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The CARNIVAL OF DEATH

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

THE HEADLESS CORPSE

RISING to a crescendo of stark horror, a scream of death hacked through the gaiety of the night. It came from the sideshows, from directly beneath the lurid banner which depicted ferocious African headhunters at their feasting. In spite of the babble of the pleasure-seeking carnival crowd, the sound lingered eerily for an instant.

Gaming wheels stopped their monotonous whirring. Faces in the crowd grew blank and then frightened. The hardened barkers whirled in their stands and stared. The gay Ferris wheel stopped, its motor coughing and spitting in idleness. Grifter and rube alike—they all seemed to know that death stalked upon the midway.

Seven stands away from the lurid banner, Bob Clark, carnival detective, paused for a second, held by the seeping terror of the shriek. Into his steel-colored eyes came a look of certainty. Then, before the crowd had recovered from that first shock, Bob Clark began to run.

He rounded the corner of a tent and sprang up to a raised platform. The entrance gaped blackly before him. In the sudden hush he heard the sound of running feet and realized they came from within the tent. Whipping a flashlight from his pocket, he darted in.

The damp mustiness of the tent dropped upon him like a cloud. He lunged into benches, tripped over ropes, sending the icy beam of his light to the uncurtained stage before him.

He skirted the edge of a pit, stumbled up a flight of steps, and stopped as suddenly as though he had come against a stone wall. His eyes dilated, and he felt a shudder course its cold way up his tingling spine.

Ringed by a pool of blood which seemed black in the white light lay a ghastly corpse. The hands were clutched in front of the torso; the legs were drawn up, twisted by unbearable agony. In spite of the years at his trade, Bob Clark shuddered again, for the body was without a head!

The flashlight whipped down into the pit to display its emptiness. Not long before, at the midshow of the evening, four African headhunters had been manacled there, savage creatures on display to all who had the necessary dime.

They had been ugly brutes, teeth filed to points, brown skins glistening under the glare of spots, faces inscrutable, eyes filled with evil. They had been brought straight from Africa for Shreve's Mammoth Carnival.

But now the irons gaped empty, and the implication was plain. Entirely too plain. It was evident that the headhunters had escaped, and in escaping had murdered their barker, taking his head as grim payment for their captivity.

Clark jumped down into the canvas-rimmed hole. Bending quickly, he snatched up a steel wristlet and examined it, expecting to see the metal filed. He gave a low mutter of surprise when he found it was not. The wristlet was intact and had been opened with a key.



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Back on the raised platform, Clark stepped gingerly to the side of the headless corpse. He took a still-warm hand in his own and without effort parted the fingers and removed several strands of whitish hair they had clutched. He held these in the beam of his light, examining them. He frowned and thrust them into an old envelope.

People were coming through the entrance of the tent, cautiously and without a great deal of noise. Outside the carnival had begun its song again. Bob Clark looked at the entering barkers and property men and selected two, knowing that as carnival detective he had that right.

“Stay here with this, will you?” said Clark.

The first of the two selected was a flashily dressed ballyhoo man from an adjoining stand.

“Who?” he blurted tremulously. “You don’t mean me. That guy’s dead!”

“Sure he’s dead,” rasped Clark. “You’ll stay.”

The man started to protest and then saw the grim set of the carnival detective’s jaw. With a glazed stare, the barker sat down on a folding seat. The property man designated stood with feet wide apart, disbelief in his eyes.

“But, good God, Clark,” stammered the property man. “Those cannibals are loose! What if they come back?”

“They won’t,” said Clark with a grimace. “They’re miles away from here by now.”

“I wish I believed that,” croaked the barker.

“So do I,” snapped Clark, as he started toward the back of the tent.

To Bob Clark this murder assumed greater proportions

than a crime committed by four escaping headhunters. It was only a link in the chain he had tried so hard to break.

He had been with Shreve's Mammoth Carnival for three months, and during that time two distinct attempts had been made upon his own life. He had been at a loss to explain these because to his knowledge only one man with the show knew his true identity.

That man was beyond suspicion—he was Shreve, owner of the show. And Henry Shreve had been the one who had first informed the United States Government of the curse which rode with the outfit—the curse of dope.

That tip tallied with their own records, and the Treasury Department had not been slow in placing an operative on the case. That man was Robert W. Clark, of the Narcotics Squad, who, to date, did not have a single failure to his discredit.

Bob Clark knew that he walked on the brink of death, but he only shifted his light to his left hand and lifted the tent flap with his right. A blur of stakes and ropes was silhouetted against the murky sky as he looked up. He could see the fairgrounds' grandstand against the glowing clouds which hung over the large Middle Western town.

Then without warning a blackjack smashed down. It caught the detective a glancing blow on the side of the head and sent him reeling to one side, knocked the flashlight from his grasp. Dazedly, Clark flung out a hand, his clawing fingers clutched a sleeve. He pulled the arm savagely toward him, throwing his unseen assailant off balance.

In an instant the detective's head was clear. He raised the flashlight in his left hand, brought it down viciously, and

heard his foe grunt with pain as the lamp thudded against his shoulder.

They closed in. Tent ropes tripped him, death-seeking hands tore at him, the night spun crazily about him, but Bob Clark held on tenaciously. Blows pounded in his face, a writhing demon grunted animal-like in his grasp. A blackjack smashed again and again into his body.

Clark fought silently, his breath coming in great soundless gasps.

The detective's assailant wrenched his arm free, a fist smacked against Clark's chin. He felt himself hurtled backward with terrific speed. A rope was between his legs; he stumbled over it, crashed to the ground.

Before he could rise, his foe was on top of him, pounding him with crazed strength. Into Clark's mind darted a vision of headhunters, sharp knives and ripped bodies.

Doubling his knees, Clark managed to jam his feet against the other's chest. He thrust his legs out savagely, summoning every ounce of his strength. With a howl, his attacker catapulted back, hit the ground, rolled over and darted away.

Clark jumped up in pursuit, but his speed was his undoing. He crashed into a pile of stakes and went down, a sharp cry of pain tearing itself from his lips. Sprawling there, he found his dropped flashlight.

Battered and dented though it was, the light worked. Its beam flashed on, splashed off white canvas and red props and then caught a face in its glare.

The features were pinched and the eyes wide with fear. It

was a white man, young, with blond hair half hidden by a cap. Although the face was there but an instant, Clark's trained eye caught and held the image for later identification.

Before the detective could regain his feet and dash in pursuit, the face was gone. The dark blur of a body sped out of sight around a stand. Even though he knew the man would instantly be swallowed up in the surging crowd on the midway, Clark pounded in pursuit.

He slowed his pace to a walk when he reached the lighted area. To all outward appearances both grifters and customers had forgotten the tense atmosphere of horror created by the scream. Perhaps rumors had been circulated to stay possible panic.

Clark hoped so, because panic would go a long way toward ruining his chances of again coming to grips with his late assailant. The unknown man obviously had not been one of the headhunters.

The glimpse of that fear-distorted face had tightened the detective's hold on his one clue. He had seen the blond hair which might possibly match that which had been clutched in the hand of the headless corpse.

The detective felt something was behind the escape of the headhunters. Something which would somehow tie up with Clark's own task.

Someone had purposely released the headhunters. Clark was positive of that now, and he had to learn why. Someone had waited for him there by the tent. He had heard the footsteps when he had first entered. Someone knew why he was there.

But the show went on. Ticket takers might shake a little when they tore off their pasteboards; spielers might glance fearfully behind them into shadows where black death might lurk—but the show went on.

Once more all of the features of the midway were going through their routines.

Outside of one stand a pair of acrobats was doing a headstand while their barker gave his spiel of the more death-defying feats which would occur inside the tent.

A little further along a clarinet and bass drum throbbed the strains of “The Streets of Cairo” as an Oriental dancer went through her snakelike gyrations. With a steady hand, the knife-thrower stood beside his tremendous pile of sharp knives, selecting his blades carefully, and heaving them unerringly at his human target.

Tight-lipped, Clark turned into the manager’s tent where he knew he would find Shreve himself.