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**WEIRD TALES**

408 Holliday Building

Indianapolis, Ind.

*A Solemn Pact Between Two Artists Caused  
One of Them to Become a Murderer*

# Wolfgang Fex, Criminal

By HOWARD ELSMERE FULLER

**D**E FLEAR is dead (thank God! his death at least has been accomplished), and cruel iron bars separate me from the trees, the flowers, the singing birds and the soft Italian twilight; for having been charged with the murder of René de Flear, I have been found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. That I encompassed his death, I have never sought to conceal. My statements, even before the grim tribunal, were said to be strangely free from subterfuge and dissimulation. The trial was brief—indecently brief; my counsel could adduce no precedent to sustain his earnest plea for extenuation. And I was led from the ghastly white-washed halls through hosts of curious spectators to the condemned cell where I lay for many days in a drowsy stupor.

Everything had been so sudden, so diabolically well-ordered, that my reason must have been temporarily deposed when the cataclysm swept into the quiet lives of de Flear and me.

Why should the world so concern itself with our motives and methods? We had asked nothing of it save forbearance—permission to live, to toil, to pass our lives in our own way, unhampered by the arbitrary decrees of a giddy society. I was bitter against the world—bitter against the contemptible minions of the law—bitter against the fell circumstances that had laid bare one tragic act in the drama of our lives.

I have said that we asked only forbearance from our natural enemy, mankind, but deeper introspection reveals to me that which I must have long known. We craved the appreciation that we felt was due to our prodigious labors in the province of art.

For de Flear and I were ardent painters—obscure, if you will; but we painted with a soul-excoriating fervor and an interpretative bodying forth of life as we had lived it that were calculated to secure our canvases to immortality. I have but scant patience with the man that stoops to belittle his work. It is as great an offense for a man to underestimate his ability as it is for him to overestimate it. Had we not thought our work meritorious, consistency would have required us to abandon it years ago. But we had not abandoned it; and our pictures have been exhibited in salon and gallery, far and wide, over two continents.

And we consorted with each other, de Flear and I. We painted; and we dwelt in squalor—in a dwarfing poverty. We painted, but we scorned to let the covetous vulture of poverty prey upon our genius. It may lacerate and tear the flesh, but it shall not feed upon the soul. But then, what does sear the tender soul and cause the life to go from it as from the severed flower? It is the poisonous breath of smug critics and the venomous indifference of an ignorant and unappreciative public.

Fame is but a handful of star dust thrown by the gods upon the decaying bones of mortals to stay the ravages of time a little longer. I would not draw one breath for fame. Wide distinctions exist between fame and greatness—greatness, rooted in the knowledge of self, fructifies in the accurate interpretation thereof. Fame, unlike greatness, does not necessarily follow noble works. Unless a work of art pierces the very soul of the beholder and stirs to life sweet and gentle emotions, long latent and dead, its creator is a dumb and bitter failure. Childhood must feel its little pulse quickened, and its gaiety, for the moment, tempered; youth—virile, effervescent youth—must feel the calm of sobriety and the weight of life; age must soften with reminiscence, and wander anew in the labyrinth of memory.

It is strange.

FOUR years ago tomorrow, de Flear called me to the studio from the chamber where I had retired for the night. As I entered, he was pressing home a tiny hypodermic needle in his thin blue-dotted wrist, from which he had pushed the sleeve of his ragged and color-bedaubed smock.

"Fex," he said, laying down the needle, "observe the canvas on yonder easel. It is ready for the first painting. It shall be my masterpiece. It will be the last picture I shall ever paint."

De Flear was a remarkably handsome man. His brow was high, white, and blue-veined; his hair, suffered to grow without restraint, fell in curling masses upon his shoulders. But poverty had not failed to leave its acid marks on his countenance. It was drawn, emaciated and thin. His nose, high cut and delicate, and his lips, perfectly chiseled, sea-shell pink and full, were pre-eminently those of the artist. There was a wanness and a fragility in the feminine grace of his

hands that spoke of his ultra-sensitive-ness.

Somewhat bewildered by his speech, I regarded him with more than my usual curiosity.

He was speaking again.

"Fex," he said, opening a drawer in the table at his side, "I cannot live unless I paint."

Laying a small silver-mounted stiletto on the table, he continued:

"I have spent years of my life at the easel. I have drained my veins on the palette. My canvases, as well as yours, hang in the galleries with Rembrandt, Velasquez and Murillo. Their color is not inferior to that of Titian; their sweetness, to that of Reynolds; their sublimity, to that of Raphael—yet none has seen that sublimity—that sweetness—that color. None has paused to search for their beauty or to bathe in their serenity. None has striven to draw sustenance from their solidity of conception. The duty of our contemporaries is to the masters; they close their eyes, lest they see meaning in modern art. If it has not been my pleasure to see my art appreciated, it shall be yours."

Here he picked up the stiletto and tapped the keen edge with his forefinger. A sarcastic smile contorted his lips.

"Fex, when I have finished my canvas, I will pose for you with this stiletto buried in my heart."

When I had become cognizant of the full purport of his words, I, who had known the fruitful sources of bitterness such as his, made reply, "As it has ever been, recognition will come with the surcease of the breath: man must lay down his mortality so that his work may take up immortality. And just as we have sacrificed much to put our conceptions on canvas, we must sacrifice all to secure their messages to posterity. After all it is pitifully little to be required of men whom the cosmic spirit has breathed upon. We have known our

joys, our loves, our sweet moments, our ecstasies. We have walked with the gods, even if shadowed by the satyrs; we have bathed our souls in the witchery of color; we have been keenly alive to the magic softness of these moonlit Italian nights. We are the fond apostles of feeling; beauty is our heritage. The gorgeous clouds festooned with flaming tongues of lavender and rose madder, melting into the tranquil purple of the evening sky; the cerulean bosom of the satin sea, like a turquoise stone in an emerald setting mirroring the trembling stars of night or the pearly clouds of burning noon; the sober browns of autumn, the naked blacks and whites of winter, the glistening verdure of spring, the dusty greens and yellows of summer—these are the things that have spoken to our hearts of the glories of the creation. But there is no sunshine that hath not its shade; the richly endowed and highly susceptible often become the vortex of mighty sorrows. He that is super-sensitive to pleasure is perforce super-sensitive to pain—the eternal law of compensation, you will perceive, my dear de Flear. With you, I shall become a martyr to art. I shall willingly cast myself, a propitiation, upon her flaming altar, and let my work, unfettered, make its mute appeal to man. Let my immolation be witness to my sincerity."

And so it was.

The solemn pact into which we entered that night provided that immediately following the completion of our next—and final—canvases, one of us should become both suicide and murderer; and the sortilege, which we instituted for the purpose of determining which of us should so function, placed the obligation with me.

THE years passed; we worked fervently and pertinaciously, constantly. Our canvases became living, pulsating symphonies of tone and

color. We painted as men enamored of life—as full, buoyant souls whose range of experience comprehended the whole vast universe; whose intuition rivaled that of nature herself. Every detail was studied with an ardor seldom seen in sane men. Conscientious defenders of technique, we strove after balance, detail and accuracy.

At length there came a day, a sweet, sad day in early fall, whose high noon, I perceived, must witness the completion of my last contribution to the field of art. The air was dazzling and crisp in its purity; the sky, steel-gray and lofty; the sea, beauteous as a dream.

De Flear painted for some hours after I had laid in the last bits of color; the shadows were lengthening and a molten sun was fast sinking into the fragile turquoise of the Tyrrhenian before he threw aside his brushes, saying that he was convinced that he could not farther improve his work. He stepped to the window and gazed with loving eyes into the radiant west. Calling me to his side, he said, "Drink in the beauty of the earth, the sea and the sky."

I gazed with a rapturous and unconquerable fascination at the magnificent panorama etched on the western sky. Like a fairy city of opal and alabaster rose majestic clouds from the bosom of the iridescent sea. Many-spired as the Cathedral of Milan, they shot their flaming pinnacles far into the deepening azure of the heavens. Delicate frieze and subtle tracery, scintillating like diamond filigree, surmounted façades of the purest crystal. Swanlike in their stately dignity floated islands of gold on seas of emerald and silver. Voluminous masses of fleecy cumuli, dimpled with many a sheeny grotto, tossed in a haze of dingy ultramarine like ponderous icebergs in an Arctic sea. Grotesque shapes, readily transmutable by the imaginative eye into

demons and behemoths of delirious medieval fancy, stood, silent and pompous guards, before palaces of sapphire and onyx.

Like a lovelorn swain sucking the sweet poison from the lips of a Cleopatra, I longed to revel once—only once—in the unearthly glory of that sunset and to die with its beauty seeping into my soul.

I turned to look at de Flear; he had fallen back a few paces; his face was radiant and godlike.

"Enough," he was saying, "enough, this is the moment. Why tarry?"

The airy sky tapestries of clear lilac and violet were now faded into drab and gray, and the chariots of fire had merged into formless, colorless monstrosities, and the towered castles of amethyst and opal were become distorted masses of dusky pearl; I raised the glittering stiletto, an exquisite product of old Damascus, and pushed its hungry blade deep into the bared and quivering bosom of René de Flear.

The co-ordination of trivial circumstances—how potent, how devastating, how deadly!

There was the half-open door through which my unconventional behavior had arrested the attention of a casual passer-by; then there was the hurling at me of a heavy iron candlestick which he had been carrying, and the bursting of a hoarse cry of alarm from his lips as he flung himself into the room. The missile struck me on the wrist; the stiletto went clattering far away; and in a moment more, my arms pinioned at my sides by brawny hands, I was borne powerless to the floor with the hot breath of my colossal assailant fanning my cheek. The room filled with uniformed champions of law and order, and the corridors buzzed with a curious throng. The fantastic prison cart already stood at the steps, and I was bundled into it amid the coarse shouts of the rabble

and the ribald jests of the officers. I but vaguely remember the gruesome details connected with the indictment, the trial and the sentence; I lived through them as in a fatal dream.

I OFTEN pore over these clippings sent me by a friend. The first is a press account of the so-called crime, and runs thus:

All S—— was shocked at the recent perpetration of one of the most brutal crimes in its history. Signor René de Flear, the great painter, was stabbed and instantly killed by one Wolfgang Fex, thought to be also a painter. The tragedy occurred late Friday afternoon in Signor de Flear's apartments, and apparently while he was at work on a canvas. It is evident that Fex shared, or at least worked in, de Flear's rooms, inasmuch as a daub of recent painting with his name attached was discovered by the inspector in charge.

The police were summoned by D——, a fellow lodger, who chanced upon the scene. Fex has been ordered to appear before the tribunal during the latter part of the month.

Other lodgers at the inn claim to have known but little of the habits of the two men, and professional jealousy on the part of Fex is thought to have been responsible for the killing. We are assured, however, that the police, operating with their customary sagacity, will soon discover Fex's diabolical motives.

The other, appearing in *The Journal of the Seven Arts*, is from the pen of H——, the noted art critic.

There is no more sublime a figure in contemporary art—one might almost say, in all art—than René de Flear, the creator of "The Spirit of Poesy."

Working in arrant poverty amid sordid surroundings, which is the usual portion of genius, he has evolved some of the very greatest canvases of all time; and it was while he was engaged on "The Spirit of Poesy" (unquestionably his masterpiece), that the traitorous blade of a fanatical assassin put an end to his brilliant career.

For homogeneity of tone and color, few have approached and none has ever surpassed this masterpiece. There is no conscious—hence artificial—striving after effect. The effect is there—by the grace of God, it is there—but it inheres in the conceptual breadth of the theme. It would have been impossible for de Flear to paint

otherwise than with a sweeping technique. He would have had to labor to obtain pettiness in his style as you or I should have to labor to obtain perfection. That which distinguishes the mere painter from the artist is an innate spirituelle quality, embodying in this instance the allegorical character of the basic idea.

Like a bird, with its eye fixed on the distant cliff, beating impotently against the bars of its cage until it falls, a lifeless thing, on the floor, so did de Flear, aflame with the burden of his lofty fancy, beat against the bars of mortality, intent on bursting from its narrow confines and on doing homage at the shrine of beauty. Apotheosized by his zeal, he wove his own soul into the canvas, there to illumine the glory of his conception. Whether he succeeded, no one will question.

As I have before suggested, there is much of the tragic surrounding the last days of René de Flear. He was murdered by an insane bigot, Wolfgang Fex, on the very eve

of the completion of his greatest picture. To many this must seem a meet conclusion to his unhappy career—for in losing his life, he found it.

NOTE.—This grim last episode in the history of René de Flear will be perennially suggested to art lovers by a mediocre bit in oil, now to be seen hanging in the National Gallery beside "The Spirit of Poesy," and said to have been painted by Wolfgang Fex, the man that struck down in cold blood, the foremost exponent of modern art. Fex has been tried in the Italian courts of justice, and condemned to death. The execution is set for November 1.

**T**ODAY I write. Tomorrow my soul will be launched forth into eternity to join those of ages flown. Then I, too, shall become great—greater than my beloved de Flear, because I murdered him.