

Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Kharu Knows All

By RENIER WYERS

A short tale of the retribution that struck the ghoul who preyed on the love of a woman for her dead husband

SELF-DESCRIBED as "The World's Greatest Medium," Tuan Kharu managed to eke out a fairly comfortable subsistence by swindling gullible people who sought communication with the dead. He lived in the hope that one day there would come to his murky, incense-laden séance-parlor an opulent victim from whom he could glean what he termed "important money."

Such a victim was waiting to see him now. Of this he felt certain as—with the trace of a leer on his swarthy and be-whiskered face—his beady black eyes read the name on the calling-card he held in his hand:

"Mrs. Victoria Sanderson."

He had seen that name before. He stroked his black Mefistofelian beard, nodded his turbaned head, and said in an affected oriental accent:

"Tell Madam that I am in meditation. I shall grant her a consultation as soon as I have finished. Begone!"

"Yes, sir." The youth who served as the man's only corporeal assistant, a combination office-boy and secretary, retreated from the parlor to the reception room, closing the door behind him.

The instructions, Kharu decided, would keep the woman in properly awesome suspense, while he prepared for the in-

terview. He went about this preparation, humming a little tune. It was not, as one might have expected, an exotic strain from the mystic East, nor yet a spiritual hymn. It was *Happy Days Are Here Again*, a melody reminiscent of the days of his fraudulent stock and bond activities, when he was known as Tim Carewe, salesman of spurious securities.

He had, when stocketeering ceased to be profitable, applied his talents to his present fake mediumship. By changing his name and raising a mustache and beard, he had eluded his duped investors and outraged creditors. With the aid of a few books of occult lore, he became a sufficiently transformed personality to establish himself in his new business without leaving town.

"Happy days are here again, te-dum-tedum," he concluded as he studied the contents of his filing-cabinet. It contained, in alphabetical order, death notices clipped from the press. In a trice, he found what he wanted, a clipping only seven days old. He compared it with the calling-card and chuckled. The clipping bore the words:

"Sanderson—Joseph L. Sanderson, beloved husband of Victoria. Funeral from late residence, 1087 Astor Street, June 5th." This was pasted on an index card

on which was penciled, "See General News File."

The swindler's beady eyes gleamed, for this notation meant that the deceased had been prominent enough to "rate" an obituary in the news columns. Yes, here it was, a brief biography of Joseph L. Sanderson, wealthy, retired lumber dealer. The item was illustrated with a one-column, half-tone reproduction of a photograph portraying a firm, leonine face, a broad forehead under a thick mane of snow-white hair.

KHARU studied the clippings a moment, then put them away and darkened the room by drawing the long window-drapes together. He turned a light switch. The effect of these maneuvers was a dim, eery light in which nothing was clearly discernible. The smoking incense-burners enhanced the mystery of the atmosphere. It was one in which susceptible people could easily delude themselves into believing that they were in the presence of the wraiths and souls of their departed loved ones summoned here by the self-acclaimed supernatural powers of the Great Kharu. He seated himself in a throne-like chair behind the massive table on which reposed a huge crystal globe. He adjusted his turban and pressed a buzzer.

Mrs. Victoria Sanderson, elderly and bent, was escorted in by the medium's assistant. He left her standing timidly in the center of the séance-parlor and backed out, closing the door softly. She peered about her and gasped, as from a deep shadow Kharu rose majestically to his feet. He was draped in a flowing robe of blood-red silk. He stepped from behind the table, swept forward, bowed low over the timid little woman's hand and said in soothing, sympathetic tones:

"My dear Madam Sanderson! I am honored. Pray be seated here before the

crystal and compose yourself. Do not speak until you are ready. I feel with you, and deeply, the sorrow that grips your heart in these dark days of bereavement. But your sorrow will be lightened. I know, for Kharu knows all. Only yesterday, during my hour of meditation there appeared to my vision the face of a kindly man, a good man, with snow-white hair, who whispered to me, 'Victoria will come. Tell Victoria not to grieve too deeply, for death is merely one's passing through a door to a better world. I am happy here in the spirit realm and I want her to be happy, too.' Those, Madam, are the very words the spirit spoke to me."

The aged woman's face was lighted with hope. "That was Joseph!" she exclaimed excitedly. "It's true! The dead do live again! He always said so. His friends never knew it, but he was deeply interested in psychic phenomena. He often told me that if he died first he'd come back or send a message to me. I did not think of that until last night when I saw your advertisement in *The Neighborhood Observer* and decided to come here."

"He guided you, caused you to read my announcement," said the Great Kharu solemnly.

He was pleased to note that the woman was even more impressionable than she had at first appeared. Recently widowed, with no kin in whom she could confide, she was pathetically eager to believe that there could be a return of the soul of the man who had been everything to her. As she spoke, she unwittingly revealed things which, when repeated to her in a different phraseology a few minutes later by Kharu, filled her with reverent awe.

"You are a great man, Kharu," she said after the séance.

He modestly bowed in acknowledgment.

WITHIN a few weeks, she was entirely under his influence. Gradually the control of the fortune her husband had bequeathed to her slipped into the greedy fingers of the faker. He had scores of devices for parting her from her money. At his word, she contributed to him sums of cash and checks, for non-existent "causes and uplifts". She donated fifty thousand dollars to help him found an "Institute of Psychic Research". Of this sum he actually spent a few dollars for blue-prints and a prospectus. The rest he banked under his own name.

He poisoned her mind against the counsel of well-meaning acquaintances who admonished her not to be so reckless with her inheritance. He succeeded in his designs by convincing her that all his suggestions as to her investments came from her dead husband. Several times he had caused the spirit of Joseph L. Sanderson to appear before her in the darkness of the séance-parlor. She did not know that what she saw was a stereopticon projection of a slide made from the newspaper picture of the deceased. Kharu so cleverly concealed the lantern and arranged the lighting effects that his own sheeted body, moving slightly under the drape on which the picture was projected, seemed part of the specter that bore a strong leonine head crowned with a thick shock of snow-white hair.

"I speak through the voice of Kharu," said the specter. "Kharu knows all. He is our friend. Give him power of attorney. Place all you possess in his care."

This message and others in a similar vein produced excellent results for Kharu. Within a year he had bled the woman penniless.

"What shall I do now, Kharu?" she asked tearfully. "I am facing eviction from the apartment in which Joseph and I spent so many happy years. The tradesmen are dunning me. And now you say

that the money I entrusted to you is all gone!"

"Yes," said Kharu coldly. "Most of the investments recommended by the spirit of your departed husband are hopelessly lost." The faker knew from experience that the quickest way of getting rid of fleeced victims was to be "hard-boiled" about it.

"But I gave you——"

"You forced the money on me, Madam!" He glared hostilely.

"But can't you help me? Please! Ask Joseph—he would help me."

"I've been unable to get in communication with the spirit of Joseph L. Sanderson for some time. Perhaps he is angry that you have wasted your inheritance by living beyond your means. Whatever the cause, silence is the only effect of my recent attempts to evoke his spirit. It's strange, but"—he shrugged—"it's the way of the occult world." He glanced at his wrist-watch.

"I have another appointment," he lied. "Will you come to see me some other time? I shall be glad to give you another consultation—at the usual price."

She fumbled with her gloves, staring at him rheumy-eyed, apparently too dulled by the dread of bleak poverty to comprehend. "I said that I have another appointment," he rasped. "Please get out!"

THE very next morning after this interview, Kharu dismissed his assistant and closed his office doors for ever. By evening he was ensconced in his new quarters in a penthouse thirty-eight stories above Lake Shore Drive. Gone were his mustache and beard. Gone were the turban and flowing robes. He was his old self again, Tim Carewe, sleeker, more dapper, and richer than ever before. Smoking a fifty-cent cigar, he strolled proudly through the apartment, only half listening to the expensive radio in

the ornate living-room. The radio voice, racing against time, rattled on:

"—the body of the suicide who leapt to her death in the Chicago River from the Michigan Avenue bridge last midnight was recovered today and identified as that of Mrs. Victoria Sanderson, widow of the late Joseph L. Sanderson, millionaire lumber dealer who died at almost the same hour, the same day, exactly a year ago. You have just heard 'News Flashes' from Station WLS. We return to our studios where Finney Briggs and his orchestra are playing——"

Carewe leapt to the instrument and switched off the current. "God!" he muttered. "I didn't think she'd do that."

But the shock was only momentary. He shook it off with a shrug of his shoulders. Too bad! She had been such a "lovely mooch". So easy to "take". With the cigar held at a cocky angle in his smug, oily face, he plunged his hands into his pockets and strolled leisurely out through the French doors onto the terrace. Ah, this was glorious!—this sense of being on top of the world, literally and figuratively. He leaned on the parapet, gazing out over the blackness of Lake Michigan and the stars overhead. Directly below him some four hundred feet down, two streams of autos flowed past each other, almost in silence; for at this great height the hum of motors and swish of rubber on concrete was barely audible.

This quietness, this remoteness from the mundane life below, however, instead of having a soothing effect, began—after a few moments—to give him a sensation of uneasiness, a tinge of scalp-tickling fear. The palms of his hands grew moist with sweat. He felt that he was being watched. He whirled about. What he saw caused him to cringe back against the parapet in terror.

There on the tiled terrace, between him and the French doors, stood an elderly

pair. The woman was small and bent, the man stocky. From his broad shoulders protruded a short, stout neck above which was a firm leonine face under a thick shock of white hair.

Tim Carewe stared and stared but could not stare his visitors away.

His throat muscles tightened in fear. "Mrs. Sanderson," he barely managed to whisper huskily, "who—what——" He could not finish. He ran his hand over his face as though to brush away what he saw. It was a futile gesture. The pair was approaching him, drawing ever nearer. This thing could not be!

"Go away, go away!" he screamed. "You're dead, both of you! You can't come back like this! I know. I'm Kharu, the World's Greatest Spirit Medium. Kharu knows all. I know there are no ghosts. It's all a racket, I tell you. A racket!"

Still the bent little woman and the stocky old man approached him. They were not walking—yet they moved toward the cowering figure of the once dapper Tim Carewe.

A horrible obsession seized his brain; it was that if this pair touched him he would become as they, shadowy, unreal, not of this earth and flesh. The obsession drove reason from his mind, as inch by inch the figures wafted forward. He scrambled up onto the ledge of the parapet.

The pair was now directly before and below him. The short, stocky man's firm leonine face under the shock of white hair glared up at him, relentlessly and coldly. The little, bent woman shook her head sadly. From the tile, the figures rose upward, wavering slightly like smoke in a current of air. Only their staring, accusing eyes remained steady. They bored deep into the brain of Tim Carewe.

He gibbered wildly and leapt into space.