

The Claw

By Richard Garnett

The balm and stillness of a summer's night enveloped a spacious piazza in the city of Shylock and Desdemona. The sky teemed with light drifting clouds through which the beaming of the full moon broke at intervals upon some lamp-lit palace, thronged and musical, for it was a night of festivity, or silvered the dull creeping waters. Ever and anon some richly attired young patrician descended the steps of one or other of these mansions, and hurried across the wide area to the canal stairs, where his gondola awaited him. Whoever did this could not but observe a tall female figure, which, cloaked and masked, walked backwards and forwards across the piazza, regarding no one, yet with an air that seemed to invite a companion.

More than one of the young nobles approached the presumably fair peripatetic, and, with courtesy commonly in inverse ratio to the amount of wine he was carrying home, proffered his escort to his gondola. Whenever this happened the figure removed her mask and unclasped her robe, and revealed a sight which for one moment rooted the young man to the earth and in the next sent him scampering to his bark. For the countenance was a death's head, and the breast was that of a mouldering skeleton.

At last, however, a youth presented himself who, more courageous or more tipsy than his fellows, or more helplessly paralysed with horror than they, did not decline the proffered caress, and suffered himself to be drawn within the goblin's accursed embrace. Valiant or pot-valiant, great was his relief at finding himself clasped, instead of by a loathsome spectre, by a silver-haired man of noble presence, yet with a countenance indescribably haggard and anxious.

"Come, my son," he cried, "hasten whither the rewards of thy intrepidity await thee. Impouch the purse of Fortunatus! Indue the signet of Solomon!"

The young man hesitated. "Is there nought else?" he cautiously demanded. "Needs it not that I should renounce my baptism? Must I not subscribe an infernal compact?"

"In thy own blood, my son," cheerfully responded the old gentleman.

"Peradventure," hesitatingly interrogated the youth, "peradventure you are *lie*?"

"Not so, my son, upon honour," returned the mysterious personage. "I am but a distressed magician, at this present in fearful straits, from which I look to be delivered by thee."

The youth gazed some moments at his companion's head, and then still more earnestly at his feet. He then yielded his own hand to him, and the pair crossed the piazza almost at a run, the magician ever ejaculating, "Speed! speed!"

They paused at the foot of a lofty tower, doorless and windowless, with no visible access of any kind. But the magician signed with his hand, pronounced some cabalistical words, and instantly stone and lime fell asunder and revealed an entrance through which they passed, and which immediately closed behind them. The youth quaked at finding himself alone in utter darkness with he knew not what, but the wizard whistled, and a severed hand appeared in air bearing a lamp which illuminated a long winding staircase. The old man motioned to the youth to precede him, nor dared he refuse, though feeling as though he would have given the world for the very smallest relic of the very smallest saint. The distorted shadows of the twain, dancing on stair and wall with the wavering lamp-shine, seemed phantoms capering in an infernal revel, and he glanced back ever and anon weening to see himself dogged by some frightful monster, but he saw only the silver hair and sable velvet of the dignified old man.

After the ascent of many steps a door opened before them, and they found themselves in a spacious chamber, brightly, yet from its size imperfectly illumined by a single large lamp. It was wainscoted with ebony, and the furniture was of the same. A long table was covered with scrolls, skulls, crucibles, crystals, star-charts, geomantic figures, and other appurtenances of a magician's calling. Tomes of necromantic lore lined the walls, which were yet principally occupied with crystal vessels, in which foul beings seemed dimly and confusedly to agitate themselves.

The magician signed to his visitor to be seated, sat down himself and began:

“Brave youth, ere entering upon the boundless power and riches that await thee, learn who I am and why I have brought thee here. Behold in me no vulgar wizard, no mere astrologer or alchemist, but a compeer of Merlin and Michael Scott, with whose name it may be the nurse of thy infancy hath oft-times quelled thy forward humours. I am Peter of Abano, falsely believed to have lain two centuries buried in the semblance of a dog under a heap of stones hurled by the furious populace, but in truth walking earth to this day, in virtue of the compact now to be revealed to thee. Hearken, my son! Vain must be the machinations of my enemies, vain the onslaughts of the rabble, so long as I fulfil a certain contract registered in hell's chancery, as I have now done these three hundred years. And the condition is this, that every year I present unto the Demon one who hath at my persuasion assigned his soul to him in exchange for power, riches, knowledge, magical gifts, or whatever else his heart chiefly desireth; nor until this present year have I perilled the fulfilment of my obligation. Seest thou these scrolls? They are the assignments of which I have spoken. It would amaze thee to scan the subscriptions, and perceive in these the signatures of men exemplary in the eyes of their fellows, clothed with high dignities in Church and State—nay sometimes redolent of the very odour of sanctity. Never hath my sagacity deceived me until this year, when, smitten with the fair promise of a youth of singular impishness, I omitted to take due note of his consumptive habit, and have but this afternoon encountered his funeral. This is the last day of my year, and should my engagement be unredeemed when the sun attains the cusp of that nethermost house of heaven which he is even now traversing, I must become an inmate of the infernal kingdom. No time has remained for nice investigation. I have therefore proved the courage of the Venetian youth in the manner thou knowest, and thou alone hast sustained the ordeal. Fail not at my bidding, or thou quittest not this chamber alive. For when the Demon comes to bear me away, he will assuredly rend thee in pieces for being found in my company. Thou hast, therefore, everything to gain and nothing to lose by joining the goodly fellowship of my mates and partners. Delay not, time urges, night deepens, they that would drink thy blood are abroad. Hearest thou not the moaning and pelting of the rising storm, and the muttering and scraping of my imprisoned goblins? Save us, I entreat, I command, save us both!”

Screaming with agitation the aged sorcerer laid a scroll engrossed with fairly written characters before the youth, stabbed the latter's arm with a stylus that at once evoked and collected the crimson stream, thrust this into his hand and strove to guide it to the parchment, chanting at the same time litanies to the infernal powers. The crystal flagons rang like one great harmonica with shrill but spirit-stirring music; volumes of vaporous perfumes diffused themselves through the apartment, and an endless procession of treasure-laden figures defiled before the bewildered youth. He seemed buried in the opulence of the world, as he sat up to his waist in gold and jewels; all the earth's beauty gazed at him through eyes brilliant and countless as the stars of heaven; courtiers beckoned him to thrones; battlesteeds neighed and pawed for his mounting; laden tables allured every appetite; vassals bent in homage; slaves fell prostrate at his feet. Now he seemed to collect or disperse legions of spirits with the waving of a wand; anon, as he

pronounced a spell, golden dragons glided away from boughs laden with golden fruits. Well for him, doubtless, that in him Nature had kneaded from ordinary clay as unimaginative a youth as could be found in Venice: yet even so, dazzled with glamour, intoxicated with illusion, less and less able to resist the cunningly mingled caresses, entreaties, and menaces of Abano, he could not refrain from tracing a few characters with the stylus, when, catching reflected in a mirror the old magician's expression of wolfish glee, he dropped the instrument from his grasp, and cast his eye upwards as if appealing to Heaven. But every drop of blood seemed frozen in his frame as he beheld an enormous claw thrust through the roof, member as it seemed of some being too gigantic to be contained in the chamber or the tower itself. Cold, poignant, glittering as steel, it rested upon a socket of the repulsive hue of jaundiced ivory, with no vestige of a foot or anything to relieve its naked horror as, rigid and lifeless, yet plainly with a mighty force behind it, it pointed at the magician's heart. As Abano, following the youth's eye, caught sight of the portent, his visage assumed an expression of frantic horror, his spells died upon his lips, and the gorgeous figures became grinning apes or blotchy toads: madly he seized the young man's hand, and strove to force him to complete his signature. The robust youth felt as an infant in his grasp, but ere the stylus could be again thrust upon him the first stroke of the midnight hour rang through the chamber, and instantly the gigantic talon pierced Abano from breast to back, projecting far beyond his shoulders, and swept him upwards to the roof, through which both disappeared without leaving a trace of their passage.

Horror and thankfulness rushed together into the young man's mind, and there contended for some brief instants: but as the last stroke sounded all the crystal vials shivered with a stunning crash, and their hellish inmates, rejoicing in their deliverance, swarmed into the chamber. All made for the youth, who, tugged, clawed, fondled, bitten, be-slimed, blinded, deafened, beset in every way by creatures of indescribable loathsomeness, grasped frantically at his sole weapon, the stylus; but it had become a writhing serpent. This was too much, sense forsook him on the spot.

On recovering consciousness he found himself stretched on a pallet in the dungeons of the Inquisition. The Inquisitors sat on their tribunals; black-robed familiars flitted about, or waited attentive upon their orders; one expert in ecclesiastical jurisprudence proved the edge of an axe, and another heated pincers in a chafing dish; dismal groans pierced the massy walls; two sturdy fellows, stripped to the waist, adjusted the rollers of a rack. A surgeon approached the bedside, bearing a phial and a lancet. The youth screamed and again became insensible.

But his affright was groundless. The inquisitors had already taken cognisance of Abano's scrolls, and found that, touching these at least, he had spoken sooth. Besides kings, princes, ministers, magistrates, and other secular persons who had owed their success in life to dealings with the devil under his mediation, the infernal bondsmen included so many pillars of the Church and champions of the Faith; prelates plenty, abbots in abundance, cardinals not a few, a (some whispered *the*) Pope; above all, so many of the Inquisitors themselves, that further inquiry could evidently nowise conduce to edification. The surgeon, therefore, infused an opiate into the veins of the unconscious youth, and he came to himself upon a galley speeding him to the holy war in Cyprus, where he fell fighting the Turk.