

Weird Tales


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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Lethe

By HAROLD G. SHANE

A bizarre little story about the strange fascination of an old oil painting

KARL VON BRAEL saw the landscape through the dirty window of a tiny shop on Commerce Row. Have you ever felt that you had to have something—an old book, an odd bit of furniture? Karl felt that way, although he had never wanted to buy a painting before.

It was cheap, the painting, and so somber and gloomy that the little shopkeeper had despaired of selling it. So Karl fished most of the money out of his thin pay envelope and went out of the door with the canvas held firmly under his arm. That night he hung it on one of the dingy walls of his bachelor quarters.

After a meager supper, he attempted to read, but the landscape danced over the pages of his mediocre novel; so he turned his big chair around to the wall and switched off all the lights in the room except for the little one that was fastened to the frame of the picture. It was very quiet in the room, and Karl felt pleasantly relaxed as he gazed at his new acquisition.

The painting was one of utterly depressing gloom, but he did not mind, for he was one of those creatures that flourish in dank, chilly places where only toadstools, mushrooms, and lichens have any right to flourish. As to theme the picture was simple: a river, of a death-like, gray-green hue, that coiled between solemn, tree-lined banks under a moon that was nearly full. But the artist had crammed an almost painful suggestion of heaviness and sorrow into the scene. An

old man, in a barge on the river, seemed to epitomize the sentiment of the landscape as he poled his craft upstream toward a distant bend that was obscured by shadows. The heaviness and sorrow appealed to Karl; he had known sorrow to the full, and could almost feel a kinship with the stooped old toiler.

Lazily he arose and stepped nearer to the painting. To his delight, the effectiveness of the thing was not marred by a close examination, as would have been true of an ordinary oil. A brass plate, nailed to the frame and almost indistinguishable from the tarnished and peeling gilding, was inscribed with badly corroded letters, L-e-t — "Lethe," Karl spelled out. Lethe, one of many names in ancient Hellenic and pre-Hellenic myths for the sourceless river of forgetfulness and oblivion. The cheerless picture was aptly named.

But Karl did not know this. He merely grunted at what seemed gibberish to him, and returned to his seat. Dreamily he watched the painting. The thing was beautifully executed. The dark and leafless trees that grew to the edge of the water were reproduced with uncanny exactness. Their twisted boles had an acid-caten look of age, and an illusion of movement was created by the pattern of their interlacing boughs sketched against the slate-colored sky. The perspective was almost stereoscopic in its perfection, and the focus of the picture made Karl feel that he drifted down the river toward the

bend that was lost in impenetrable shadow.

As he kept his attention steady, the illusion of reality grew until at last it seemed that he actually looked upon a dreary river and forest, rather than upon a scene created by the abnormally skilful brushwork of an artist.

FOR a moment Karl was frightened by this unearthly quality in the landscape. He aroused himself, lit a cigarette, and drew a cloud of smoke into his lungs. Then, as he expelled twin streamers from his nostrils, he succumbed to the novelty of the situation. He had a new toy, a splendid new toy that was to provide him with endless entertainment.

As the time passed, Karl tried to imagine that the lusterless water was oozing toward the distant turn, and that the spectral trees swayed in the wind that drove the grimy clouds across the sky. Marvelous! The river *was* flowing sluggishly along, and the clouds had all but covered the moon.

He could smell the dampness, and the rotting vegetation on the banks, and he could feel the hard wooden seat beneath him as he moved down the river. The prow in front of him was richly carved and covered with bizarre designs. Why, he was in a boat that rode low in the water; a barge of some sort. But how had he left his armchair? How had he gotten where he was? The whole thing was too complicated for his mind. His amazement grew. . . .

Someone was rowing; an old man, he decided, for he could hear the labored wheezing of asthmatic lungs, and the boat moved slowly as if the lazy current helped it along as much as the efforts of its pilot. Yes, it was a very old man like . . . like the bent old fellow in the picture.

In the picture! Seconds passed before the enormity of his thoughts made an impression on Karl's brain. Everything about him was exactly as it was in the landscape that he had purchased! He tried to turn, to look about him, but to his horror he learned that he was unable to move even so much as the end of his little finger. He sat rigid on his seat, denied even the power of quaking from his fear. Then his terror gradually abated. After all, he was in no pain, and nothing menaced him. Why, he had had dreams that were far more unbearable than his present ride.

Hmm. Probably that's what it was. Yet it seemed rather long for a dream. Perhaps the dream took so long because the boatman was so slow. Karl chuckled mentally at his feeble bit of humor; mentally, of course, because only his brain was his. The strange paralysis still held his muscles in thrall.

As best he could, he looked ahead, determined to enjoy himself as thoroughly as possible. In front of the barge, the river ribboned on toward the bend, and on the banks withered trees reached for the bleak sky. A translucent haze or mist of light was everywhere. (Odd that he hadn't noticed it from his chair!) It was of the pale gray-green shade created when moonlight is diffused through thin clouds. An easy breeze stirred the dry leaves on the shore and caught at Karl's hair as if it possessed strengthless fingers. It made his scalp itch, and he longed to relieve the irritation by running his fingers through his hair.

THE haze grew thicker, and the shoreline lost some of its distinct outlines. With a start, Karl realized that the turn in the river was not far ahead. For the first time since his translation into this dream world, he began to worry. When

was the dream going to end? However, it was difficult even to worry, for a heavy lethargy seemed to be stealing over his brain, and he was almost comfortable.

Dim and distorted by the haze—no, it was a genuine fog now—the bend loomed up ahead. The folds of shadow about it were as dark as ever, too, not diluted by his approach as plain, everyday shadows would have been diluted. It was all so unnatural. As he stared, Karl became afraid once more. He had not even a faint desire to go farther, but his lassitude kept him from knowing real terror.

The barge continued snail-like on its course, and the mute boatman gave no sign of comprehending his passenger's feeble wishes to return. But this was to be expected, for Karl was incapable of expressing these wishes by any sound or movement.

Then, quite as abruptly as he had found himself on the river, Karl found that a crazy presentiment had taken hold of him. If he once rounded that bend in the river, he would never return. He would be out of the picture! In a dull frenzy he tried to move his inanimate body; frantically he tried to exert his will over the malignant influences that bound him. It was wasted effort, and now he was almost past caring.

A stand of birch trees with tight-drawn, unhealthy-looking bark loomed through the fog. A sick, tickling feeling assailed Karl's stomach. Those sallow birches were right at the bend! A faint current seemed to tug at the barge and hasten it along. Now the mist was so dense that the trees were fading from sight, even as he drew near to them. . . .

The shore was completely obscured. He could scarcely make out the slow flex-

ion of the black water over the bow of the boat. . . .

The fog was turning black. Were the shadows mixing with it and turning it black? It was so dark . . . and cold. Black! He could no longer see the outline of the carved prow. . . .

Black! Black! Black! The word filtered through his numb brain. He tried to utter it, but made no sound. The boatman was wheezing stertorously . . . the bend . . .

The barge was turning. . . .

THE cigarette in Karl's hand burned shorter and shorter. For a while the odor of charring flesh filled the drab room. Later it mingled with the stuffy smell of smoldering mohair. After burning a hole in the upholstery of the chair, the cigarette went out.

Karl did nothing about his fingers or the mohair, because he was no longer capable of doing anything save to stare at a bend in the river that hung before his glazing eyes; a bend in a river that was unvexed by a boat of any sort as it flowed into crape-like shadows. A few tall trees reared out of a ground mist that clung along the banks. Although the presence of the mist precluded the possibility of any wind, their branches seemed to twitch against the sky.

Toward morning, a pocket of gas exploded in a sewer below Karl's window. It shook the painting loose from the poorly driven nail that held it to the wall, and it thudded to the floor. The scaly frame split, and the canvas in it tore easily from the impact, as though it were very old and dry.

Karl continued to stare at the spot where the bend had been. . . .

