

## **The Blood-Red One**

*By Maxwell Struthers Burt*

From Scribner's Magazine

It was a February evening, so it seems, about five o'clock, and old Mr. Vandusen, having left his hat and ulster in the coatroom, had retraced his steps along the entrance hall of the St. Dunstan Club to the wide doorway that led into the first-floor library. He usually sought the library at this time of day; a little group of men, all of whom he knew well, were as a rule to be found there, and they were friendly, not overly argumentative, restful. Now he paused between the heavy portières, partly drawn aside, and peered for a moment into the room. The light from the hall behind him made a pool of faint illumination at his feet, but beyond that there was only a brown darkness, scented with the smell of books in leather bindings, in which the figures of several men, sprawled out in big chairs before the window, were faintly visible. The window itself, a square of blank fog-blurred dusk, served merely to heighten the obscurity. Mr. Vandusen, a small, plump shadow in the surrounding shadows, found an unoccupied chair and sank into it silently.

"And that's just it," said Maury suddenly, and as if he was picking up the threads of a conversation dropped but a moment before; "and that's just the point"--and his usually gentle voice was heavy with a didacticism unlike itself--"that affects most deeply a man of my temperament and generation. Nemesis--fate--whatever you choose to call it. The fear that perhaps it doesn't exist at all. That there is no such thing; or worse yet, that in some strange, monstrous way man has made himself master of it--has no longer to fear it. And man isn't fit to be altogether master of anything as yet; he's still too much half devil, half ape. There's this damned choked feeling that the world's at loose ends. I don't know how to put it--as if, that is, we, with all the devilish new knowledge we've acquired within the past fifty years, the devilish

new machines we've invented, have all at once become stronger than God; taken the final power out of the hands of the authority, whatever it is, toward which we used to look for a reckoning and balancing in the end, no matter what agony might lie between. Perhaps it's all right--I don't know. But it's an upsetting conclusion to ask a man of my generation offhandedly to accept. I was brought up--we all were--to believe in an ordered, if obscure, philosophical doctrine that evil inevitably finds its own punishment, and now--!"

"But--" began Tomlinson.

Maury interrupted him. "Yes, yes," he said, "I know all that; I know what you are going to say. I am perfectly aware of the fact that the ways of Nemesis are supposed to be slow ways--exceedingly. I am aware of the fact that in the Christian doctrine the process is not usually completed until after death, but nowadays things are different. How, since all else moves so swiftly, can a just God afford any longer to be patient? Time has been obliterated in the last four years; space and centuries telescoped; the sufferings of a century compressed into a few cycles of months. No, there is something wrong, some break in the rhythm of the universe, or those grotesque ghouls who started the whole thing, those full-bodied, cold-blooded hangmen, who for forty years have been sitting back planning the future of men and women as they planned the cards of their sniggering skat games, would awake to a sun dripping blood." He paused for a moment. "And as for that psychiatric cripple, their mouthpiece," he concluded sombrely, "that maimed man who broods over battle-fields, he would find a creeping horror in his brain like death made visible."

"And you think he will not?"....

In the darkness Mr. Vandusen suddenly sat up very straight and tried to pierce with his eyes the shadows to the right of him.

Again the chair creaked.

"And you think he will not?" asked the voice again.

The words fell one by one into the silence, like stones dropped into a pool by a precise hand. As the ripples of sound they created died away in the brown dusk, the room seemed for a moment to hold a hushed expectation that made ordinary quiet a matter of movement and sound. From the drab street outside the voice of a newsboy, strident and insistent, put a further edge to the sharp minute. "N'extra!" he shouted. "N'extra! 'Nother big raid on west'n front!"

It was Torrance who asked the question. "What--" he said. "But, but--why--!" And then his wheezing inarticulateness broke like a dislocated bellows.

Mr. Vandusen, leaning forward in his chair, did not realize at the time the unreasonableness of the sharp blaze of irritation that at the interruption burned within him. It was not until much later, indeed, that he realized other odd circumstances as well: Torrance's broken amazement, for instance; the silence of Maury, and Wheeler, and, above all, of Tomlinson. At the moment he realized nothing, except an intense curiosity to hear what the man who had just sat down next to him had to say. "An extraordinary voice! Altogether extraordinary! Like a bell, that is, if a bell could by any chance give a sense of an underlying humor." And yet, even considering all this, when one is old and has heard so many voices--But here he was quite rigid in the darkness. "Do be quiet!" he whispered sharply. "Can't we be quiet!"

"Thanks!" said the voice, with its cool, assured inflections. "There is nothing so very extraordinary. Men's brains are not unlike. Merely--shall I go on?"

And before Mr. Vandusen's hurried assent could be uttered, the quiet tones assumed the accent of narration. "Good," they said. "Very well, then. But first I must ask of you a large use of your imagination. I

must ask you, for instance, to imagine a scene so utterly unlike this February night that your eyes will have to close themselves entirely to the present and open only to my words. I must ask you to imagine a beech forest in early November; a beech forest dreaming beneath the still magic of warm, hazy days; days that come before the first sharp cold of winter. Will you imagine that?"

"Yes!" murmured Mr. Vandusen; and he noticed that the other men did not answer at all.

"The mild sunlight," continued the voice, "filters through the naked boughs and touches the smooth silver trunks and the moss about their feet with a misty gold as iridescent as the wings of dragonflies. And as far as you can see on every side stretch these silver boles, dusted with sunlight; in straight lines, in oblique columns, until the eye loses itself in the argent shadows of the distance.

"In the hidden open places, where the grass is still green toward its roots, wild swine come out of the woods and stare with small red eyes; but save for the crackling of the twigs beneath their feet it is very quiet. Marvellously so. Quiet with the final hush of summer. Only rarely a breeze stirs the legions of the heaped-up gray leaves, and sometimes, but rarely, one hears far off the chattering of a squirrel. So!--that is my forest.

"Through it runs like a purple ribbon a smooth, well-kept road. And it, too, adds to the impression of stillness, as the untenanted handiwork of man always does. On the rolled, damp surface are the marks of the cloven feet of the swine.

"Now there is a snapping of dead wood, a rustling of leaves, and an immense tusker--a grizzled leader of a herd--comes ponderously through the sun-dappled aisles to the edge of the road. For a moment he stands there, secure and unperturbed, and then suddenly he throws up his head, his little eyes wide and startled, and, wheeling, charges

back to where his satellites are browsing. There is a breathless scurrying of huge bodies; then utter silence again, except that far away a limb cracks. But only for a moment is the road deserted. It seems as if the shadow of the great tusker was still upon it when, beyond the bend, a horn, sweet as a hunting-horn, blows once, twice, ends in a fanfare of treble notes, and a long, gray motor-car sweeps into view, cutting the sunlight and the pooled shadow with its twinkling prow. Behind it is another, and another, and another, until six in all are in sight; and as they flash past one has a glimpse, on the seats of the landaulets, of a number of men in long cloaks and helmets; big and little men; fat men and sharp-featured; elderly men and young men, and particularly of one man, in the second car from the front, who looks straight ahead of him and is not interested in the chatter of his companions. He is a stern man, rather terrible, and his face wears a curious pallor. On the crest of a wooded slope, a quarter of a mile away, the giant boar sniffs the odor of the gasolene and delicately wrinkles his nose.

"And this," said the voice, "this convoy of motor-cars, these horns, almost as gay as the hunting-horns of former days, was, as you have guessed, The Maimed Man--as you choose to call him--come back to a hunting-lodge to rest, to slip from his shoulders for a while, if he could, the sodden cloak he had been wearing for the past three years and as many months.

"It was dark when they came to the hunting-lodge, a long, two-storied building of white plaster and timber-work above. The sun had been gone a while beyond the low hills to the west, and in the open place where the house stood only a remnant of the red dust of the sunset still floated in the pellucid air. Here the beeches gave way to solid ranks of pines and firs, and the evening sweetness of these fell upon the senses like the touch of cool water upon tired eyes. The headlights of the motor-cars cut wide arcs of blinding light in the gathering darkness. One by one the cars stopped before the entrance with throbbing engines and discharged their loads. The short flight of stairs became

for a few minutes a swaying tableau of gray cloaks. There was a subdued ringing of spurs. The lamps from within the doorway touched the tips of the helmets so that they twinkled like little stars.

"The Maimed Man descended slowly and passed between his waiting suite. The scent of the pines had stirred his heart with memories. He was thinking of the last time he had been here, years before--well, not really so many years before, only four years, and yet it seemed like a recollection of his boyhood. He paused inside the threshold to remove his cloak. A hand, with a curious lack of duplication to it, stretched itself forward. The Maimed Man turned abruptly to see a servant with one arm bowing toward him. For a moment he paused, and then:

"'You are wounded?' he asked, and, although nothing was further from his desire, his voice had in it a little rasping sound; anger it seemed, although it might very well have been fear.

"The man turned a brick-red. He had never quite been able to recover from the feeling that in some way to be crippled was a shameful thing. He had been very strong before.

"'At Liège, your Majesty,' he murmured. 'In the first year.'

"'Always the left arm,' said The Maimed Man. 'Always the left. It seems always so.' But now he was angry. He turned to one of his suite. 'Can I not escape such things even here?' he asked. He went up without further words to his rooms. From his study a long door of glass opened onto a balcony. He remembered the balcony well. He opened the door and stepped out. The twilight had gone now. The night was very still and touched with a hint of crispness. Stars were beginning to show themselves. The black pines that came down to the edge of the clearing were like a great hidden army."

There was a little pause.

"And so," said the voice, "I can come now almost at once to the first of the two incidents I wish to tell you. I choose only two because there is no need of more. Two will do. And I shall call the first 'The story of the leaves that marched.'

"The warm days still held, and at the hunting-lodge there was much planning to keep things moving and every one busy and content. But secret planning, you understand. The Maimed Man is not an easy person for whom to plan unless he thinks that he has the final decision himself. There were rides and drives and picnics and, in the afternoons, usually a long walk, in which the older and stouter members of the suite either stayed at home or else followed painfully in the rear of their more active companions. The Maimed Man is a difficult person to keep up with; he walks very fast across country, swinging his stick, choosing, it would seem, the roughest ways. It is almost as if he wished to rid himself of others; and he is inordinately proud of his own activity. It was a curious sight to see his straggling attendants, spread out through the silver vistas of the beeches, like earnest trolls, all in one way or another bent upon a common end. And I suppose it was on account of this trick of The Maimed Man that one afternoon, toward dusk, he found himself almost completely alone, save for myself, who managed somehow to keep step, and a silent huntsman in gray who strode on ahead with the quiet, alert step of a wild animal.

"It was very still. There was no breeze at all. Not a sound except the sound of the dead leaves beneath our feet; and The Maimed Man was not, as was his usual wont, talking. Indeed, he seemed very preoccupied, almost morosely so. Every now and then he cut with his stick at a bush or a yellowed fern as he passed. Presently the trees opened upon a little glade swimming in sunlight. And then there was a brook to cross, and beyond that a gentle slope before the trees began again. The sunlight was pleasantly warm after the coolness of the forest, and the slope, with its soft dried grass, seemed an inviting place to rest. The Maimed Man continued until he had reached the

farther belt of trees, and then he turned about and faced the sinking sun, that by now was changing itself into a nebulous radiance on the horizon. The forest stretched in gentle billows as far as the eye could see.

"We will stop here," said The Maimed Man, "until the others catch up. Lazy-bones! If they had one-half the work to do that my poorest man has to the south they would not lose their legs so readily." Then he sat down and lit a cigarette. I sat beside him. Farther up on the slope, in the shadow of the trees, sat the huntsman. We waited. The sun burned away its quivering aura and began to sink blood-red below the hills. Long shadows fell, penetrated with the dancing flecks of twilight.

"Here they come!" said The Maimed Man suddenly. "I see gray moving. There--below there, amongst the trees!" He pointed with his cane. Far back in the secret aisles of the forest across the brook there did indeed seem to be a movement. The Maimed Man half arose to his feet. "I will shame them, the lazy-bones," he said, and then he sat down again, with an odd, soft collapse.

"For, you see, it was very still, as I have said. Not a trace of wind. The forest seemed to be slumbering. And yet there had come out of it, and across the open place, and up the slope, so that it touched the hair and chilled the cheek, something that was not wind and yet was like it. A little clammy cat's-paw. So! And then was gone. And on its heels came the leaves. Yes, millions of them. But not blown; not hurriedly. Very hesitatingly; as if by their own volition. One might have said that they oozed with a monstrous slowness out from between the crepuscular tree-trunks and across the open space toward the brook. Gray leaves, creeping forward with a curious dogged languor. And when they came to the brook they paused on its farther edge and stopped, and the ones behind came pushing up to them. And looking down upon them, they might have been the backs of wounded men in gray, dragging themselves on their knees to water....



"I don't know how long this moment lasted--minutes perhaps; perhaps no longer than the drawing in and letting out of a breath. It was broken by the figure of a man--an upstanding man, this time--who stepped out of the forest opposite and, halting for a moment on the edge of the clearing, looked up to where The Maimed Man was sitting. Then he signalled to some one behind him, and presently one by one the figures of the belated suite appeared. They formed themselves in a little group and with some precision marched across the clearing. As they trampled upon the stricken leaves by the brookside the fixed stare in The Maimed Man's eyes faded, and he watched them with a rigid attention. Shortly they came to where he had got to his feet. A huge elderly man with a red face led them.

"'But your Majesty,' he objected, 'it is not fitting. You should not leave us in this way. Even here, is it altogether safe?'

"The Maimed Man did not answer. Covertly and with a sly shamefacedness, unlike himself, he was trying to read the expression in the huntsman's face. But that faithful fellow's eyes were bland. There was no sign that he had seen anything out of the ordinary....

"There is no need," said the voice, "for delay. From this to the second incident I would describe to you is only a step. I shall not go into details. For these I can safely trust to your imaginations. And yet I would not, of course, have you gather that what I have just told you is without background--was out of a clear sky. Naturally, it was not; it was a cumulation, an apex. Such things do not happen altogether suddenly. There is a nibbling away at the banks, a little rivulet here and there, and then, all at once, a torrent like a hunted river under the moon. I called the first apex 'The story of the leaves that marched'; I shall call the second 'The mist that came up suddenly.'

"Two weeks had passed; quiet days, slow weeks, quiet and slow as the sunlight through the trees. The two doctors at the hunting-lodge, round, sharp-spoken men, with big, near-sighted spectacles, rubbed

their hands together and nodded with certainty when they held their daily consultations. 'He is improving rapidly,' they said. 'The lines in his face are going. A little more exercise, a little more diversion--so!' They imagined crosses on their chests.

"Have you ever known mist on a moonlight night in a forest? Not a woods, not an open country with timber scattered through it, but a real forest; so limitless, so close-pressing, that one has the same sense of diminished personality and at the same time the same sense of all obstructions cleared away between oneself and the loneliness of the universe that one has at sea. As if, that is, you found yourself, a mere shadow in the darkness, kneeling close before an altar on which blazed, so that you could not altogether raise your head, the magnificence of a star. But mist in a moonlight forest is even more disembodied than mist on a moonlight sea. There are the dark masses of the trees, showing every now and then above the changing wraiths of white, and the summits of half-seen hills, to give an impression of a horizon near yet seemingly unattainable.

"They had finished supper in the great oak-ceilinged room down below, where a fire burned in the stone embrasure, and the soft lights of candles in silver candelabra made only more tenebrous the darkness overhead. The Maimed Man leaned back in his chair and peered with narrowed eyelids through the smoke of his cigar at the long table stretching away from him. For a moment he felt reassured; a hint of the old assurance that had once been one of his greatest gifts. It was partly a physical thing, stirring in his veins like the cool blood that follows the awakening from healthy sleep. The sight of all these friends of his, these followers of his, with their keen, sunburnt faces, or their wrinkled and wise ones--! Surely he occupied a position almost unassailable; almost as unassailable as that of the God of Force whose purposes of late had at times puzzled him in a new and disturbing way--. What nonsense! He gripped power as securely as he could grip, if he wished, his sword. What strength in heaven or earth could break a man's will, provided that will had been sufficiently

trained? He felt pleasantly tired from the walk of the afternoon; he thought that he would go up to his rooms for a while, perhaps write a personal letter or two, afterward come down again for a game of cards. He stood up; the long double lines of men at the table rose with him, as a unit, at attention. The Maimed Man looked at them for a prolonged second, his heart stirred with pride; then he wheeled about and departed.

"In his workroom above, two secretaries were writing at a table under the rays of a green-shaded lamp. They jumped to their feet as he entered, but he waved them aside.

"I shall return in a moment,' he said. 'First I wish to finish my cigar.'

"He opened the glass door onto the balcony, but, as it was cool, he stepped back and asked for his military cloak. When this was adjusted, he stepped once more into the moonlight.... And then, suddenly, there was no moonlight at all, or just the faintest glimmer of it, like light seen through milky water. Instead, he had stepped into a swirling vapor that in an instant lost him completely from the door he had just left; a maelstrom of fog, that choked him, half blinded him, twisted about him like wet, coiling ropes, and in a dreadful moment he saw that through the fog were thrust out toward him arms of a famine thinness, the extended fingers of which groped at his throat, were obliterated by the fog, groped once more with a searching intentness.

"God!' said The Maimed Man. 'God!'--and fought drunkenly for the wall behind him. His hands touched nothing. He did not even know in which direction the wall lay. He dreaded to move, for it seemed as if there was no longer a railing to save him from falling. There was no solidity anywhere. The world had become a thing of hideous flux, unstable as when first it was made. Gelid fingers, farther reaching than the rest, touched the back of his neck. He gave a hoarse, strangled cry and reeled forward, and fell across the balustrade that came up out of the mist to meet him. And slowly the mist retreated;

down from the balcony and across the open place beneath. A narrow line of dew-brightened grass appeared and grew wider. The tops of the trees began to show. But The Maimed Man could not take his eyes off the mist, for it seemed to him that the open place was filled with the despairing arms of women and of children, and that through the shifting whiteness gleamed the whiteness of their serried faces. Behind him was the warm glow of the room, shining through the glass doors. But he did not dare go in as yet; it was necessary first to control the little flecks of foam that despite his endeavor still wet his lips. For you see," said the voice, and in the darkness its accents took on a slow, rhythmical sombreness, like the swish of a sword in a shuttered room, "this was far worse than the leaves. For, after all, the dead are only the dead, but to the living there is no end."

At least a minute--fully a minute--must have passed, a minute in which the brown shadows of the library, held back for now this long while by the weaving magic of the voice, stepped forward once more into their places, while Mr. Vandusen waited for the voice to continue. Then the spell broke like a shattered globe, and, with a sudden realization of many things, he leaned forward and felt the chair to the right of him. There was no one there. He paused with his hand still on the leather seat. "Would you mind telling me," he asked, and he found that he was speaking with some effort and with great precision, "if any of you know the gentleman who has just left?"

"Left?" said Tomlinson sharply.

"Yes--left."

Tomlinson's voice was incredulous. "But he couldn't have," he insisted. "From where I am sitting I would have seen him as he reached the door. Although, if he really is gone, I can say, thank the Lord, that I think he's a faker."

On silent feet young Wheeler had departed for the hall. Now he returned. "It may interest you to know," he said, "that I have just interviewed the doorman and the boy who is stationed at the steps leading back, and they both say no one has come in or out in the last half-hour."

Suddenly his careful voice rose to a high note. "What the devil--!" he sputtered. He strode over to the electric switch. "For Heaven's sake, let's have some light," he said. "Why do we always insist upon sitting in this confounded darkness?"