



Weird Tales

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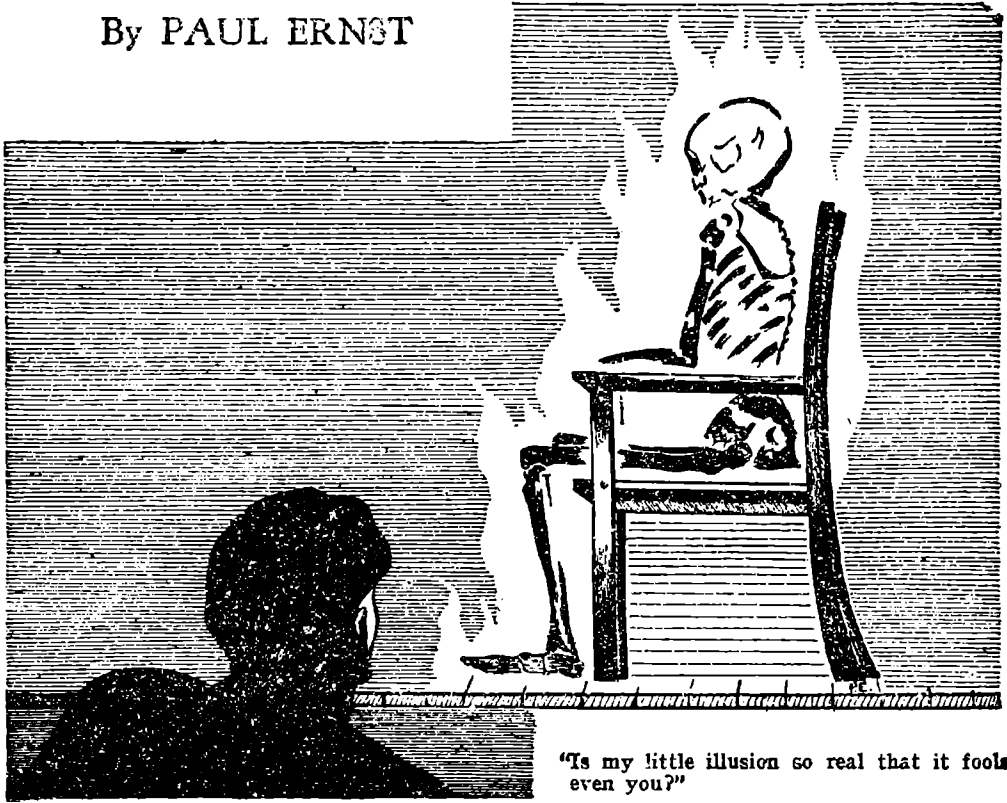
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Illusion of Flame

By PAUL ERNST



"Is my little illusion so real that it fools even you?"

A withered stranger from far-off Tibet showed the Great Caprini a bit of terrible magic that made the blood run cold in his veins

BART CAPRINI gave a last touch to the adjustable mirror. He looked toward the miniature stage. His assistant in magic seemed to be standing there. Actually the assistant stood in the wings; only his reflection was realistically to be seen on the small stage.

"Try it again," said Caprini.

The assistant moved in the wings. On the stage the reflected body dropped its right leg. The leg seemed to slough off, to lie like a log on the floor. The man smiled amiably.

Caprini grunted his satisfaction.

"The other leg."

The left leg clattered to the floor with a padded thud. The torso on the stage remained suspended, legless, in empty air. It was a clever stunt.

Caprini looked for flaws and found none. The silence of late night pressed down on the barn of a workroom like the silence of the tomb, but Caprini did not notice. He was too used to working here, late at night, with the city asleep.

"All right," he said to his assistant, Greer. "We'll call it a day."

The Great Caprini was a short man, stout but amazingly strong, with deft though pudgy fingers. The world's best-

known magician, he looked like a statesman rather than an actor. A cynical statesman, however. None knew so well as he that there was no such thing as magic—that all was trickery and sham.

The Great Caprini relaxed and lit a thin black cigar. The latest illusion was ready. Next season audiences would see a man stand before them and lose his legs and arms, one at a time, to recover them miraculously at a word from Caprini.

"Want a pot of coffee with me before you go home?" he asked his helper.

The assistant, Morton Greer, nodded wordlessly. A singularly silent man, Greer. He was middle-aged, but his face was seamed and his body bent as though he were quite old. In the main a model worker, now and then he disappeared and got terrifically—though still silently—drunk.

He acted as though something in his past continually reached out for him, this wordless, wizened man; as though he had a secret he must continually drown in alcohol. He had been with Caprini for two years, and Caprini still knew nothing of him.

Greer went to the concealed gas range at the rear of the big workshop where Caprini figured out his new illusions. There coffee simmered perpetually in a granite pot.

Greer poured two cups and brought them to a rough table.

"Cigar?" said Caprini.

"Thanks," said Greer, taking one and lighting it.

"Hear of any new tricks anywhere?" asked Caprini.

Greer shook his head.

Caprini sighed, and gazed around. Mirrors, small motors, flexible cables—all the paraphernalia of wizardry as practised on the stage—littered the place.

"I guess we've got all the stunts there

are," he said, not bombastically, but with simple pride. He was master of his trade and knew it. "If anybody can show us a new one—hello! How did *you* get in here?"

GREER turned in his chair to see what Caprini was staring at, whom he had spoken to.

A man was standing near the door, behind Greer. He was a curious-looking fellow, tall, emaciated, old. Scant white hair hung down in strings below the brim of an ancient felt hat. His head was like a skull in which black eyes flamed with amazing fires. His skin was burned deep red-brown with ferocious suns, and also was heavily pitted with pock-marks.

"How did you get in here?" repeated Caprini testily. "I locked that door myself."

"A trick," purred the man. His voice was creaky, as if long unused. "I can open any lock. I chose to open this one to startle you into listening to me. For I have an illusion to show you."

Caprini scowled a little. Wherever he went, he was besieged by fools who wanted to show him magic—*real* magic, if you please! Caprini sneered a little.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"It doesn't matter," the emaciated old man creaked.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I watched for you to come in," replied the man calmly. "I have watched for weeks, waiting to catch you and your assistant in this shop."

Something impelled Caprini to look at Greer. He was surprized. His assistant was staring at the lank old man with queerly glassy eyes, and was rigid in his chair, as if he had gone into a trance.

"Hypnotized!" burst out Caprini, gazing at Greer. The world-famous magi-

cian was no longer irritated. "That was well done, my friend! To look at me and—without making a pass—to hypnotize my assistant—that is amazing."

"Thank you." Was there irony in the man's voice? If so, it did not reflect in his face. "I might explain that your assistant is not under an ordinary hypnotic spell. He can comprehend everything said and done about him—but can not act in any way. Isn't that right, my friend?"

The flaming black eyes in the cavernous sockets stared at Greer. Greer stared helplessly back.

"That is right." Greer's voice came hollowly, almost fearfully.

The Great Caprini applauded gently. "You are expert indeed. I suspect you are a professional yourself."

"I was—but not now. Due to various circumstances, I no longer make my living on the stage. But I should like to show you an illusion I have developed since retiring."

Caprini suddenly found that his cigar was out. He had forgotten to draw on it. Not unnatural. This was all highly unusual. It stood out as a highlight in a life filled with the unusual. A man comes through a locked door, hypnotizes your assistant in about ten seconds without once looking at him, and then demonstrates the hypnotic spell as entirely different from any Caprini knew! And the looks of the man! What a fine stage character! The lank white hair, the parchment skin with its innumerable craters, the blazing eyes in the deep skull-sockets!

But Caprini felt a sudden doubt. It seemed as if almost an insane light glowed in the deep-set eyes. Was the fellow a crank after all? A highly expert crank—but still a crank?

"Is the trick you want to show me

merely an illusion, or is it real magic?" he asked craftily.

The man smiled, and Caprini felt a tingle in his spine. The smile was disquieting, somehow.

"It is merely an illusion, of course," the harsh voice grated out. "Real magic? Bah! You and I know there is no such thing!"

Caprini sighed with relief.

"Go ahead and show your trick," he said. "I'll be glad to buy it if it is spectacular."

The man's lips moved again in that disquieting smile.

"It is—quite spectacular," he said. "You! Pick up your chair, walk to the little stage, and re-seat yourself there," he commanded Greer.

Greer rose, picked up the chair, and carried it from beside the table to the miniature stage. He sat down there. His eyes . . .

Caprini gazed curiously at his assistant's eyes. They were wide and glazed.

"Why, he looks frightened to death," he said to the unknown old man, who was now standing beside the table where Greer had been sitting a moment ago.

The old man shrugged. "That is merely one of the outward symptoms of this kind of hypnotism," he purred.

Satisfied, Caprini sank back in his chair and waited for the old man to go on.

"I have worked out a rather elaborate little act to go with my illusion—which I call the Illusion of Consuming Flame," the harsh voice creaked out. "You can dispense with the skit if you like, and keep only the illusion. But with your permission I will go through with it now."

"Of course," said the Great Caprini quickly. He was a sincere searcher after the new and bizarre. The chances were a thousand to one that no man could show

him a genuinely new trick. But he was beginning to feel sure that the illusion he was about to witness might be that one in a thousand.

THESE were silence for an instant. The big lights glared down on Greer, seated rigidly on the stage with his eyes fixed in that glassy stare so strangely akin to sheer terror; on Caprini, seated by the table watching first his assistant and then the strange old fellow who had so easily opened a locked door; on the old man, dressed in old, almost shabby clothes, with his battered hat still on his head, and his eyes peering out from under the brim like twin black fires.

For a moment Caprini had a feeling that this was all unreal. "I've fallen asleep over my coffee," he said to himself. "In a minute I'll wake up and find Greer across the table from me, and no one else here."

The grating voice jerked him back to reality.

"Keep watching the man on the stage, Caprini. After it is over you can learn the mechanics of the illusion, if you are capable."

Caprini raised his eyebrows good-humoredly. If you are capable! *That to him!*

He heard the old man moving behind him, and assumed he was adjusting mirrors there. He started to tell the man that the mirrors in the wings of the small stage might be more convenient, but stopped himself. Let the fellow handle things in his own way.

The man's voice grated out.

"The theme of the little skit accompanying the illusion is this:

"A magician, playing the second-rate houses, has a fine-looking young assistant—and a lovely wife. The three get along very well for a time. Then the assistant,

who is much younger and better-looking than the magician, looks more than twice at his employer's wife. The woman becomes infatuated with him. They begin plotting against the husband—at least the assistant does. The woman agrees only after much persuasion, half realizing that she is more than a little mad under the spell of her infatuation. . . . You understand all I am saying, Greer?"

On the stage the man nodded his head like a mechanical doll. His eyes were enormous.

"I understand," he said hollowly.

Caprini shifted in his chair.

"Why——" he began.

"This is all part of the skit," came the creaking voice behind him. "You will understand my occasional remarks to your assistant as we go along."

Caprini settled back, leaving unasked the second question in his mind: how it was that the man behind him knew Greer's name.

"The assistant," the old man's voice went on, "decided that he knew all his employer's tricks and could perform them himself. And by getting rid of the man he could at one stroke steal his act and his wife. So—he got rid of him."

"I don't quite see how all this could be made into a skit," said Caprini, thoughtfully.

"It would have to be shortened and whipped into shape," came the creaking voice, in suave agreement. "But let me go on:

"The assistant waited till their act was billed on the San Francisco stage before striking. This was because he was too cowardly for murder. He preferred to hire two sailors from a dope-smuggling Chinese boat to shanghai his employer and take him back to China, or kill him on the way and dump his body overboard. . . . Which was it to be, Greer?"

Greer's hollow voice came thinly. "He was to be killed on the way."

"All part of the act, Caprini," the grating voice came as Caprini moved restlessly in his chair again. "All part of the act. You can eliminate it in the future, if you like."

Caprini heard something like a match being struck, but he continued to gaze ahead of him, at his assistant on the stage.

"The next part of the act will have to be worked very carefully and quickly. Perhaps it can be done by shifting scenery. Anyhow, picture to yourself a miserable, pock-marked opium slave being taken into an obscure Tibetan monastery. That is what the shanghaied magician has become, and that, after sickness and wandering, was where he was given refuge. He entertains the priests with a display of his cheap, mechanical wizardry. They laugh, and one of them teaches him, in a moment of idleness, a bit of *real* magic. . . . Only in the play, Caprini. Only in the play. You and I know there is no such thing. Eh? But it should go well with an audience."

Caprini saw a reflection of a small, flickering flame.

"Careful," he said quickly. "Don't set the place afire."

"I have only a few dried weeds burning in one of your big copper pots," the old man replied. He went on.

"THE scene changes," he said. There was a crisp new note in his voice, and Caprini had the sudden conviction that the man was not so old as he looked. Sickness, or something else, had aged him prematurely, that was all.

"The second-rate magician is back in this country with his new trick, which he learned from the Tibetan priest. Only this is not a trick. It is actual wizardry. . . . You hear, Greer? Actual

wizardry. You will begin to feel it in a moment."

Into the creaking voice crept a note of savagery; and at the same instant Greer's eyes grew yet more terror-filled. Caprini nodded his head a little. The skit *might* go, at that. It would require acting as well as deftness. Well, he, the Great Caprini, could act. And Greer could be taught the frozen horror of expression he was now assuming under the peculiar form of hypnotism practised by this amazing old man.

"The magician hunts up his ex-assistant. He discovers that the man has deserted the stolen wife, and that the woman has died. The assistant is now trying the act alone and slowly failing. He is expert, but not quite expert enough to perform the illusions. He does not recognize the man he has wronged, and grasps at that man's offer to teach him some new tricks. . . . Do you begin to feel it, Greer?"

The voice of the man on the stage sounded cavernously.

"I begin to feel it."

"But you can make no move to escape?"

"I can make no move to escape."

Caprini felt the odd little tingle in his spine again. Untold suffering had seemed to reflect in his assistant's voice. For perhaps two seconds he found himself wondering if there were not, after all, possible implications in this queer act being performed for him. But he put this thought down promptly. To wonder about such a thing was to put himself in a class with the fools in his audiences who believed all they saw and heard.

"As soon as he gets his ex-assistant alone," the savage, creaking voice went on, "he performs on him the Tibetan priest's magic, the Illusion of Consuming Flame. But the audience, Caprini, which

will be breathlessly watching the climax of the little skit as you are watching now, will be solemnly assured that it is *not* an illusion. And since the act is designed to end the performance, the descending curtain can carry out the pretense."

The description of Caprini's staring as "breathless watching" was a true one. For now the master magician was bending forward in his chair with his eyes riveted to his assistant.

The man had begun to *glow!* A bizarre word to apply to a human body, but as precise as any other word. Greer, from head to foot, was *glowing* faintly, as though he had been smeared with phosphorescent paint. His clothes slowly were disappearing, as though dissolving in liquid green flames. Soon his naked body, with green fire waving lamently over every inch of it, showed in the chair.

"That is the great trick the unfortunate magician learned in the Tibetan fastness: how to consume a man in slow fire without once touching him. And the man, meanwhile, feels all the pangs of slow death by burning. . . . Don't you, Greer?"

The lips of the naked figure on the stage moved. Small green flames moved with them.

"Don't you?" purred the man behind Caprini.

"Yes . . . *yes!*"

The words seemed wrenched from the flaming lips. And Caprini knew sudden fear.

"Say — you're not really hurting him, are you?"

There was a grating laugh.

"Hurting him? Really hurting him? Such a question for the Great Caprini to ask! Is my little illusion so real, then, that it fools even you?"

Caprini returned his undivided attention to the marvelous illusion being performed on the stage. He was angry at himself. He, who had done things almost like this since he was a boy—to be half convinced that he was looking at reality when the reality was patently impossible!

"Such is the skit, Caprini, which ought to go with the Illusion of Consuming Flame. There before the eyes of the audience, the man takes his revenge. He burns his betrayer into nothingness, by real magic. A good touch to convince a public that is growing all too cynical, don't you think?"

Caprini said nothing. In profound admiration for the old man's skill and trickery, he was staring at Greer.

Greer was now a skeleton. That is, it *looked* as if he were only a skeleton. As the envelope of his clothes had dissolved seemingly in the consuming green flames, so now the envelope of his flesh had melted like slow mist, to reveal only the skeleton seated on the chair on the stage. But still the skeleton smoldered soundlessly in the green fire. Still the lambent flame licked languidly at it. The skeleton faded slowly to reveal the faintly shining "second skeleton"—the phantom structure of silicon and mineral matter, sometimes revealed in an X-ray picture, which mingles with the bony structure of the human frame.

Then there was nothing. The chair was empty. Morton Greer had apparently been consumed entirely by impossible fire before Caprini's eyes.

THE Great Caprini was a just man. He knew when he had met a peer. And he knew that he had met one now. With all his profound knowledge of practical physics, chemistry, electricity, and optical phenomena, he hadn't the faintest

idea how this thing had been done—or, rather, made to look as if it were done.

"Superb!" he exclaimed, turning in his chair to gaze at the old man and learn now how this thing was performed. "It was astounding——"

He stopped, feeling more than a little foolish.

There was no man behind him. The old man had gone—disappeared into thin air, a layman would have said. But the Great Caprini only swore and raced for the door. The old fool! Why had he left in such theatrical mystery? He must have displayed the agility of a young athlete to reach the door so quickly. Why? Caprini wanted to buy the act.

The door, he found, was locked. So the old man incredibly had managed to go out, and lock the door after him, in that short space of time since Caprini had last heard his voice!

Caprini fairly tore the door open and leaned over the banister.

"Say!" he shouted urgently. "Say, you! Come back! I'll give you anything in reason for the trick!"

There was no answer. There was no sound of footsteps. Caprini went down the stairs two at a time. The old man was not on the staircase.

Slowly Caprini came back up. It seemed impossible that the fellow could have got away by the stairs so quickly. . . .

He shrugged. How else could he have got away?

Cursing a little, Caprini re-entered the workshop. He had the annoying conviction that he would never be able to fig-

ure out the Illusion of Consuming Flame by himself. But perhaps Greer, in the queer hypnotic trance that had seemed to lock his muscles while leaving his mind free, had observed enough of the man's actions behind Caprini to have some inkling of how the thing had been done.

Caprini had expected to come back and see Greer seated on the chair again, possibly still in the curious trance. But his assistant was nowhere in sight. In the recess beside the miniature stage, perhaps?

"Greer."

There was no answer. Damn it! Had Greer been too deeply hypnotized to observe anything when he slid off the chair and the illusion of the flaming skeleton was substituted before Caprini's eyes?

"Greer!"

Caprini went quickly to the stage. Greer was nowhere in the recess beside it. He shook the empty chair impatiently, as though in the insensate wood might lie an answer to the mechanics of the illusion and to his assistant's childish hiding.

Then he stared at the chair. Covering its seat was a film of grayish dust.

The large vein in Caprini's throat began to pulse heavily. He moistened dry lips. As though of its own accord, his hand went out and down. His forefinger stirred the film of dust.

But the film was not dust.

"Greer!" whimpered the Great Caprini. The whimper rose to a shriek which echoed and re-echoed in the lofty, terribly silent workshop. "Greer! For God's sake—*where are you?*"

