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The GUARDIANS OF DEATH

By Charles Lee Taylor

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It was a forlorn looking house, long since forsaken of human tenantry, one would have said. Scouring lizards did sentry duty upon its porch, and the predacious ants had eaten into its woodwork. But to a civil engineer in the unsettled center of Mexico any shelter is a matter of gratitude. Darrel and I took possession without any qualms of guilt, for it was evident that the owner had moved out years before. While the cook built a fire and prepared dinner in the main room we proceeded to explore, not without caution, for the old shack looked like a promising resort for snakes. I had just dispatched a couple that were keeping house in a side room when a shout from Darrel summoned me to the second story.

"Here's a queer thing to turn up in an abandoned house," he called.

He was bending over a small box bound in horsehide, the lid of which he had pried open. Together we carried it downstairs and went through the contents. They were surprising enough; at least it was surprising that the tenants should have left such papers behind them, for here were deeds to property, leases, some mortgage papers and other valuable documents, besides a number of family records, all dated many years before, but all in a good state of preservation. What interested me most, however, was a small map drawn on prepared paper, the work of an amateur. Whoever drew it knew something about surveying, for he had his ranges and angles fairly correct. He had started at a spring at the foot of an unlocated hill in the foothills of the San Luis range and run a line up a ravine 500 feet. Then he had run 125 feet up a cross ravine, turning to the left, and had marked a cross on the face of a wall rising sheer ninety feet. His marks showed the elevation of this cross to be thirty-two feet above the bed of the ravine. Here was food for speculation.

"Darrel," said I to my companion, "the man that drew that map didn't do it for fun."

"I guess that's right," replied Darrel. "There's something behind the place marked by that cross, but what is it?"

"What's the most likely thing to be in the side of a cliff in this country?" "Oh, I see," said he. "A cave, you mean. But what's in the cave, then?" "That's what we'll find out if we can locate the cave," said I.

Luck was with us in the matter. It wasn't a week later when one of our surveyors came in with a tale of having located a fine spring at the foot of a hill and near one of the wildest ravines that he had ever set eyes on. Neither Darrel nor I rested easy until we were on the way to the spot with the little map tucked under my belt. We were to split even on whatever we found. Poor Darrel! When I think of that bargain, I have a chill even to this day.

It took us nearly a day on muleback to reach our destination. There were the spring, the hill and the ravine running back just as in the map. It was one of the wildest spots I ever saw in a wild country; one couldn't help feeling a bit put out with its loneliness. Up the big ravine we trudged until we reached the cross gulch, a sheer cut through the solid rock, the work of centuries of fierce torrents.

It took us a long time to make out the cross, as the cliff was in semidarkness and patches of moss were growing over the surface, but we located it at last and saw that the only way to reach it was from the top of the cliff.

Having foreseen this contingency, we had brought along a stout rope, and near the edge of the cliff, which we mounted after a long detour, we found a convenient tree. For one of us to lower the other would be an easy matter. Both of us were eager to go. Which should it be? The good old American method of a flipped coin was the arbiter, and Darrel won. Presently he was sitting in the bight of the rope before the spot where the cross was marked and calling up his reports to me.

"Yes, there's a cave here all right, but it's walled up. Lower me down that geologist's hammer of yours, and I can break the flimsy thing in."

I sent the hammer down on a string, and for five minutes Darrel hammered and panted, and the sound of crumbling masonry told me that he was making headway. Presently there came a sort of gasp from him.

"Phew! That's bad air! Don't dare go in there for a bit."

"Throw in a lighted match, and if it burns the air is pure enough," I called excitedly, for I was in a hurry to know what was in that cave.

"There she goes," said Darrel a minute later; "burns all right. Oh, great Caesar!"

"What's the matter? What is it?" I cried, dancing on the edge of the cliff.

"It's gold, that's what it is—a big bracelet of it right near the entrance. There's something that looks like bones near it."

"Just what I expected!" I cried jubilantly. "An Aztec burial cave probably, and the fellow that drew the map found it out some way. They buried their finest treasures with their dead. It's a fortune, Darrel!"

"Carefully enough place to find it in," he said. "But here's for it anyhow." And he entered the opening that he had made.

For what seemed to me long minutes

I lay peering over the cliff at the twitching rope that gave indications of Darrel's movements. Then there echoed from the opposite side of the ravine a strange sound as of the rattling of many castanets, followed by a shriek of such grisly terror as I never again want to hear. The next instant Darrel plunged forth from the mouth of the cave, swung out from the face of the cliff, swung back again against the rock and, still shrieking horribly, so that the ravine reverberated with the sound of it, slipped through the bight of the rope and fell headlong to the rocks below. For a moment I lay there stricken, waiting for I knew not what thing of horror to issue from the mysterious cavern. Then I rushed down to the aid of my motionless companion. Half the contents of my flask had been forced down his throat before he opened his eyes. But not to consciousness did he open them. The glare in them told me that I tried to recall his mind.

"What was it, old man? What was it?" I asked him.

He half raised himself and tried to speak, gasping and choking like a man being strangled.

"The hands! The hands of the dead! At my throat! They're throttling me! Help!"

He tore at his throat with mad strength. Then his limbs relaxed, and he fell back in my arms lifeless. I believe in my inmost soul that it was not the fall from the cliff, but sheer terror, that killed him.

How I ever lived through that fearful, horror haunted ride to the camp I don't know. I was crazy with fever and delirium when I reached there. It wasn't till weeks afterward that they told me of the expedition that went out to find and bury Darrel. My ravings and the map that they found when they undressed me gave them a working clue to the tragedy. They found the rope tied to the tree, and two of the men went down and entered the cave armed with stout clubs, for their theory was that poor Darrel had been killed by a venomous snake. That would not have explained his last words, but what they found did. A few yards in from the entrance lay sprawled a heap of articulated skeletons. Darrel's hat was beneath the heap. Groping his way in, he had displaced a slender post which held in place on a shelf above him the grim, dead guardians of the dead. They had fallen upon the invader and claimed him for their own.

The men searched the cave. Row after row of long dead mummies they found, but little treasure. The bracelet that had cost Darrel his life and one or two small gold carvings—that was all. But what of the map and the maker of it? Did he perhaps visit the cave and perish there of terror? Were his bones those that Darrel saw from the entrance of the cave? That is a mystery that I shall never solve—that and that other mystery of who set, against the profaning incursion of the living, that grisly trap of the dead.

A Mistake Somewhere.

"I had read," said the colonel as he was relating some of his experiences in China, "that if a person fell into the water no one could pull him out, holding that his falling in was a decree of Providence that must not be interfered with. One day, on one of the canals, I stumbled and went overboard, and, although there were twelve boatmen, not one of them would extend me a hand. After a close shave, as I cannot swim, I got aboard again, and as soon as I recovered my breath I yelled at the boss boatman:

"You infernal scoundrel, but why didn't you help me out?"

"It was your fate to fall in," he calmly replied.

"And it's your fate to take a good licking!" I said as I went for him and kicked and cuffed him about. When I had finished him off, I took another, and I was just polishing off my fifth victim when the sixth man halted me to say:

"There seems to be a mistake here. We are taught that if a person falls into the water he must save himself or drown, but we are not taught that if he does save himself he is at liberty to lick half of China in revenge."

"I thought his point well taken," laughed the colonel, "and I stopped my score at five and went down to change into dry clothes."

River Soap Grease.

The famous Chicago river is being sold by the bucketful to soapmakers. That classic stream, the passing of whose water by the city of St. Louis moved the state of Missouri to go to law with the state of Illinois for not keeping its nuisance at home, affords a lucrative employment to a number of men. In the south branch above the drainage canal they are kept busy the day long scooping the top layer of the stream off with buckets and putting it in barrels, in which form it is sold to packers at the stockyards to be transformed into soap. This takes place in "Bubbly creek," which is the name applied to that part of the river into which the waste from the stockyards empties through sewers.—New York Tribune.

Awkward.

Professor (in a medical college, exhibiting a patient to his class)—Gentlemen, allow me to call your attention to this unfortunate man. It is impossible for you to guess what is the matter with him. Examine the shape of his head and the expression of his eyes, and you are none the wiser for it, but that is not strange. It takes years of experience and constant study to tell at a glance, as I can, that he is deaf and dumb.

Patient (looking up with a grin)—Professor, I am very sorry, but my brother, who is deaf and dumb, could not come today, so I came in his place.—Pearson's.



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