

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

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The Band of Death

A Gripping Complete Novelet

By **ELI COLTER**



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*The Snow-Thing, Whose Home is the White Silence,
Softly Caresses, but Exacts a Toll of Death!*



He was set upon by a wind "with snow in it"

ITHAQUA

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Author of "The Man from Dark Valley," "Eyes of the Serpent," etc.

IN THE spring of 1939 there pushed into the public prints various obscure paragraphs, most of them very muddled, concerning such apparently unrelated matters as the queer beliefs of certain Indian tribe remnants, the apparent incompetence of Constable James French of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, the disappearance of one

Henry Lucas, and finally the vanishing of the aforesaid Constable French.

There was also a brief uproar in the press concerning a certain statement released on the eleventh of May, by John Dalhousie, Division Chief of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. The statement was a reply to the public criticism of

Constable French and the general handling of the Lucas case.

Lastly, by means of a strange grapevine system of communication, apparently not by word of mouth, since no one was ever heard to speak of it, there was a certain incredible story about a Snow-Thing, the story of a strange god of the great white silence, the vast land where snow lies for long months beneath a limitless, cold sky.

And yet these apparently unrelated phenomena, to which the press referred with ever-increasing scorn, were closely bound together by a sinister connection. Let us turn to the record. On the eleventh day of May, John Dalhousie wrote:

THIS is in reply to harsh unjustified criticism directed against me in the matter of the Lucas investigation. I am being especially harassed by the press because this case still remains unsolved. It is being pointed out that Henry Lucas could not have walked from his house and vanished, despite the fixed and indisputable evidence that *this is what Lucas did*.

"The facts are briefly these: On the night of the 21st of February last, during a light snowstorm, Henry Lucas walked out of his cabin on the northern edge of the village of Cold Harbor and was not seen again.

"A neighbor saw Lucas going toward the old Olassie trail near Lucas' cabin, but did not see him subsequently. This was the last time Lucas was seen alive. Two days later, a brother-in-law, Randy Margate, reported Lucas' disappearance, and Constable French was sent at once to inquire into the matter.

"The constable's report reached my office two weeks later. Let me say at once that despite public belief to the contrary, the Lucas mystery was solved.

"But its solution was so outré, so unbelievable, so horrible, that this department felt it must not be given to

the public. To that decision we have held until today, when it has become apparent that our solution, however strange, must be released to stem the flood of criticism directed at this department.

"I append herewith the last report of Constable James French."

Constable French to Division Chief Dalhousie:

Cold Harbor, 3 March, 1939:

Sir: I have hardly the courage to write this to you, for I must write something my nature rebels against, something my intelligence tells me cannot, must not be—and yet it *is!* Yes, it was as we were told—Lucas walked out of his house and vanished—but we had not dreamed of the reason for his going, nor that something lurked in the forest, waiting. . . .

I got here on the twenty-fifth of February and proceeded at once to the Lucas cabin, where I met and spoke to Margate. He, however, had nothing to tell me, having come in from a neighboring village, found his brother missing, and reported the matter to us.

Shortly after I saw Randy Margate, he left for his own home in Navissa Camp.

I went then to the neighbor who had last seen him. This man seemed unwilling to talk, and I had much difficulty in understanding him, since he is apparently very largely Indian, certainly a descendant of the old tribes still so plentiful around here. He showed me the place where he had last seen Lucas, and indicated that the vanished man's footprints had abruptly stopped. He said this rather excitedly.

Then, suddenly looking toward the forest across the open space, he said somewhat lamely that of course the snow had filled in the other tracks. But the place indicated was wind-swept, where little snow stayed. Indeed, in some places the footprints of Lucas could still be seen, and beyond the place from which he supposedly disappeared, there are none of

his, though there are footprints of Margate and one or two others.

In the light of subsequent discoveries, this is a highly significant fact. *Lucas certainly did not walk beyond this spot, and he certainly did not return to his cabin.* He disappeared from this spot as completely as if he had never existed.

I tried then, and I have tried since then, to explain to myself how Lucas could have vanished without leaving some trace, but there has been no explanation save the one I will presently chronicle, unbelievable as it is. But before I come to that, I must present certain evidence which seems to me important.

You will remember that twice last year the itinerant priest, Father Brisbois, reported disappearances of Indian children from Cold Harbor. In each case we were informed that the child had turned up before we could investigate. I had not been here a day before finding out that these missing children had never turned up, that, indeed, there had been strange vanishings from Cold Harbor which had never been reported to us, that apparently the disappearance of Lucas was but one in a chain. Lucas, however, appears to have been the first white man to vanish.

THERE were several singular discoveries which I quickly made, and these left me with anything but a favorable impression. I felt at once that it was not a *right* sort of case. These facts seem to rank in importance:

1. Lucas was pretty generally disliked. He had repeatedly cheated the Indians and, while intoxicated, had once tried to interfere in some matter apparently pertaining to their religion. I considered this as motive, and it may yet be so—but not so obviously as I had first thought.

2. The chiefly Indian population of Cold Harbor is either very reluctant to talk or refuses to talk at all. Some of them are downright afraid, some are sullen, and some are defiant and even warning. One of them, Medicine Three-Hat, when questioned, said: "Look, there are things you are

not to know. Of them is Ithaqua, whom no man may look upon without worship. Only to see him is death, like frost in the deep night."

Three-Hat would say nothing more. However, what he did say has since taken on much significance, as you will see.

3. There is a curious ancient worship here. Of this, more below.

Frequent hints of some connection between great bonfires in the pine forest skirted by the old Olassie Trail, sudden, inexplicable snowstorms, and the vanishings, put me at last upon the thread of discovery tying up to the odd worship of these Indians of the North.

I had thought at first that the villagers' guarded reference to the forest and the snow were only the expression of the natural fear of the elements common to people in isolated countries. Apparently, however, I erred in this.

On the second day after my arrival, Father Brisbois came into Cold Harbor, and he, seeing me at one of his brief services, sent an altar boy to tell me he would like to see me. I saw him after the services.

He had assumed that I was looking into the disappearances he had reported to us, and expressed considerable surprise when he learned that the lost children had been reported found by their parents.

"Then they suspected my intentions," he said in explanation, "and prevented an investigation. But, of course, you know that the children never did turn up?"

I said that I knew it, and went on to urge him to tell us all he might know about the mysterious vanishings. His attitude, however, surprised me.

"I can't tell you, because you wouldn't believe me," he said. "But tell me, have you been in the forest? Down along the old Olassie Trail, for instance?" And, at my negative, he went on: "Then go into the woods and see if you can find the altars. When you find them, come back and tell me what you make of them. I'll stay in Cold Harbor for two days or so."

That was all he would tell me. But I saw then that there was something to be discovered in the forest, and though the afternoon was on the wane, I set out along the old Olassie Trail and out into the woods, though not without carefully estimating the hours of daylight yet remaining.

I went deeper and deeper—it is all virgin woods there, with some very ancient trees—and finally I came upon a trail through the snow. Since there had been a rather clever attempt made to disguise this trail, I felt I had hit upon something.

I followed it and had no difficulty in finding what Father Brisbois meant by the altars. They were peculiar circles of stone, around which the snow appeared to be all tramped down. That was my first impression, but when I got up next to the circles of stone I saw that the snow outside the circle was like glass—smooth, but not slippery—a fact, incidentally, that could not be ascribed solely to *human* footprints. Inside the circles, however, the snow was soft as down.

These circles were quite large, fully seventy feet in diameter, and were crudely put together of some strange kind of frosted stone, a white, glazed rock with which I am totally unfamiliar. When I put out a hand to touch one of these rocks, I was severely shocked by what was apparently an electrical discharge of some kind. Add to this the fact that the stone is certainly of great age and incredibly cold, and you may conceive of the amazement with which I viewed this strange place of worship.

There were three circles, not very far removed from each other. Having examined them from the outside, I entered the first circle and found, as I have pointed out before, that the snow was exceedingly soft. Here there were very distinct footprints. I think I must have looked at them in mild interest for some minutes before their significance began to dawn upon me. Then I dropped to my knees and examined them carefully.

The evidence before my eyes was plain. The footprints were made by a man wearing shoes, certainly a white man, for the Indians hereabouts

wear moccasins. Moreover, the prints were the same as those made on the open space by Henry Lucas when he vanished. On the face of it, I felt I could work on the hypothesis that these prints had been made by Lucas.

BUT the most extraordinary thing about the footprints was that they gave evidence that the man who had made them had neither walked into the circle nor walked out of it!

The point of entry—or, rather, the beginning of the line of prints—lay not far from where I stood. Here was partly snow-covered evidence that he had been *thrown or dropped* into the circle.

Lucas had then risen and begun to walk around toward the circle's only entrance, but at this entrance his footprints hesitated, then turned back. He walked faster and faster, then he began to run, and abruptly his footprints stopped entirely, cut off toward the middle of the circle!

There was no mistake about it, for, while the preceding footprints were slightly snow-covered, the light snowfall had apparently stopped coincident with the cessation of the footprints.

As I was examining these curious prints, I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was being watched. I scanned the forest covertly, but nothing came into my line of vision.

Nevertheless, the feeling of being under observation persisted, and a mounting uneasiness took possession of me, so that I felt a definite sense of danger within this strange and silent circle of stone deep in the hushed woods. Presently I emerged from the circular altar and went toward the forest in some apprehension.

Then suddenly I came upon the site of great fires, and I remembered the half-hinted suggestions put forth by some of the natives of Cold Harbor. The fact that Lucas' footprints were within the stone circle certainly linked the fires to his disappearance, and, as I have pointed out, snow was obviously falling at the time Lucas stood within the stones.

I remembered then, too, that there had occasionally been rumors of fires

seen in the deep woods along the Olassie Trail when that trail was still in use a few years ago. I examined the ashes, though, owing to encroaching darkness, I could not be as careful as I wished. Apparently only pine boughs had been burned.

I now saw that not only was darkness closing down, but that the sky had clouded, and flakes of snow were already beginning to sift down through the trees. Here, then, was another point in evidence—the sudden oncoming of a snowstorm, when but a few moments before, the sky had been devoid of clouds! One by one those queer hints were taking tangible form before my eyes.

All this time, I was still certain that someone was observing my every movement, so I calculated my movements in such a way that I might surprise anyone in the woods. The fires had been burned behind the altars, and as I turned, I faced the stone circles.

Now, as I say, it was getting dark, and snow was falling—but I saw something. It was like a sudden cloud of snow hanging over the altars, like a huge shapeless mass of thickly packed snow—not just a swirl of flakes, though snow-flakes did seem to encircle it. And it did not have a white color, but rather a blue-green tint shading away into purple.

THIS may have been the effect of the dusk which was rapidly invading the forest. I want to make clear to you the fact that I was not then conscious of anything strange, being fully aware of the weird light-changes sometimes affecting one's vision at dusk.

But, as I went forward, past the altars, I looked around. And I saw that the upper half of that weird entity moved independently of the lower!

As I stood looking up into the darkness, the thing began to fade away, just as if dissolving into the falling snow, until at last there was nothing there. It was then that I became frightened, with the fear that the thing encompassed me, was all around me in the falling snow. For

the first time in my life I was afraid of the woods and the night and the silent snow. I turned and ran, but not before I saw—*where the snow image had been, a pair of bright, green eyes hung suspended like stars in space above the circular altars!*

I am not ashamed to confess that I ran as if a pack of hell-hounds bayed at my heels. I still thank whatever powers there are for guiding my mad flight to the comparative safety of the Olassie Trail, where it was still quite light, and where for the first time I paused. I looked back toward the woods, but there was nothing to be seen, for the snow now was falling thickly.

I was still afraid, and I half imagined that I heard whispering among the snow-flakes, a hellish whispering urging me to return to the altars. So strong it was, so clear, that for one awful moment I stood wavering on the trail, almost ready to turn and plunge again into the ominous darkness of the forest. Then I broke the spell that held me and ran on down the trail toward Cold Harbor.

I went directly to the house of Dr. Telfer, where Father Brisbois was staying. The priest was frankly alarmed at what he described as my "wild and horror-struck appearance," and Dr. Telfer wanted to give me a sedative, which I declined.

I told them at once what I had seen. From the expression on his face, I gathered that what I was saying was neither exactly unexpected nor new to the priest. The doctor, however, made it rather plain from his comments that he considered me the victim of illusory phenomena common enough at twilight.

Father Brisbois disagreed. In fact, the priest hinted that I had penetrated a veil always present but seldom seen, that what I had seen was no illusion but indeed a tangible proof of a ghastly other world of which most human beings, mercifully, know and suspect nothing.

"There exists no legend," Father Brisbois said, "that is not firmly rooted to something, even if that something existed in a long, long forgotten past beyond memory of

man. Elementary forces are still worshiped in far out-of-the-way places in this world—the Wind-Walker, and Ithaqua, god of the great white silence, the one god of whom no totems bear sign."

THE memory of what I had seen hanging above the stone circles deep in the forest beyond Cold Harbor came to me.

This and the knowledge that one old Indian had mentioned to me a name that the priest had now spoken—*Ithaqua*.

"Do you mean that the Indians hereabouts worship this thing called Ithaqua, offering up their children as human sacrifice?" I asked. "Then how explain Lucas' vanishing? And who or what, actually, is Ithaqua?"

"As to Lucas," Father Brisbois answered, "he was extremely unpopular, steadily cheating the Indians, and at one time got himself mixed up with them at the forest's edge. That was but a few days prior to his disappearance. As to Ithaqua and who or what he is, I am not capable of answering. There is a belief that none but worshippers dare look upon him. To do so otherwise means death. What was it you saw above the altar? Ithaqua? Is he the spirit of water or of wind, or is he truly a god of this great white silence, the thing of snow, a manifestation of which you saw?"

"I don't know about that," I said. "I'm thinking about those poor Indian children."

"I buried three of them," said the priest thoughtfully. "They were found in the snow not far from here, found encased in beautiful shrouds of snow soft as down, and their bodies were colder than ice, even though two of them still lived when found, only to die shortly after."

I did not know what to say. If I had been told this before going into the forest, I would frankly have scoffed at it, as Father Brisbois foresaw. But I saw something in that forest, and it was nothing human, nothing even remotely human. I am not saying, understand, that I saw what Father Brisbois meant by his "god of the great white silence," what the

Indians call *Ithaqua*. No, but I did see *something*.

At this point someone came to the house with the astounding announcement that Lucas' body had just been found, and the doctor was needed to examine it. The three of us immediately followed the Indian who had brought this message to a place not very far from the fur-trading post, where a large crowd of natives stood around what seemed at first to be a large and gleaming snowball.

But it was not a snowball. It was the body of Henry Lucas, cold as the stones in the circle I had touched, and the body was wrapped in a cloak of spun snow. I write *spun*, because it was spun. It was like an ineffably lovely gauze, brilliantly white, with a subtle suggestion of green and blue, and it was like pulling away brittle, stiffened gauze when we tore the snow covering from the body.

IT WAS not until this wrapping had been torn away that we discovered Henry Lucas was not dead! Dr. Telfer could hardly credit his own senses, though there had been two previous cases similar to this. The body was cold, so cold we could hardly bear touching it. Yet there was a faint beating of the heart, sluggish and barely perceptible. But it was there, and in the warmth of Telfer's house the breath came, and the heart's beating became firmer.

"It's impossible," said the doctor, "but it's happening. Yet he's dying, sure as I'm standing here."

"Hope that he may become conscious," said the priest.

But the doctor shook his head.

"Never," he said.

And then Lucas began to talk, like a man in delirium. First it was indistinguishable sound, a low monotone like a far-away uneven humming. Then words began to come, slowly, few and far between, and finally phrases and sentences. Both the priest and I jotted them down, and compared notes later. This is a sample of what Lucas said:

"O, soft, lovely snow. . . Here, Ithaqua, take Thou my body, let the snow-god carry me, let the great god

of the white silence take me. . . How soft the snow, how drowsy the winds, how sweet with the smell of locust blossoms from the south."

There was much more of this, and most of it is meaningless. Lucas never talked like that in his whole life. Whence, then, had come the words that issued from his lips?

From Lucas' maunderings we managed to piece together a story, the story of his disappearance. Apparently he had been drawn from his cabin that night into the snowstorm by the sound of unearthly music combined with an urgent whispering which seemed to come from just beyond the cabin. He opened the door and looked out. Seeing nothing, he nevertheless went out into the snow. I should venture to guess that he had been hypnotized—though that seems far-fetched.

He was set upon by "something from above"—his own words, which he later qualified by saying of it that it was a wind with "snow in it." By this he was carried away, and he knew no more until he found himself dropped into the circle of stone in the forest.

Then he was aware of great fires burning in the woods, and of the Indians before the altars, many of them flattened out in the snow, worshipping. And above him, he saw what he spoke of as "a cloud of green and purple smoke with eyes." Could it have been the same thing I saw above the altars?

As he watched, this thing began to move, to come lower. He heard music again, and then he began to feel the cold. He ran toward the entrance, which stood open, but he could not pass through—it was as if some great, invisible hand held him away from outside. Then he became frightened, and he ran madly around, and finally he cut across the circle.

And then he was lifted from the earth. It was as if he were in a cloud of soft, whispering snow. He heard music again, and chanting, and then, terribly, far in the background, a ghastly ululation. Then he lost consciousness.

After that, Henry Lucas' story is by

no means clear. We can gather that he was taken somewhere—either far underground or far above the earth. From some of the phrases he let drop, we might suspect that he had been on another planet, were this not absolutely impossible. And he spoke as if this were a punishment he had incurred. His words made Father Brisbois very uneasy, and several times I am sure that the good priest was praying to himself.

He died about three hours after being found, without gaining consciousness, though the doctor said that his state was normal, except for the persistent cold and his being apparently unaware of us and the room.

I hesitate to offer any solution beyond giving you these facts. After all, these things speak more clearly than any words. Since there is no means of identifying any of the Indians present at those hellish services in the woods, there can be no prosecution of any kind. But that something fatal happened to Lucas in those stone circles—probably as a result of his brush and interference with the Indian worshippers—remains indisputable. How he was taken there, and how he was transported to the place where his body was finally found, is explainable only if we accept his terrible story.

I suggest that in the circumstances we would be quite justified in destroying those altars and issuing stern warnings to the Indians of Cold Harbor and the surrounding country. I have ascertained that dynamite is obtainable in the village, and I propose to go out and dynamite those hellish altars as soon as I have the proper authority from you to do so.

Later: I have just learned that there are a great number of Indians making off into the woods. Apparently there is to be another meeting to worship at those altars, and, despite my strange feeling of being observed—as from the sky—my duty is clear. I shall follow as soon as I dispatch this.

* * * * *

THUS ends Constable French's report. John Dalhousie goes on as follows:

"The foregoing is the complete text of Constable French's final report to me. It reached my office on the fifth of March, and on that day I wired instructions to him to proceed with the dynamiting, and also to arrest any native suspected of being a member of the group who worshipped at those strange altars.

"Following this, I was forced to leave Headquarters for a considerable time, and when I returned, I found the letter from Dr. Telfer telling me that Constable French had disappeared before receiving my telegram. I later ascertained that his disappearance took place on the night he dispatched his report to me, on the night that the Indians worshipped at the altars near the Olasie Trail.

I SENT Constable Robert Considine to Cold Harbor immediately and I myself followed within twenty-four hours. My first business was to carry out myself those instructions I had wired to French, and I went into the woods and dynamited those altars. Then I devoted myself to finding trace of French, but there was absolutely nothing to find. He had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him up.

"But it was not the earth that had swallowed him up. On the night of the seventh of May, during a violent blizzard, Constable French's body was found. It was lodged in a deep snowbank not far from Dr. Telfer's house. All evidence showed that it had been dropped from a great height, and the body was wrapped in layer after layer of brittle snow, like spun gauze!

"Death from exposure to cold! What ironic, empty words those are! How little they tell of the colossal evil lurking beyond the veil! I know what Constable French feared, what he more than suspected.

"For all that night, and all last night, I saw from my window in Dr. Telfer's house a huge, shapeless mass of snow bulking high into the sky, a huge, sentient mass surmounted by two inscrutable, ineffably cold green eyes!

"There are even now rumors that the Indians are gathering again for another meeting at the site of those accursed altars. That shall not and must not happen, and if they persist, they must be forcibly removed from the village and scattered throughout the provinces. *I am going now to break up their hellish worship. . . .*"

* * * * *

But, as the world now knows, John Dalhousie did not carry out his plan. For on that very night he vanished, only to be found three nights later as Constable French and Henry Lucas were found before him—wrapped in "ineffably beautiful" snow, like spun gauze, scintillating and gleaming in the wan moonlight, like those others who had suffered the vengeance of Ithaqua, the Snow-Thing, the god of the great white silence.

The Department scattered the Indians throughout the provinces, and all persons were forbidden to enter the forest bordering the unused Olasie Trail. But somewhere, in the forest night, sometime they may gather again, murmur and bow low, offer their children and their enemies as sacrifices to the elemental object of their worship, and cry out to him as Lucas cried: "*Ithaqua, take Thou my body . . . Ithaqua. . . .*"