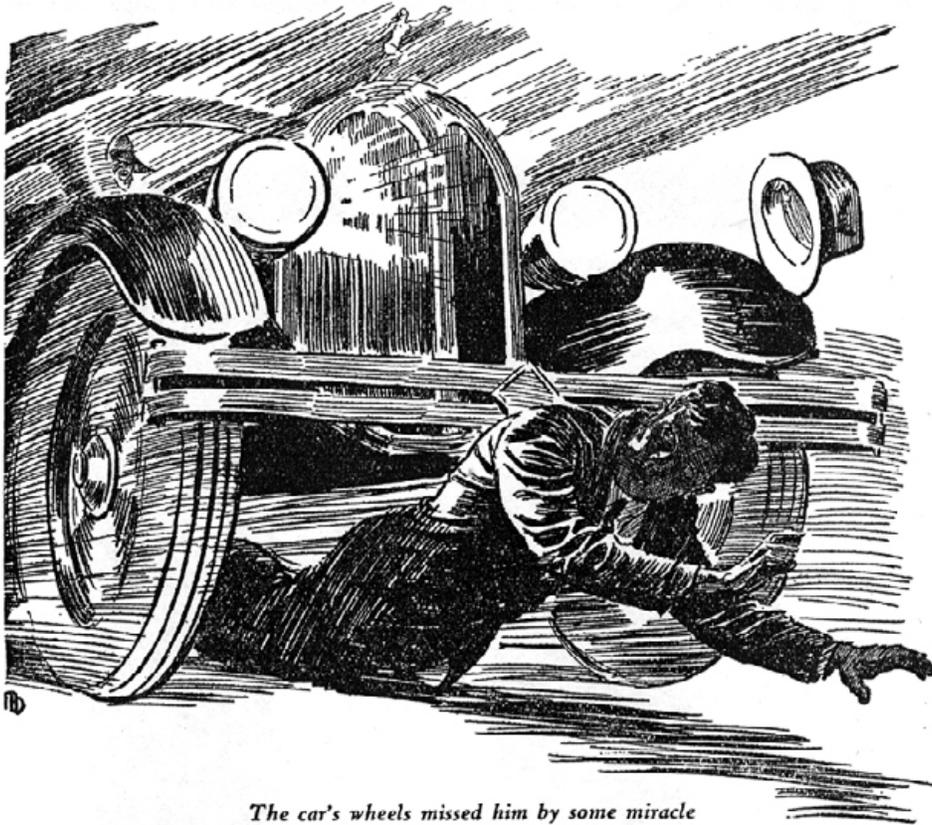


DANSE MACABRE

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The car's wheels missed him by some miracle

Rand Wade Invades a Spider-Mesh of Horror When Men Go Back to the Primeval Ooze!

BLACK darkness shrouded the old country road in dismal gloom. Rand Wade felt a warning of impending disaster sweep over him as he trudged along. There was something evil, even horrible, about the hot breathless hush of the summer night.

The low hum of a speeding auto came from behind him. He glanced back. The headlights cut a white swath through the darkness, revealing his figure as he stood waving for the speeding car to stop.

It was traveling fast and the man at the wheel made no attempt to decrease his speed. Wade had no chance to leap back out of the way. He flung himself down flat as the car came roaring at him. It passed over him, its wheels missing him by some miracle, the car's chassis brushing him like the wings of a bat. He aged ten years that one instant. Then the Juggernaut of death was gone like the wind, leaving him sprawled out in the darkness.

Weird, hellish laughter back to him. The tail lights of the car were two sardonical red eyes vanishing into the gloom.

"Nearly got me!" Wade flexed arms and legs, found he was bruised but not seriously

hurt and got slowly to his feet. "A madman was at that wheel!"

Norma Payne's words echoed in his ears as he hurried on. Again and again he seemed to hear her low frightened voice as she urged him to come at once to the old Potter farm—and then the sudden silence over the wire, which was more fraught with dread than the panic in her voice. Something was wrong at Mark Potter's farm—something was terribly wrong.

It seemed hours before he finally reached the place, a big rambling old farm house some distance back from the seldom used country road. It brooded amid the shadows of tall trees, its white painted walls looming eerily in the darkness.

Wade discovered a faint light coming through a heavily barred cellar window at one side of the house. He went closer and peered in, then uttered a startled curse.

Sprawled out on the top of a huge oak chest was Norma Payne. She was lying on her back, her head hanging over the edge of the chest, her luxuriant dark hair cascading down toward the floor. Her eyes were closed and her lovely face was pale. A yellow silk negligee only half concealed her slender young body.

Wade's eyes narrowed as he saw the tank of anesthetizing gas standing close to the girl's head. Norma was unconscious—someone had placed her under an anesthetic. Why?

Abruptly a figure leaped at Wade out of the darkness. Talon-like fingers caught him by the throat. Desperately he tore at those choking hands, as he writhed and twisted, trying to shake off his unseen foe. Again he heard that weird diabolical laughter—the same as that which had been emitted by the ruthless fiend at the wheel of the speeding car.

From somewhere within the house came the strains of music—the weird cadence of "Danse Macabre"—the Dance of Death by

the composer, Saint-Saens. A man shouted, a woman laughed hysterically, and then everything went black to Rand Wade as those cruel fingers strangled him into unconsciousness.

YEARS later, it seemed, Wade opened his eyes. At first he thought he had been left in some slimy swamp. In the dim light he could see ferns and wet green leaves scattered all about him—then he saw the moving figures that were twisting and crawling all about him.

They were men and women, clad in scant garments, their flesh a hideous green. They moved about on the floor of a big room like the spawn of Paleozoic mire, like crawling creatures existing before the dawn of history. Then one of them spoke, almost in echo to Wade's thought.

"That's it," shouted a green clad man. "We are the Paleozoic people—crawling through mud and slime—faster, faster." Abruptly he snatched up a whip and began to lash those about him. A woman screamed and crawled away like an alligator.

Unnoticed by the others, Wade sat up. He was still fully dressed and his hat was lying beside him. The place where he had been lying was in deep shadow beyond the green light.

Was Norma Payne still in the cellar unconscious? That was all that mattered to Rand Wade. These sadistic fools with their mad game—it must be a game—meant nothing to him. They were as loathsome as the squirming crustaceans they were trying to represent! They were worse—they were human beings trying to act subhumanly. They were degenerate.

Wade managed to sneak out of the room without being observed. He hastily searched through the rest of the house until he found the stairs leading down into the cellar. He descended swiftly. Lights were burning in the cellar and he found himself in a small

room. Beyond this was a low arch and in the room on the opposite side Norma was still sprawled out on the oak chest.

But now a tall man clad in a red lounging robe was standing beside her. A handkerchief masked the lower part of his face and in his left hand he held a small water glass.

"I'm very clever, my dear," he said slowly, as though believing the unconscious girl could hear him. "Those fools upstairs going through their insane ceremonies—nasty, jaded souls seeking something different."

He laughed and it was the same weird laughter Wade had heard twice before that night.

"They don't know that everything that Mark Potter does has a purpose. Even this paleozoic cult I started for them."

Horror swept over Rand Wade as he crouched against the side of the arch, watching. Potter had opened the upper part of Norma's negligee, revealing the soft whiteness of her neck and shoulders. The man in the red lounging robe then shook the glass in his hand. A squirming creature dropped from the glass and began to crawl across the girl's flesh.

It was a vicious black widow spider!

"You see, I plan everything," said Potter. "Tomorrow when they find your body they will learn that you died from the bite of a black widow spider. They have been kept too busy to know what has been going on down here. That is the way that I wanted it."

"Get away from that girl!" snapped Wade, suddenly appearing in the doorway. His gun in his hand, the gun which he had retrieved from the place of concealment on his person. He fired as Potter snatched an automatic from inside his lounging robe.

FOR the last time that insane laughter issued from Mark Potter's lips. Then he

crumpled to the floor, to sprawl there motionless, a bullet in his heart.

"Rand," Norma murmured weakly, unable to see him. "Is that you?"

"Yes, don't move." He leaped to her, brushed the black widow spider off her and then crushed it to death beneath his foot. He saw a second spider crawling across the floor and killed that also. Wade shuddered as he looked at the girl.

"If you had moved, that thing would have bitten you—but they won't touch a motionless body. I guess Potter wouldn't have worked it the way he did if he had known that."

"He—he knew," said Norma raising her head. "He was waiting for me to come out of the anesthetic—that's why he did not put the spiders on me until just now. He planned the whole thing. As my cousin, he was my only close relation—he would get the half million in my estate if I were dead."

From upstairs came the sound of excited voices. Mark Potter's other guests had heard the shot.

"We've got to get rid of those fools," said Wade. "Police! Police!" he shouted. "Get out, the place is raided."

From upstairs came the trampling of feet as Potter's guests tried to get away as swiftly as possible. No one stopped to question, to see if the police were really there.

Motors roared and soon the place was silent.

"You know, Rand," said Norma sitting up weakly. "I didn't realize until now how good it is to be engaged to a private detective, particularly a rich one—who doesn't want my money."

"Right," said Wade, smiling as he kissed her.

"But I'm afraid that if we should see a spider while we're on our honeymoon, I'll scream!"