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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Will of the Dead

By LORETTA BURROUGH

*The story of a hate that was strong enough to strike back from the grave—  
an unusual weird tale of a mother's malign resentment  
of her son's wife*

EVELYN HAY LANE knew, at the moment she met Alexandra Lane, Stephen's mother, that she had found a mortal enemy. Not that she hadn't been prepared; Steve's half-hints, veiled suggestions, air of nervous expectancy, had let her know that this first meeting was fraught with difficulty.

"Look here, Stephen——" she said. They were driving rapidly over a quiet, moon-patterned road; at the end of the road loomed this meeting and dinner with Alexandra in her vast rich house that perched above the Hudson like an eagle's nest on a mountain top. The mausoleum, Stephen had called it once.

"Yes, what, sweet?" he said, juggling the car expertly past a lumbering truck.

"Am I to understand you haven't told her yet? And I want to know, is she Medusa or something? Am I going to be turned into stone when she looks at me?"

"I wouldn't be surprized." Stephen moved his hands on the wheel in a sudden impatient gesture. "Lord, Eve, you've never been up against her! It's like battling a boa constrictor—you just get wrapped around and smothered. And I've been her whole life since Father died, and that was twenty years ago."

"But you haven't told her?"

They had been married five months; they had filled an apartment with new furniture like any newly-weds—they had been man and wife for three week-ends, but Stephen had not yet left his mother.

"This is *terribly* funny!" Evelyn began to laugh, a curious shaking expression of something that was not real mirth.

"No, I haven't told her, and I know we can't go on like this. It's not really being married, and together. But she's got rid of every other girl I ever was interested in—somehow, by hook or by crook." He put his hand on hers, coiling strong warm fingers up to her wrist. "I was afraid that might happen to you. Do you think I'm scared of being disinherited or something?"

No, she had not thought that, well aware there was no weakness, no flaw, anywhere in Stephen except in this queer relation to his mother.

"I know better," she said. "But what *is* it?"

He fumbled at his cigarette case with one hand, got a cigarette out and lighted it elaborately with the lighter on the instrument panel, as though he were postponing the moment for explanation. Then he sighed and said suddenly, "Don't ask me, Eve, because I can't answer—I don't know. She has a queer kind of power over me, as over everyone. I don't understand it. Perhaps you'll see tonight. At any rate"—he snapped the case shut with a sharp, definite sound—"I'm going to tell her this evening, even if The Gables fall in ruins about my ears! And here we are!"

THE car swung in between two stone posts, topped by grinning stone faces, ground up a drive banded with moonlight, and stopped beneath the porte-cochère. The architecture of the house was ugly, with pointing roofs and gables, and gargoyles that looked as though they were about to pounce, projecting into the moonlight from the roof gutters.

"What is it, Gothic?" Evelyn asked, looking up at its face crossed with soft silver light, dark shadows—the stones seemed, to her mind, strung at the mo-

ment to imaginativeness, to have a cold malice about them.

"It's a mess. We can leave the car here—there'll be nobody else tonight. Come on!" He caught her by the elbow; she could feel his excitement in the sharpness of his clutch. "I'll leave either with my shield or on it!"

Johnson, the butler, admitted them, a withered black-looking creature, stooped and elderly. Evelyn had a quick impression of a vast dark hallway, and stairs that spiraled up into a height of darkness, before the butler left them in a



"He closed the door softly."

drawing-room. There was a boar's head on the wall above the fireplace, cruel hanging tusks glinting in the dull glow from the chandelier. Cabinets of curios stood about, containing little ivory toys, strings of beads, small unpleasant gods.

"Mother traveled a lot in the East," Stephen said in explanation. "She loves that sort of thing, power of mind over matter, Karma, what not." His handsome, simple face looked at his complicated surroundings with an expression bordering on awe. "It's a wonder I didn't turn into a curio, long ago."

"You would have, if I hadn't rescued you." Evelyn went up to him and they stood together in a close embrace, broken by a voice from the doorway, saying,

"Stephen!"

Evelyn turned, and for a moment, startled by some trick of the light, seemed to be looking into the blinding heart of fire. And then the woman who stood in the doorway moved her hand, and the explosion of color that had come from a ring on her finger ended at once.

"Mother!" Stephen tugged Evelyn awkwardly by the elbow. "I want you to know my friend, Evelyn Hay. Evelyn, this is my mother."

Evelyn understood Stephen's baffling remarks about his mother now. One glance into the dark wells of the woman's eyes made her feel simple and confused and childish—they were so experienced, so subtle in their swift stabbing glances; Evelyn knew she had been weighed and found wanting in a split second.

"I always prefer to know Stephen's friends," his mother said. "Then often they can be my friends. Shall we dine now? Stephen, you were very prompt."

There had been nothing of an obvious sharp offense, and yet Evelyn knew that in some irreparable way she had been deftly injured. When Stephen's mother

had looked at her, she had felt as though a sword had been inserted in her heart. Oppressed, she followed that tall thin figure into the dining-room, some secret place in her harboring an uneasy foreboding. Was this what Stephen had encountered whenever he had dared to cross his mother? An impact, too subtle, too intensely painful, to be endured?

IT WAS a strange dinner because of the shadowy things, the unexpressed meanings, that walked cat-footed about them; Evelyn and Stephen spoke hardly at all, but his mother had many words—she talked well, of far places where strange gods were worshipped, of wildernesses where there were no gods but silence; and of Stephen, speaking as though she had made him with her long narrow hands, suggesting that there never had been, and never could be, any life for him apart from her. When she spoke of him her eyes would travel back to Evelyn, piercing in their dark intensity, fixed like an animal's eyes.

Evelyn could see the perspiration that stood in small globes on Stephen's forehead. His head a little to one side, he seemed to listen with an almost mesmerized intentness to the monotone of his mother's voice; it went on and on like a river, punctuated by the light musical jangling of prisms that hung from the chandelier and tinkled in the light breath of wind from a door open at the room's far end.

Every so often, the candlelight would strike deep into the ring on Mrs. Lane's finger, calling forth a burst of fire to spring and dance upon the white damask. I am being hypnotized, Evelyn thought suddenly, because she had felt her senses swim for a moment in a dizzy circle within her, and Stephen's pale face, opposite her, had grown dim.

Mrs. Lane's voice went smoothly on,

"I don't believe in marriage for a man like Stephen; do you, Miss Hay?"

Directly addressed, Evelyn was silent. Her eyes were held by Mrs. Lane's; it seemed, for an instant, impossible to do anything but agree. And then something in the coldness and determined cruelty of the gaze that held hers, wakened her sleeping will. She looked away from the woman's eyes, the burning ring upon that white hand. Stephen was staring at her, his face tense—his lips closed in a tight line as though he found himself unable to speak. *Quick!* she heard a sharp voice within her say, and her lips formed and spoke the words,

"That's nonsense! I believe in marriage for anyone who needs it. Stephen did, and I love him. That's why I married him. We were married five months ago—we have a little apartment in the city. We're going there tonight."

The realization came clearly to her that if she had not said that, Stephen would not have gone back with her—he would have stayed with his mother, and she would never have had him again. But the words had broken whatever it was that knotted him to his mother.

He leaped up from his chair, almost overturning it in the violence of his release, and swung a white defiant face toward Mrs. Lane.

"Yes, we're married," he said. "And you can't stop it. Not with Karma, or mesmerism, or whatever you do! Not with anything!"

His mother had moved once, when Evelyn had spoken, moved as though something had struck her from within, but now she sat still, turning the ring upon her finger; red-blue-green flashed from it—one moment a pale milky globe, it shifted into a core of flame, and back again. The prisms tinkled in the breeze, dropping a chilly shower of sound. Evelyn could hear her own shallow breath-

ing, forced by the faster pumping of her heart. Stephen and I are like two mice, she thought, terrified by a cat.

And then she felt his arm about her shoulder and her thoughts steadied—she must not think of his mother as strange or malignant, because that must be fanciful and untrue.

"Please let us be friends, Mrs. Lane," she said.

The woman's eyes made her think of something that has been wounded, and is dying of the wound; yet even as she looked, they changed, and Evelyn quailed before the intensity of hate that seemed to radiate from the silent figure seated at the end of the long table. Her first impression was true, she understood at once; there was great danger here.

"Mother," Stephen said hastily, as though he felt this too, "I'll leave our address. You can reach us at it, any time."

His quick fingers dropped a card upon the white damask.

"Please, Mother——" His voice pleaded.

But there was no answer except the soft dreamy tinkling of the moving prisms, the flashes of fire from the turning ring, if answer that could be called.

"Come on, let's get out." Stephen tugged at Evelyn's elbow and they left the room.

EVELYN drew a deep breath of the cold spring air, when they were outdoors in the moonlight. Everything seemed pressed into rigidity, as though dipped in metal; even the trees seemed momentarily as frozen as the stone gargoyles.

"That was awful, Stephen!" she said. "Your mother hates me."

"Yes," he admitted. "And me too, now that I've gone against her, I suppose."

They got into the car; he put it in gear

and they shot off down the drive. Evelyn looked back once at the towering dark thrust of the house, with moonlight like snow upon its roofs.

"There is something about her——" Evelyn spoke in a hushed and worried voice. Absurd to think that his mother's influence might reach out through stone walls and hurt them, yet there it was!

"Something," he agreed. "Something—nasty. You know what I saw her doing once, when I was a child?"

He took out a cigarette and lighted it with a hand whose tremor betrayed shaking nerves.

"I don't know how I happened to see—yes I do, too. I went up to her room for something—I know I thought she was out in the garden. I opened the door, and she was sitting there at a little table. That ring of hers was in front of her on a black velvet pad, and she was staring at the ring—into it, I might almost say, as though it had depths. Her face was terrible, dark. I closed the door softly—though I don't suppose she would have heard me, she was so absorbed in what she was doing—and went away in a hurry; somehow I knew she wouldn't have liked it if she'd known I'd seen her. But I've never forgotten, it was so queer."

He blew out a streamer of smoke.

"It was like—well, black magic. As though she were putting a spell on someone."

Evelyn looked up at him. His face was set in an unhappy frown.

"Don't be so worried, Stephen," she said soothingly. "She can't hurt us." At least, they were brave words. "That odd ring of hers, it is so beautiful—what is it?"

"A girasol. Fire-opal. I suppose it's very valuable. And probably it has some bloody and horrible history, like most of the things she owns."

"You're out of that house for ever, darling. And she *can't* hurt us."

"I'd like to think she can't." And then he smiled, and took her hand. "Do you realize we're going to our home, Mrs. Stephen Lane?"

THE telephone was ringing with a cold and empty sound when they entered the apartment.

"Who on earth?" Evelyn said, as Stephen shucked off his coat and went to answer it. "Nobody knows we're here."

"Nobody but Mother." He lifted the receiver with an unwilling air and said, "Hello?"

And then Evelyn saw his body stiffen into a sudden motionless rigidity. "Oh, God!" he said. "Get a doctor, Johnson. I'll leave right away—I should be there in forty-five minutes."

He dropped the receiver and turned to her, his face gray. She went to him without a word, taking his hands.

"Mother's hung herself," he said. "Johnson is sure that she's dead."

MRS. LANE was buried on Saturday. On Monday evening, Stephen came home, and Evelyn met him at the door.

"Well?" she said.

"The servants are gone, the house is shut up, the keys are left with the real estate agent. We're through, Evelyn!"

They clung to each other for a moment.

"Stephen, it's been terrible for you! You look worn out."

His face, in these few days, had sunken in; there were dark smudged circles beneath his eyes. Even his voice had a hoarse, worn undertone in it.

"I couldn't sleep well up there; the house seemed—I know it sounds queer to say it—unfriendly." He took off his coat slowly and hung it in the foyer closet. "As though her possessions hated me."

"You only imagined it." She gave him a gentle push toward the living-room. "Sit down with the paper—dinner will be ready in a moment."

Although he settled himself obediently in an easy-chair with the newspaper spread before him like wings, she could see, glancing in at him from time to time, that he was not reading and that his thoughts were unpleasant.

"Something's troubling you, Stephen," she said, when they were having coffee. He looked a little better, but only a little.

"Yes," he admitted, "perhaps I should tell you about it. Something in the will." He had called her Friday evening, to tell her that the will had been read, and everything had been left to him. "And perhaps I shouldn't." He prodded in a package of cigarettes, took one out and lighted it. "Mother had added a codicil, duly witnessed and all that. She must have done it just before——"

"Yes," Evelyn said, apprehensive of the dark cloud that had hung over him for a moment then.

"In it, she expressed the wish that her most cherished possession, her girasol ring, be given to her daughter-in-law, Evelyn Hay Lane."

"I won't have it, Stephen," Evelyn said quickly. "I won't wear it—I don't even want it in the house."

"Don't worry." The smoke from his cigarette coiled between his fingers in spirals of soft velvet blue. "Probably I should have consulted you—but I was pretty sure what you'd say. I had it buried with her. I saw them close the coffin, and it was on her finger, winking and blinking." He blew out a deep breath of disgust. "I can't figure out what her idea was, in leaving it to you. At any rate, I'm sure that this is the first time Mother did not get her way."

It was strange to think of the ring, smothered in grave darkness—it could

not shine and spit fire out of its milkiness, where it was now.

"I'm glad," Evelyn said. "It may seem terrible to say this, Stephen, and foolishly superstitious, but I think it would have poisoned me. I know I wouldn't have been happy, with it anywhere near."

He sat frowning at his demi-tasse, turning it between his fingers. "I was just remembering how anyone who ever displeased Mother had something very miserable and unhappy occur to them. If they didn't die, I guess they wished they had." He reached out his hand for the glass jar of coffee. "There was a neighbor of ours who got in her bad graces—his son died, his wife ran away, his house burned down—and he left, not exactly the man he came."

Evelyn felt as though a shadow had stretched over her suddenly.

"Don't be an idiot, Stephen," she said. "I'm not going to curl up and wither away."

He touched her hand.

"Of course not," he said, "now that she's gone. Only I'm glad her ring's gone with her."

Evelyn thought how weird their talk was, in this apartment in Manhattan's heart; beyond their windows pulsated the life of a great city, lighted a few blocks away by the hearty coarse glitter of Broadway.

"But now, Stephen, I've got some *good* news. I went to the doctor today. I'm going to have a baby."

For a moment, he only stared, and then his eyes gleamed.

"Lord!" he said, leaning over to kiss her. "That's wonderful! I'll open a bottle of wine—we'll celebrate!"

And then, sharp, trailing, insidious shadows, a thought started up in her brain—His mother hated me so. But she's dead, of course. So she couldn't hurt the baby in any way. *But could she?*

It took her only a moment to dismiss it. But the suggestion had been there, and in the following months it came back often to plague her until she spoke of it to Stephen more than once. Absurd, ridiculous, superstitious, but there, like a knife turning slowly in her mind.

"SEE, little idiot!" he said tenderly, leaning above her, "how foolish your superstitious fancies were!"

The baby had been born in the morning. Evelyn had just awakened from a deep sleep, and she lay there untroubled, glad it was all over.

"He's a grand baby, isn't he?" she said.

"The doctor told me he was one of the healthiest he had ever seen."

Her eyes wandered toward the lace-covered bassinet; she could see nothing of the baby but one small fist, curled in a ball. "We'll call him Stephen. No doubt he'll grow up to be President."

"No doubt," the nurse agreed, smiling, coming up to the bed at that moment. "But you'll have to leave, Mr. Lane. Your wife's got to be settled for the night."

Stephen went out. She relaxed in the nurse's ministering hands, thinking of the baby. He would look like Stephen, of course; he would be like Stephen, he would be a swell fellow.

And then the nurse turned suddenly and stared at the bassinet.

"Quick!" Evelyn cried, struggling to sit up, for there had come one sharp and pointed cry in the air of the still room.

Stephen had heard it too.

"Make her lie down and keep still!" the nurse commanded him, running to the bassinet, lifting the baby out, taking him from the room.

"Stephen, Stephen——" Evelyn whimpered.

SHE slept that night because they had given her drugs, and she slept the next day and the next night, for the same reason. But they let her wake the following morning, and her first words were, "Why? Why? Why did it happen, Stephen? They said the baby was so healthy. Why?"

The doctor stood there, with Stephen. "I'd tell her," he said. "I think it would be better," and went out.

It must be something very dreadful, she knew, looking at Stephen, because he has grown older in more than time since the morning the baby had been born. His hands kept moving in small trembling motions as though they would never stop and be strong steady hands again. And his eyes, what had happened to his eyes? They looked as though they would never see the world in quite the same way again.

"The doctor's a fool!" he said. "I shouldn't tell you."

She caught his fingers. "You must—I'm going crazy, wondering—the nurse looks at me with such pity, but she won't tell me anything. Nobody will."

He wrapped his hand about hers; in it she could feel a steadily recurrent tremor.

"There had to be an autopsy," he said in a dull voice, "because they couldn't find any cause of death. You know they do that—I didn't want them to, but it's the law. As though we might have poisoned him or something!" He went on, picking his words slowly. "Perhaps I was afraid to know, too."

"Please——"

In a moment he began again, speaking more quickly. "They couldn't find anything wrong, there was nothing at all, he was a perfectly normal infant, until they opened his heart."

His voice seemed to fail him; his hand spread across his eyes.

"Poor Stephen!" she whispered. She



must be strong because he was so shattered; she would be strong.

"Then——" He stopped, his eyes clouded, as though for a moment he could not think of words, or what they meant.

"Then," he repeated, "they couldn't understand how it could beat at all for hours, as it did." His hand tightened about hers. "Are you strong enough? Do you know—perhaps you can guess, what was wrong?"

Her eyes asked him, terrified. What dreadful thing *could* there be wrong with an infant's tiny heart? "Please, Stephen——"

"This," he said brokenly, "in his heart's right ventricle."

He opened his other hand and showed her what lay on his palm.

She knew then that she would never again be strong enough for anything life might bring her. She felt a scream welling deep within her, but not yet, for a moment, sound.

The sunlight that had been stealing up the counterpane reached and touched what was in his hand. A burst of fire sprang forth, for an instant colored green-blue, and then steadying into a perfect flame, the hue of blood. Magnificent, glorious, the girasol ring winked and glowed.