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VALE OF THE CORBIES

by Arthur J. Burks

Author of "Black Medicine," "Strange Tales From Santo Domingo," etc.

MY FEAR is an intangible fear; yet to me it is terribly real. Reason tells me that my experiences are but the figments of realistic nightmares, while my inner consciousness tells me that what I have gone through has been something more than disordered imagining. I know, in my mind, that it has all been a dream, or a series of dreams.

Yet how can I explain to myself those strange red dots on my hands, my face, my neck?

These are very real. They are not hallucinations, for such of my friends as still come to see me at intervals have noted the dots and remarked upon their peculiar appearance.

This fact it is that is slowly but surely driving me to the very door of the insane asylum. Damn it, I know they have all been dreams! Yet dream creatures do not leave their marks upon the body of the dreamer.

But I had best go back and tell it all from the beginning.

I believe that from childhood I dreamed at intervals, widely spaced intervals, of a little secluded valley which had no location except in the recesses of my subconscious mind. It has always been a sunless valley, with a dark cloud hiding the sun. Mias-

matic mists have hung like airy shrouds in the still air above the valley's floor. There has been no breeze in this valley, nor anything that lived or moved. The air has been good, freighted with a musty kind of perfume that has ever tantalized my sensitive nostrils; but it has always been air with a strange sort of chill to it that has ever caused me to waken shivering from my dream. I have called the place a valley, yet I do not know for sure that it is a valley, since only my imagination has walled the valley in. It is as though somewhere beyond the mists and the black cloud there were a circle of high hills which I cannot see, just beyond the reach of my vision.

Always, in my dream, I enter the valley through a narrow cleft in the walls of stone. I know it is a cleft, though I have never seen the walls, for countless times have I believed that, by putting forth my hands, I could have touched the walls on either hand—and I have always feared to put forth my hands, lest they encounter nothingness, and this knowledge of nothingness where I had expected walls might cause my mind to collapse with thoughts of wide immensities, or caverns, bottomless, on my right hand

and on my left. I prefer not to know the truth, or to delude myself with the knowledge that there may be walls when, possibly, there are none at all.

Straight through this cleft I go until my sensitive feelings tell me that I have entered the valley.

Then begin my strange sensations.

First, there is a terrible feeling of loneliness. A feeling of great space all about me. A sense of surrounding desolation which my eye can not see. And over all a silence that is as heavy as a giant's cloak upon the shoulders of a mere boy.

There is the inevitable chill in the air which causes me to shiver, even though—as is sometimes the case when I have dreamed of entering the valley swiftly, with much exertion—my body is bathed in perspiration.

Quietly, lest I disturb the eery atmosphere of the place, I seat myself, cross-legged, upon the ground.

And almost at once the queer noises begin to be heard! Always, until a few weeks ago, the noises have been the same, never varying from dream to dream—which, during the passing of the years, have occurred so frequently that the dreams seem to blend into one long nightmare that has no end.

What are the noises?

They are the beating, beating in the air about me of silken, invisible wings! Yet, until a few weeks ago, I had never seen the creatures whose wings I had heard. Out of the misty distances they come, those wings that whir in the air, those creatures that always swerve and dart hither and yon, ever just far enough within the mists that I cannot see the creatures themselves. When I remember hearing the wings the first time I am sure there was but one pair of them. Out of the mists they came whirring, and I heard them slap smartly as the creature who traveled upon them, sensing my presence perhaps, stayed its flight and darted back into the fog. Only

to return a few seconds later, slapping its wings together smartly ere it darted back and was lost!

When the dream came again—and this second time I was several months older—it was repeated in all its details as I have outlined it above. Except that now there were two creatures instead of one! Distinctly, while I held my breath to listen, came the whirring of two pairs of wings. Still the creatures were invisible, though I knew from the sound that they were probably identical in shape and kind. Out of the fog they would come, whirring, pausing while their wings beat a startled tattoo in the mists as their flight was stayed.

FOR a number of times whose exact count I have long since forgotten, the dream was repeated at intervals—which, as I grew older, came closer and closer together. The details never varied except in one particular.

The beating of the wings was greater in volume with each succeeding occurrence of the nightmare! First there had been one pair of wings, then two, then four—ever increasing in numbers until the air all about me, ever beyond my vision, was alive with invisible creatures whose wings whipped the air, caused the fog to swirl eerily—creating a medley of noise that became shortly a continual sound of beating wings, as though the creatures were advancing from the mists in companies and battalions, in regiments and brigades. One group would rush upon me and retire, only to give place to another group which charged me, only to retreat. How many minutes, hours or days I remained in the valley with its unseen walls I have no way of computing; but this I know well: after the first time or two the sound as of wings beating never paused, from my entry to the valley until the dream ceased and I awoke in my bed beneath the

eaves at home—with a cold perspiration bathing my body clammily.

And here is another weird circumstance. Even though I know in my dream that it is a dream; even though I know as I travel through the cleft what I shall experience when I have reached the valley at last, I am never able to cause myself to waken—nor am I able to cause the dream to change until it has gone through to its usual conclusion. As I traverse the cleft I try to stay my steps, try to face about and return; but find myself powerless to do so. Always I must go on until I have entered the valley and listened to the rustling and beating of the invisible wings!

Is it any wonder that I have come to fear the approach of nightfall? Is it any wonder that I watch the sun with dread as it slopes down the sky into the west? Is it any wonder that I walk the floor of my study until far into the night, fighting sleep until, from very weariness, I cease to struggle and my eyes close of their own accord? Is it any wonder that a fever has entered my blood, crimsoning my cheeks until I appear like a man far gone in consumption, until the flesh has shrunken on my face so that, except for the roses of fever, my facial appearance is that of a cadaver?

Too much worry and fear because of a tiresome nightmare, you say? A nightmare that comes because I fear that it *will* come and, so fearing, bring on the very dream I dread?

If it were only the beating of the wings! But many months have passed now since it was only the wings that frightened me!

Months, did I say? Months it is; yet it seems that whole years have passed!

For one night when I dreamed, straining my eyes to make out the creatures whose wings I heard, I saw a black blotch against the misty wraiths of the valley—a blotch no bigger than a man's head! The blotch

was black, I say! Blacker even than "the raven tresses of midnight"! Just a glimpse it was, a glimpse that chilled me even as the dread coldness of the valley had never done. For there was a definite shape to that black blotch—a shape that spelled, to my disordered imagination, but one thing: that of a vampire bat with a death's head! I waited, my heart in my mouth, for the shape to show itself again. Shortly, then, I saw it—and knew that the creature I saw was not the same which I had first glimpsed. The outline was the same, but there was an indefinable, inexplicable difference which told me that this second glimpse was of a different creature, twin, perhaps, of the first.

But why continue? Night after night it was the same, until, mingled with the never-ending whirring of the silken wings, I stared, mute with a nameless fear, at a veritable wall of black, darting creatures—a wall that came toward me like a flood of blackness, like a sea of ebon smoke; a wall that was alive, that swirled and eddied, writhed and twisted, pouring in, over, and down upon itself, like heavy opaque oil in ferment.

Then came the other sound—a raucous croaking which told me what manner of creature it was that showed such interest in me.

These creatures were not bats, but birds of ebon blackness; birds that caused their wings to whir tirelessly, birds that increased with the speed of thought, birds that gave voice to raucous croakings that grated against the ear-drums as the rasping of a file grates against an exposed nerve.

The birds were corbies!

The birds were ravens!

But did the knowledge ease the feeling of tension which, night by night, seemed to clasp me the tighter? No! No! No!

Imagine it if you can. Try mentally to experience it but once. Then multiply that experience by all the

countless times that I, dreaming my ever-recurring dream, entered the vale of the corbies and listened to the beating of their wings, to their perpetual croaking—and watched them writhe and twist in the air, so many in number that their evolutions made one think of a sea of plastic ebony.

Do this and you know why I fight the descent of sleep as I would fight the temptations of Satan.

Yet it is but a dream, after all! But is it?

IT IS only two weeks ago now that, for the first time, I found myself unable to listen, undisturbed, to the beating wings of the corbies—for, as they were emboldened no doubt by my motionless attitude, the natural fear of me which the creatures must have felt began to disappear. I knew it certainly when I noted that the black wall of the darting birds had approached closer to me on all sides—had approached so close that I could feel the breeze caused by the wings, could feel the coolness on my cheeks.

Then I knew, with a suddenness which had the force of some eery inspiration, that the chill along my spine which I had always experienced had had a definite cause—and that cause was the antagonism which the corbies felt toward me! Don't ask me why, for I do not know; yet what happened afterward proves to me that I am correct in this surmise.

From the very first the corbies of the hidden valley hated me! Hated me with a hatred which nothing in the world could quell! Why, then, did they not, in all their countless numbers, overpower me like a relentless flood and smother me with the very weight of their numbers?

Something held them back! Was it the antagonism which I instinctively fostered within myself as a weird sort of protection? Perhaps. Then could these creatures have been creatures of flesh and blood? Or is it

only creatures of the astral world that can sense these emanations? Have I not insisted that it is nothing but a never-ending dream?

But wait!

Two nights later, when the wall approached quite too closely, I could stand it no longer. With a cry of anger, a cry that was pregnant with fear and a nameless horror, I leaped to my feet and, for the first time, took active steps against the black creatures which were robbing me of what little reason I still possessed. I rushed pell-mell, my eyes closed tightly, into the thick of the wall of flying corbies—striking out on all sides with clenched fists! I felt my fists strike home in soft, feathery bodies; felt the bodies fall away from my hands. I gathered the creatures in armfuls to my breast, crushing out their little lives against my own body—and fiercely gloated in my power to do them injury.

But what were those little stabs of pain which I felt on my exposed hands, my face, and my neck? I felt them, but at the time did not realize their significance!

Finally, exhausted from my battle against these terrific, somehow intangible odds, I fell back from the fight and sank again to the ground.

But, fast between my two palms, I held a single one of the ebon ravens! He was still alive, and his little eyes seemed to stare into my own with an expression of saturnine, undying hatred—as though he dared me to hurt him. For many minutes I looked into the eyes of the weak, defenseless bird. Unblinking he stared back at me—unafraid.

Slowly his mouth opened, as though he sneered at me. Still with his eyes staring into mine, the raven ducked its head suddenly and drove its pointed bill deep into the flesh of my hand! The blood spurted from the wound! Then I knew the meaning of those stabs of pain I had felt when I had

fought against the vanguard of the corbies! The other birds, too, had driven their sharp bills into my flesh. I stared wonderingly at my hands, my attention drawn more closely because the bird between my palms had pierced the flesh—and as I saw the countless punctures I knew that what I had thought to be perspiration bathing my cheeks was not perspiration, but blood which the ravens had drawn!

What did I do then?

Deliberately, not knowing why, just as a small boy does not know why he takes pleasure in being cruel to animals, I looked back at the bird and into its challenging eyes; then, holding it fast in one hand, with the other I slowly twisted the ebony head from the creature's shoulders and hurled it into the mists!

The little body in my hand did not quiver; did not move once after I had cast the head free; but when I had hurled the body after the head it suddenly seemed to come to life, jumping here and there as does any bird which has been beheaded. Then, upright on its two feet, it darted into the fog. But before it had entirely disappeared, I saw it take wing and rise into the air!

My God, what ghastly croaking then came from the billow upon billow of corbies which still circled about me!

I pressed my hands to my ears to prevent my ear drums from bursting. Then, when I could stand no more, I leaped to my feet and started back the way I had come, while the ravens followed behind me, raucously croaking their wordless anger. I felt them on my shoulders and on my head; I felt them about my legs, retarding my retreat. I felt the slapping of their wings against my unprotected cheeks and face; felt the sharp stabs of pain in my flesh as their savage bills were plunged home.

And awoke in my bed at home with perspiration beading my body!

It was perspiration, too, not blood.

But on my hands, face and neck, there were many, many little red dots—dots which might have been tiny wounds that had healed, leaving fiery weals where the open wounds had been.

This then is why I fear sleep. When I sleep I dream, and when I dream I dream of the vale of corbies—and I know that, sooner or later, the ravens will slay me! Yet a man can not fight sleep forever—though for over a week I have not closed my eyes. I have imbibed strong coffee, fiery hot and black as the wings of the ravens; I have used many kinds of drugs, increasing the doses swiftly until I use more than any confirmed fiend that ever lived; yet I feel myself growing weaker hour by hour, and know that soon I must sleep. And when I do . . .

* * * * *

I, HANS GOODMAN, brother of the man who wrote the above manuscript, must finish the story, for my brother is dead. What he saw beyond the veil of sleep I do not know—assuredly I do not believe all that he has written above, because I know that it was written in a fevered frenzy, was born of a mind that had been crazed by drugs and loss of sleep. Call it an insane obsession if you like.

But I found my brother dead in a chair in his study, his body literally covered with the blood which oozed from countless little wounds in his flesh—flesh that, between the wounds, was red with the roses of fever, or red because it had been beaten and pounded by something that was still not powerful enough to break the skin! And who shall say that whirring wings did not paint those roses there—whirring wings that beat an endless tattoo?