was standing beside him. The man jabbed Oranger's ribs with one of those crude but deadly contraptions sometimes seen in England: a home-made pistol, an affair of springs and wood and wire that might blast murderously even before it was intended.

ORANGER relaxed with a sigh as if the air had been let out of him. Another man was now following the first, in through the window. He was armed with a small, womanish automatic, handled in mother-of-pearl. Strict laws made it hard to get guns, but somehow, they contrived. This second man was a slight figure with stringy knots of muscle and hollow cheeks. He turned his automatic to cover Elise.

Elise let the silken handkerchief dangle from her wrist. Deliberately, she walked toward the gun.

"Keep away, lady, or before God, I'll let you have it!" the thin man rasped. She laughed, stopped short. With that handkerchief, she had no reason to be afraid.

With infinite care, Oranger put the phone down beside its cradle. The thin irritated voice at the other end of the wire said again, "Are you there? Are you——"

Oranger lifted his hand carefully and wiped it across his upper lip where perspiration showed like a mustache of crystal beads. "What—what do you want?" he demanded.

The thick man shifted on his feet, from one to the other, and twisted his mouth in a dog-like snarl to utter:

"Didn't expect you'd 'ave a lady friend visitin' you, Mis-ter Oranger. But that don't make hany difference! We come to settle han old score with you."

"Score?" Oranger murmured faintly.

"And settle it with bullets!" the thin one cackled. He flourished the gun.

"We're out o' Dartmoor now. I said I'd come back!" There was triumph in the first man's voice.

"Dartmoor? Come back? What's that to do with me?" Oranger posed as a picture of irritated righteousness.

The thick man licked his lips ferociously. "Try a little, Mis-ter Oranger. You'll remember, you will. Remember 'ow you 'ired me hand Davey 'ere to pull a little job for you, hand 'ow you fixed it so's you'd collect the swag and we'd get sent hup! Both of us, seein' the sky through bars, four long years!"

Elise murmured, "Then I wasn't the only one you double-crossed, dear. You seem to have made a career of it!"

"He's insane!" Oranger said.

"Two thousand pounds worth o' stuff it was we 'elped you to," the big man continued, "hand never a farthing of it we got! You'll pay hup now! Hall of it!"

"Blackmail!" Oranger muttered darkly.

The thin one spoke, 'n his turn: "It'll be worse than blackmail. And you'll like it less. You won't like it at all!" He gestured with the gun.

Oranger wiped sweat again and bargained, "Suppose I haven't that much here?"

"We'll 'ave it hout of your 'ide!" the big man spat.

Elise laughed. She was enjoying his discomfort. There was in her flesh a memory of foolish tenderness for this man; yet she could not decide whether he was more of a comic spectacle than a rat. He was both.

He rose, and they all watched him

while he faltered to the wall, moved away the picture that concealed his safe, and twirled the nickel knob. Meanwhile the big man casually appropriated the automatic .38 which Oranger had had no chance to use.

He fondled it admiringly; his own contraption he stuck away in a hip pocket. Oranger turned back to them, bearing an armful of papers and boxes. He set them all down.

"Here," he said sullenly.

"Show us what you got there," the thick man commanded.

Oranger showed. Currency—of four nations; bonds that were instantly negotiable in New York or Paris as well as in London; a heap of jewelry. His own get-away cache, ready for any emergency.

The thick man stuffed his pockets. His partner did likewise. Banknotes stuck from their shirts and rubies from their trousers.

"Now—you'll go?" Oranger asked nervously.

The thick man grinned: "That just hevens it hup for the dough you howe us. Now we'll settle for the dirty trick!"

"Let me do it, Artie, let me!" the little man pleaded, wagging his automatic under Oranger's nose.

"You," said Artie generously, "can bump the lady. We mustn't 'ave a live witness hanging around here. But hall that kept me goin' these four years was the thought of killin' 'im meself!"

"I half intended it myself!" Elise said. "You needn't fear me."

Artie bared his teeth and moved his one continuous line of eyebrow up and down ferociously.

"Think you can slip a fast one over, lady? None o' that! Get ready, Davey!"

"Of all damnable situations!" Elise murmured in an aside to Oranger. "I come here all the way from India to kill

you, and I've got to save your life instead!"

Oranger cringed.

"Not much'll save 'is life now, not from me!" Artie promised. "Nor yours neither!"

ELISE smiled and moved a little closer to him. She wondered if she could provoke him into mercy. She could provoke him into something.

He saw her approach, her lips parted and smiling at him.

"None o' that, now!" he said hoarsely.

He retreated a step. But his eyes were on her body, shimmering like starshine in the gray folds of her silken robe. Her hips swayed languidly toward him, very close, until her body brushed his like a thousand tiny flames, burning him dry and feverish and tense. His breath came faster until it whistled unevenly through his clenched teeth.

Little Davey, worried for him, cried out: "That's no English girl, Artie—it's a damned witch!"

"Witch!" Artie muttered, thrusting her away from him in agony. "I'll blow her to hell myself!" He raised his gun.

His face was wet with a clamminess, but his hand was steady and his eyes were hard.

She made a little tentative motion with her wrist and the gray silk of her handkerchief sighed; then her wrist flicked out suddenly and the handkerchief whirled whispering, darted faster than sight could follow it; around Artie's thick throat it curled, and the sharp *crack!* it made was not the silk snapping in air, but the vertebræ of his spine.

Artie jerked up on tiptoe; then the gray silk came loose and his head flopped grotesquely. He hit the floor.

Little hollow-cheeked Davey screamed in sudden terror; he had seen something

he didn't believe. Death couldn't happen that way, that quickly.

He turned the pearl-handled automatic on Elise and tried madly to squeeze the trigger; but again the handkerchief whispered; wrist and silk moved with incredible speed and mystic dexterity; again the sharp sickening *snap!* and Davey's hollow-cheeked head lolled, his eyes went dull, his body tumbled.

"Oh, my God! My God!" Oranger, fear scribbled upon his white face, leaned over Artie's body. He reached down to pick up the gun in the still hand.

Silk hissed beside his ear and Oranger dived chattering for the floor while Elise let her laugh peal.

"No! no!" he managed to gasp. "I'll give you anything you want!"

"Is there anything you can give me?" she asked with a curl to her lip.

"All this money—these jewels!" He indicated the valuables still sticking out where Artie and Davey had stuffed them.

"Those are already mine. They were theirs—you gave them; and since I offered their bodies as sacrifice to Kalee, by all the ancient customs of thuggee their wealth is mine."

He regained some of his composure. "You always liked to be dramatic," he said. "Thuggee is dead—stamped out long ago by the army. First thing the British did when they took over India."

She indicated the bodies. "Thuggee is dead, you say—but so are these! Their blood is an offering to Kalee, since they died by the handkerchief sacred to her. That was another trick my husband taught me!"

TENTACLES of fog beyond the casement again seemed to swirl into the form of that squatting woman with four

arms, her horrid necklace and her girdle made of hands. But Oranger knew the shape of Kalee, death-goddess, who had created men and given them handkerchiefs to slay with. His imagination was playing him tricks. Bah!

"You married me to him," Elise continued. "That was your doing, and he paid you for it. But it was he who taught me the trick of death with a handkerchief; how poetic and how just that now I return to use it on you!"

She wafted the gray silk lightly through the air, demonstrating.

Oranger staggered back and clutched his throat with both hands to ward off death, yet knowing there was no defense.

She murmured, "I take what is mine." Her fingers lifted a heap of gems, a sheaf of notes and securities. "This is all I want. I came here with half a mind to kill you because there was yet passion for you in my veins, even if that passion was only hatred. But you are too small a creature. Revenge on you would be too petty. Look for a rat-hole to hide in!"

Oranger's eyes opened wide and his breath sighed in a gasp that turned into a sob.

For a moment everything was still. Then an annoyed thin voice droned from somewhere, "Scotland Yard speaking! I say, are you there? Are you——"

Elise picked up the still-neglected phone.

"Could you send a man to Oak Manse at once," she murmured, "with some spirits of ammonia? Mr. Blenheim Oranger has fainted!"

She moved to the casement and stretched out her arms to meet the fog.