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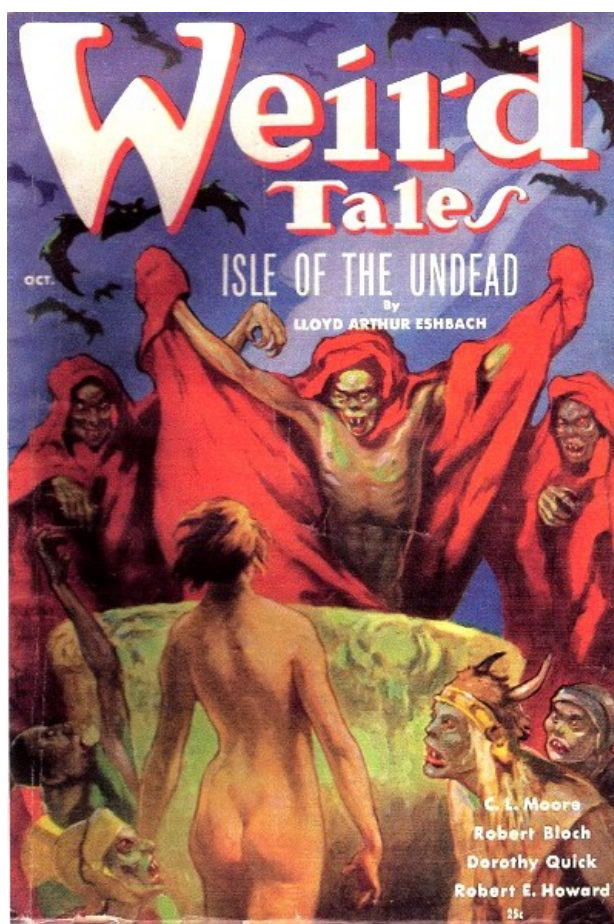
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET OF KRALITZ ***



The Secret of Kralitz

By HENRY KUTTNER

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I awoke from profound sleep to find two black-swathed forms standing silently beside me, their faces pale blurs in the gloom. As I blinked to clear my sleep-dimmed eyes, one of them beckoned impatiently, and suddenly I realized the purpose of this midnight summons. For years I had been expecting it, ever since my father, the Baron Kralitz, had revealed to me the secret and the curse that hung over our ancient house. And so,

A story of the shocking revelation that came to the twenty-first Baron Kralitz

without a word, I rose and followed my guides as they led me along the gloomy corridors of the castle that had been my home since birth.

As I proceeded there rose up in my mind the stern face of my father, and in my ears rang his solemn words as he told me of the legendary curse of the House of Kralitz, the unknown secret that was imparted to the eldest son of each generation—at a certain time.

"When?" I had asked my father as he lay on his death-bed, fighting back the approach of dissolution.

"When you are able to understand," he had told me, watching my face intently from beneath his tufted white brows. "Some are told the secret sooner than others. Since the first Baron Kralitz the secret has been handed down——"

He clutched at his breast and paused. It was fully five minutes before he had gathered his strength to speak again in his rolling, powerful voice. No gasping, death-bed confessions for the Baron Kralitz!

He said at last, "You have seen the ruins of the old monastery near the village, Franz. The first Baron burnt it and put the monks to the sword. The Abbot interfered too often with the Baron's whims. A girl sought shelter and the Abbot refused to give her up at the Baron's demand. His patience was at an end—you know the tales they still tell about him.

"He slew the Abbot, burned the monastery, and took the girl. Before he died the Abbot cursed his slayer, and cursed his sons for unborn generations. And it is the nature of this curse that is the secret of our house.

"I may not tell you what the curse is. Do not seek to discover it before it is revealed to you. Wait patiently, and in due time you will be taken by the warders of the secret down the stairway to the underground cavern. And then you will learn the secret of Kralitz."

As the last word passed my father's lips he died, his stern face still set in its harsh lines.

Deep in my memories, I had not noticed our path, but now the dark forms of my guides paused beside a gap in the stone flagging, where a stairway which I had never seen during my wanderings about the castle led into subterranean depths. Down this stairway I was conducted, and presently I came to realize that there was light of a sort—a dim, phosphorescent radiance that came from no recognizable source, and seemed to be less actual light than the accustoming of my eyes to the near-darkness.

I went down for a long time. The stairway turned and twisted in the rock, and the bobbing forms ahead were my only relief from the monotony of the interminable descent. And at last, deep underground, the long stairway ended, and I gazed over the shoulders of my guides at the great door that barred my path. It was roughly chiseled from the solid stone, and upon it were curious and strangely disquieting carvings, symbols which I did not recognize. It swung open, and I passed through and paused, staring about me through a gray sea of mist.

I stood upon a gentle slope that fell away into the fog-hidden distance, from which came a pandemonium of muffled bellowing and high-pitched, shrill squeakings vaguely akin to obscene laughter. Dark, half-glimpsed shapes swam into sight through the haze and disappeared again, and great vague shadows swept overhead on silent wings. Almost beside me was a long rectangular table of stone, and at this table two score of men were seated, watching me from eyes that gleamed dully out of deep sockets. My two guides silently took their places among them.

And suddenly the thick fog began to lift. It was swept raggedly away on the breath of a chill wind. The far dim reaches of the cavern were revealed as the mist swiftly dissipated, and I stood silent in the grip of a mighty fear, and, strangely, an equally potent, unaccountable thrill of delight. A part of my mind seemed to ask, "What horror is this?" And another part whispered, "You know this place!"

But I could never have seen it before. If I had realized what lay far beneath the castle I could never have slept at night for the fear that would have obsessed me. For, standing silent with conflicting tides of horror and ecstasy racing through me, I saw the weird inhabitants of the underground world.

Demons, monsters, unnamable things! Nightmare colossi strode bellowing through the murk, and amorphous gray things like giant slugs walked upright on stumpy legs. Creatures of shapeless soft pulp, beings with flame-shot eyes scattered over their misshapen bodies like fabled Argus, writhed and twisted there in the evil glow. Winged things that were not bats swooped and fluttered in the tenebrous air, whispering sibilantly—whispering in *human* voices.

Far away at the bottom of the slope I could see the chill gleam of water, a hidden, sunless sea. Shapes mercifully almost hidden by distance and the semi-darkness sported and cried, troubling the surface of the lake, the size of which I could only conjecture. And a flapping thing whose leathery wings stretched like a tent above my head swooped and hovered for a moment, staring with flaming eyes, and then darted off and was lost in the gloom.

And all the while, as I shuddered with fear and loathing, within me was this evil glee—this voice which whispered, "You know this place! You belong here! Is it not good to be home?"

I glanced behind me. The great door had swung silently shut, and escape was impossible. And then pride came to my aid. I was a Kralitz. And a Kralitz would not acknowledge fear in the face of the devil himself!

I stepped forward and confronted the warders, who were still seated regarding me intently from eyes in which a smoldering fire seemed to burn. Fighting down an insane dread that I might find before me an array of fleshless skeletons, I stepped to the head of the table, where there was a sort of crude throne, and peered closely at the silent figure on my right.

It was no bare skull at which I gazed, but a bearded, deadly-pale face. The curved, voluptuous lips were crimson, looking almost rouged, and the dull eyes stared through me bleakly. Inhuman agony had etched itself in deep lines on the white face, and gnawing anguish smoldered in the sunken eyes. I cannot hope to convey the utter strangeness, the atmosphere of unearthliness that surrounded him, almost as palpable as the fetid tomb-stench that welled from his dark garments. He waved a black-swathed arm to the vacant seat at the head of the table, and I sat down.

This nightmare sense of unreality! I seemed to be in a dream, with a hidden part of my mind slowly waking from sleep into evil life to take command of my faculties. The table was set with old-fashioned goblets and trenchers such as had not been used for hundreds of years. There was meat on the trenchers, and red liquor in the jeweled goblets. A heady, overpowering fragrance swam up into my nostrils, mixed with the grave-smell of my companions and the musty odor of a dank and sunless place.

Every white face was turned to me, faces that seemed oddly familiar, although I did not know why. Each face was alike in its blood-red, sensual lips and its expression of gnawing agony, and burning black eyes like the abysmal pits of Tartarus stared at me until I felt the short hairs stir on my neck. But—I was a Kralitz! I stood up and said boldly in archaic German that somehow came familiarly from my lips, "I am Franz, twenty-first Baron Kralitz. What do you want with me?"

A murmur of approval went around the long table. There was a stir. From the foot of the board a huge bearded man arose, a man with a frightful scar that made the left side of his face a horror of healed white tissue. Again the odd thrill of familiarity ran through me; I had seen that face before, and vaguely I remembered looking at it through dim twilight.

The man spoke in the old guttural German. "We greet you, Franz, Baron Kralitz. We greet you and pledge you, Franz—and we pledge the House of Kralitz!"

With that he caught up the goblet before him and held it high. All along the long table the black-swathed ones arose, and each held high his jeweled cup, and pledged me. They drank deeply, savoring the liquor, and I made the bow custom demanded. I said, in words that sprang almost unbidden from my mouth:

"I greet you, who are the warders of the secret of Kralitz, and I pledge you in return."

All about me, to the farthest reaches of the dim cavern, a hush fell, and the bellows and howlings, and the insane tittering of the flying things, were no longer heard. My companions leaned expectantly toward me. Standing alone at the head of the board, I raised my goblet and drank. The liquor was heady, exhilarating, with a faintly brackish flavor.

And abruptly I knew why the pain-racked, ruined face of my companion had seemed familiar; I had seen it often among the portraits of my ancestors, the frowning, disfigured visage of the founder of the House of Kralitz that glared down from the gloom of the great hall. In that fierce white light of revelation I knew my companions for what they were; I recognized them, one by one, remembering their canvas counterparts. But there was a change! Like an impalpable veil, the stamp of ineradicable evil lay on the tortured faces of my hosts, strangely altering their features, so that I could not always be sure I recognized them. One pale, sardonic face reminded me of my father, but I could not be sure, so monstrously altered was its expression.

I was dining with my ancestors—the House of Kralitz!

My cup was still held high, and I drained it, for somehow the grim revelation was not entirely unexpected. A strange glow thrilled through my veins, and I laughed aloud for the evil delight that was in me. The others laughed too, a deep-throated merriment like the barking of wolves—tortured laughter from men stretched on the rack, mad laughter in hell! And all through the hazy cavern came the clamor of the devil's brood! Great figures that towered many spans high rocked with thundering glee, and the flying things tittered slyly overhead. And out over the vast expanse swept the wave of frightful mirth, until the half-seen things in the black waters sent out bellows that tore at my eardrums, and the unseen roof far overhead sent back roaring echoes of the clamor.

And I laughed with them, laughed insanely, until I dropped exhausted into my seat and watched the scarred man at the other end of the table as he spoke.

"You are worthy to be of our company, and worthy to eat at the same board. We have pledged

each other, and you are one of us; we shall eat together."

And we fell to, tearing like hungry beasts at the succulent white meat in the jeweled trenchers. Strange monsters served us, and at a chill touch on my arm I turned to find a dreadful crimson thing, like a skinned child, refilling my goblet. Strange, strange and utterly blasphemous was our feast. We shouted and laughed and fed there in the hazy light, while all around us thundered the evil horde. There was hell beneath Castle Kralitz, and it held high carnival this night.

Presently we sang a fierce drinking-song, swinging the deep cups back and forth in rhythm with our shouted chant. It was an archaic song, but the obsolete words were no handicap, for I mouthed them as though they had been learned at my mother's knee. And at the thought of my mother a trembling and a weakness ran through me abruptly, but I banished it with a draft of the heady liquor.

Long, long we shouted and sang and caroused there in the great cavern, and after a time we arose together and trooped to where a narrow, high-arched bridge spanned the tenebrous waters of the lake. But I may not speak of what was at the other end of the bridge, nor of the unnamable things that I saw—and did! I learned of the fungoid, inhuman beings that dwell on far cold Yuggoth, of the cyclopean shapes that attend unsleeping Cthulhu in his submarine city, of the strange pleasures that the followers of leprous, subterranean Yog-Sothoth may possess, and I learned, too, of the unbelievable manner in which Iod, the Source, is worshipped beyond the outer galaxies. I plumbed the blackest pits of hell and came back—laughing. I was one with the rest of those dark warders, and I joined them in the saturnalia of horror until the scarred man spoke to us again.

"Our time grows short," he said, his scarred and bearded white face like a gargoyle's in the half-light. "We must depart soon. But you are a true Kralitz, Franz, and we shall meet again, and feast again, and make merry for longer than you think. One last pledge!"

I gave it to him. "To the House of Kralitz! May it never fall!"

And with an exultant shout we drained the pungent dregs of the liquor.

Then a strange lassitude fell upon me. With the others I turned my back on the cavern and the shapes that pranced and bellowed and crawled there, and I went up through the carved stone portal. We filed up the stairs, up and up, endlessly, until at last we emerged through the gaping hole in the stone flags and proceeded, a dark, silent company, back through those interminable corridors. The surroundings began to grow strangely familiar, and suddenly I recognized them.

We were in the great burial vaults below the castle, where the Barons Kralitz were ceremoniously entombed. Each Baron had been placed in his stone casket in his separate chamber, and each chamber lay, like beads on a necklace, adjacent to the next, so that we proceeded from the farthest tombs of the early Barons Kralitz toward the unoccupied vaults. By immemorial custom, each tomb lay bare, an empty mausoleum, until the time had come for its use, when the great stone coffin, with the memorial inscription carved upon it, would be carried to its place. It was fitting, indeed, for the secret of Kralitz to be hidden here.

Abruptly I realized that I was alone, save for the bearded man with the disfiguring scar. The others had vanished, and, deep in my thoughts, I had not missed them. My companion stretched out his black-swathed arm and halted my progress, and I turned to him questioningly. He said in his sonorous voice, "I must leave you now. I must go back to my own place." And he pointed to the way whence we had come.

I nodded, for I had already recognized my companions for what they were. I knew that each Baron Kralitz had been laid in his tomb, only to arise as a monstrous thing neither dead nor alive, to descend into the cavern below and take part in the evil saturnalia. I realized, too, that with the approach of dawn they had returned to their stone coffins, to lie in a death-like trance until the setting sun should bring brief liberation. My own occult studies had enabled me to recognize these dreadful manifestations.

I bowed to my companion and would have proceeded on my way to the upper parts of the castle, but he barred my path. He shook his head slowly, his scar hideous in the phosphorescent gloom.

I said, "May I not go yet?"

He stared at me with tortured, smoldering eyes that had looked into hell itself, and he pointed to what lay beside me, and in a flash of nightmare realization I knew the secret of the curse of Kralitz. There came to me the knowledge that made my brain a frightful thing in which shapes of darkness would ever swirl and scream; the dreadful comprehension of *when* each Baron Kralitz was initiated into the brotherhood of blood. I knew—I *knew*—that no coffin had ever been placed unoccupied in the tombs, and I read upon the stone sarcophagus at my feet the inscription that made my doom known to me—*my own name, "Franz, twenty-first Baron Kralitz."*

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET OF KRALITZ ***

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