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THE STAIN THAT GREW

By
John Russell Fearn

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It was nearing twilight when Calver Mason reached the outskirts of the little Middle West village of Craven Town. In ten minutes he was through the village—a gaunt, sombre figure of a man, cadaverous face set into harshly cut lines, cheeks coated with a three days' stubble. Dust stirred round boots that were deeply down at heel.

Three days and nights he had been walking, motivated by only one desire—vengeance. All sparks of sentiment and manliness had been purged from him when he had at last known the terrible truth. His daughter had been murdered by a fiend. There could no longer be any doubt about it. Viciously, cleverly murdered, so that the police could do little about it. But Calver Mason could—and meant to!

At last he beheld that which he sought. Before him stretched a rugged expanse of mountainous terrain; behind it all lay the blood-red gash of the dying sunset. Silhouetted against this reposed the only two habitations for miles—the one, a tiny cliff-edge shack, and the other an isolated factory closed for the night. Only for an instant did Mason take in the lofty chimney of the factory, survey its silent, darkened windows, then his lips shut as his gaze fell to the solitary shack. So he had tracked Melvin Gorne down at last.

Tireless, waxen of face, he strode up to the place and hammered grimly on the door. For a long time there was no response, then there came a shuffling and the door opened. A bleak, cruel face looked out upon him.

'Mason!' Gorne gasped hoarsely, and made to shut the door. But with one shove of a massive shoulder Mason flung it back on its hinges and strode into the dingy interior.

A small oil lamp was burning, casting a fitful yellow glow upon a scene of chaos. Dirt was in every corner; the floor itself was filthy. A tablecloth, fallen into holes, adorned the battered table. And in the midst of it all Gorne crouched now like a frightened beast, deep-set eyes glowing with the light of madness.

Then, little by little, he seemed to recover himself.

'So this is where you got to, Gorne!' Mason breathed, fixing him with a deadly stare. 'This is the hell-hole to which you dragged my daughter! Through weeks and months I've searched for you—then, a chance clue in New Orleans, an interview with the police—and now I've tracked you down. You murdered my daughter—slew her. And as sure as there is a God you're going to go the same way!'

'Think so?' Gorne sneered, and chuckled harshly. 'I killed your daughter, yes—because she tried to kill me. She hated me, poor dear—didn't like my methods. So I brought her here. She died horribly, Mason—horribly. Slowly strangled to death . . . I buried her corpse just at the cliff edge there. I knew the police would never get me here, even though they had their suspicions. As for you, you can't come here and get away again, Mason!'

'I came to kill you, Gorne, and I mean to do it,' Mason answered tonelessly, and with that drew out a revolver from his pocket.

But he was not quite quick enough. Days and nights of tramping, of consuming hatred, had drained upon his alertness. He was unprepared for Gorne's sudden tremendous forward leap. It was the leap of a madman. In one sweep he had knocked the revolver from Mason's hand, brought up a skinny fist and planted it straight in his enemy's face. Gasping with the suddenness and pain Mason went flying over backwards.

Gorne laughed shortly, whirled round, and snatched up the heavy iron poker from the ancient log fireplace. Savagely, fiendishly, he whirled it through the air and brought it down with smashing force on Mason's head.

Mason groaned, but for a moment consciousness clung to him.

'May hell curse you, Gorne!' he panted thickly. 'One murder—now another! But I'll return! My blood and soul will return to crush you to perdition!'

Gorne did not wait to hear more. Again and again he smashed the poker down with maniacal power, did not cease until the body of Mason lay limp and inert on the floor, blood flowing steadily from his crushed head. The poker dropped from Gorne's hand with a clatter. For a space he stared wide-eyed at the corpse, stricken for an instant with momentary sanity.

Then again the madness that was within him returned. He laughed raucously, cast a look round the dingy filthiness of the hovel in which he existed, had existed ever since he had brought his young wife here and murdered her in a fit of insane passion.

For a space he considered, then looked through the open door toward the deserted expanse outside, reaching right to the cliff edge. There in the murky silence of the approaching night lay the crude grave of Mason's daughter. Here was another body to be disposed of. He turned swiftly, picked up a heavy shovel from by the wall, and strode out into the darkness.

Throughout the night, in the complete darkness, whilst the mountain winds wailed about his skinny form, until his back was cracking with the effort, he dug a second grave not twenty feet from the first one. Before the dawn came he seized Mason's stiffened corpse, dragged it along the ground, and dropped it into the cavity he had made. He chuckled to himself at each hollow reverberation of falling earth.

Then at last the hole was refilled and he returned to the shack, slammed the door, bolted it, and from sheer exhaustion fell asleep.

Toward the following evening Melvin Gorne awoke again, ate ravenously from his sparse supplies, and listened as he munched to the sound of the rising gale as it boomed round the old shack. A sense of intense uneasiness, for which he could not account, was upon him. It was the first time he had experienced a gale in these quarters. Usually the climate was fairly quiet and reliable.

Memories of the night before, of the brutal killing of Mason floated into his warped mind. He laughed again, hollowly, and the wind muttered in the rotting gables of the old place.

'My blood and soul will return to crush you into perdition!' That was what it seemed to say, reiterated endlessly, monotonously, like the joints in a railway line. Gorne crushed the liquor glass in his fingers until it collapsed into splinters and he sat like a wounded animal staring at the blood streaming from minor glass cuts.

'No!' he shouted suddenly. 'No! You can't return, Mason! Any more than your daughter can! The dead are forever dead!'

He ceased speaking suddenly, wrenched open the door, and strode out into the night. The wind smote him like something solid, hurtling up the gorge with the roar of a thousand demons. At the same time he was aware of something else—a foul and overpowering stench that had within it all the vileness, the filthy moldering odor of the grave. It was the first time

he had ever noticed it, but there was no denying the dankness of the atmosphere. The gale crept with the portent of funereal disaster.

Trembling he gained the recently made grave and looked at it in the dim light. He tried to strike a match but the wind whipped the flame into extinguishment. Then suddenly the moon shot into view from behind the scurrying clouds and flooded the scene with ghastly, pallid radiance.

Gorne stiffened. Now he could distinctly see a round carmine patch on the yellow soil atop the grave. Blood-red; the size of a melon, perhaps. He bent down to touch it, then something held him back.

'Blood!' he muttered. 'Blood! He said his blood and soul would return—No! Not that! Melvin Gorne, you are a fool! There's nothing at all. And yet—'

His breath caught and he stared again. Behind him in the distance the yellow lights of the isolated factory were dancing through the approaching storm. Tonight they were evidently working overtime in the place.

Stupidly Gorne turned and went back to the shack, the memory of the red stain biting ever deeper into his merciless, half-crazy mind. Every whistle of the wind, every creak of the ancient timbers seemed to reiterate the words of the dying Mason. Time and time again he peered furtively through the window, drew aside the brittle, faded curtains, and every time he pictured in his mind's eyes that stain, blood-red and horribly fresh. The thought of it made him wild.

'It can't be blood!' he shouted into the shadows. 'Blood ceases to flow when a body dies! Calver Mason, you're dead—dead as your daughter!'

He gloated over that. 'You just died a little faster, that's all. She died slowly, just as she deserved.'

He broke off with a sudden start. The wind; a solid, mounting wall of fury suddenly buffeted against the shack wall and flung down an ancient picture from its hook. Gorne sat in silence, licking his dry lips, fingers in his unkempt gray hair, staring at the glass splinters and dust-caked print. Somewhere, he remembered, that that meant a death.

He stood up again, indecisive, then trembling in spite of himself tried to sleep again. Sleep, however, would not come to his overburdened mind. He lay there in the darkness, the lamp extinguished, and thought of the endless miles of storm-swept country that surrounded him. He was alone, save for people in the busily working factory. For a fleeting instant he thought of going there, then remembering that that would probably entail an inquiry he refrained from pursuing the idea.

And, little by little as he lay there trembling, the dirty blanket clutched in his gnarled hands, that same horrible odor he had detected outside floated into the grimy fastness of his retreat. Yes, it was from the grave! He was sure of it now. It penetrated into every nook and cranny, a stench that reminded him vaguely of rotting chrysanthemums, filled, too, with an unutterable coldness, unless that was the chill produced by the terrific fear that was governing him.

Somewhere abroad in this clammy dark must be the avenging soul of Calver Mason, waiting, waiting, through the timeless minutes to strike—to crush him into the perdition he deserved.

With a half scream Gorne sat up again and stared with dilated eyes into the blackness. He fully expected to behold the spectral presence of Mason himself, but the darkness remained unrelieved.

For a long time Gorne sat there, then he climbed out of the bed and relit the lamp. His knees were shaking, and they continued to do so even though he cursed himself huskily for a weak and imaginative fool.

Time and time again, furiously though he fought against it, the remembrance of that stain came back to him. Blood—upward, from a dead man! The thing was impossible! Nevertheless the recollection was too strong to permit of only conjecture. He wrenched the door open once more and stumbled out into the blackness. A loose stone caught his foot and sent him sprawling with his face within five inches of the grave itself.

Shuddering horror surged through him. The stain was there, but it was infinitely larger! The soil was saturated with it! Roughly it had formed into the shape of a man, a blood-red, sodden reincarnation of a man.

With a scream Gorne jumped upright, shouted desperately to the howling wind that flapped his worn garments about his emaciated frame.

‘You’re coming back, Mason!’ he shouted desperately. ‘You’re coming back! Stop, I tell you! *Stop!*’

His excess of emotion and fright suddenly vanished at his outburst. He became cooler. Momentary sane reasoning plainly indicated that this was absurd. Blood from a dead man? That thought stuck in his mind.

With an obstinate shake of his head he returned to the shack for the shovel. Grimly, resolutely, he drove it down into the red, glutinous mass. A deep shudder shook him at the soggy, ghastly sucking noise the soil made as he lifted a shovelful into the air. Immediately the red stain refilled into position. The crimson drops fell slowly from Gorne’s shovel as he stood staring.

Then it was blood! Flowing from a source unknown! Or was it unknown? Deep down in that spot lay Mason’s corpse. If it was his blood then his soul must be abroad, too.

It was too much for Gorne. He dropped the shovel with a crash and raced back screaming to the shack, slammed and bolted the door, then sat in sweating horror until the dawn crept through the angry clouds.

Throughout that boisterous day Gorne did not attempt to leave his retreat. He was too frightened. He did take furtive peeps through the window and, every time his eyes were met by that distant carmine stain. It had grown again since the night and covered now the entire area of the grave, its irregular edges steadily spreading towards the older grave of the girl herself.

Still there hung on the air that horrible smell, and it remained with the gale, which showed no signs of abating. Night fell again finally and Gorne was in a pitiable state. His naturally lean face was shrunken almost to that of a skeleton. Eyes filled with the light of insanity stared horribly into the dark.

Still the wind seemed to mutter: ‘My soul and blood shall return!’

He did not know how long he sat there in the darkness, but at last he got to his feet, taking a sudden grip on himself. This mystery had to be solved or he would entirely lose his reason. Stubbornly, resolutely, he opened the door and noted how much stronger was the gale.

Pressing against it, head down, he gained the grave again and stared mutely at the expanse of redness. With every breath he took the musty dank odor filled his nostrils.

‘You can’t come back!’ he shouted fiercely. ‘I’ll dig you out first!’

He turned to pick up the shovel, but at the identical moment a stronger gust of the wind caught his skinny frame and sent him sprawling backwards. His heels caught in the soggy red

mass as he overbalanced. Hoarsely, madly, he screamed, but it was too late.

He lost his balance completely and with a terrible cry fell over the edge of the cliff and dropped a sheer thousand feet into the gale-ridden canyon below.

And above, the stain steadily spread . . .

Danvers, City Editor of the New Orleans *Observer*, surveyed Wilson, his cub reporter, in some disgust.

‘So that’s all you got out of the Mason business?’ he asked shortly. ‘I thought there would be more to his disappearance than that!’

Wilson shrugged. ‘Don’t blame me, boss, I did all I could. I tracked Mason from here to a dump called Craven Town, and after that to a shack—a filthy old hole. And did the place hum! There’s a chemical dyeworks near there and the reek from that chimney of theirs is worse than glue. Smells like a grave or sump’n. It only stopped when the wind changed round.’

‘Never mind that,’ the editor returned coldly. ‘What’s all this about a red stain? Did you find that devil Gorne?’

‘Sure—in the gorge below, with the living lights knocked out of him. There were two corpses buried near his shack, but it seems that in one of the graves he had unknowingly punctured a dye-pipe leading to the works and the darned stuff leaked out and coloured the ground crimson. There was a party of dyeworks men there when I arrived. I got the story from them. That’s all there is to it.’

Danvers shrugged. ‘Okay, then, but I expected something more interesting. At least we have it fairly clear that Mason and his daughter were murdered by this old lunatic Gorne. We’ll print it. Hey, copy boy!’

THE END

[The end of *The Stain that Grew*, by John Russell Fearn]