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The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A brief story of the terror that lurked in Avilton's library and the tragic event that ensued

"NO, AS I've told you fellows before, I haven't a red cent's worth of faith in the supernatural."

The speaker was Arthur Avilton, whose tales of the ghostly and macabre had often been compared to Poe, Bierce and Machen. He was a master of imaginative horrors, with a command of diabolically convincing details, of monstrous cobweb suggestions, that had often laid a singular spell on the minds of readers who were not ordinarily attracted or impressed by literature of that type. It was his own boast, often made, that all his effects were secured in a purely ratiocinative, even scientific manner, by playing on the element of subconscious dread, the ancestral superstition latent in most human beings; but he claimed that he himself was utterly incredulous of anything occult or fantasmal, and that he had never in his life known the slightest tremor of fear concerning such things.

Avilton's listeners looked at him a little questioningly. They were John Godfrey, a young landscape painter, and Emil Schuler, a rich dilettante, who played in alternation with literature and music, but was not serious in his attentions to either. Both were old friends and admirers of Avilton, at whose house on Suster Street, in San Francisco, they had met by chance that afternoon. Avilton had suspended work on a new story to chat with them and smoke a sociable pipe. He still sat at his writing-table, with a pile of nearly written foolscap before him. His appear-

ance was as normal and non-eccentric as his handwriting, and he might have been a lawyer or doctor or chemist, rather than a concocter of bizarre fiction. The room, his library, was quite luxurious, in a sober, gentlemanly sort of fashion, and there was little of the outré in its furnishings. The only unusual notes were struck by two heavy brass candlesticks on his table, wrought in the form of rearing serpents, and a stuffed rattlesnake that was coiled on top of one of the low bookcases.

"Well," observed Godfrey, "if anything could convince me of the reality of the supernatural, it would be some of your stories, Avilton. I always read them by broad daylight—I wouldn't do it after dark on a bet. . . . That one about the invisible fantasm with bloody footprints, for example. . . . By the way, what's the yarn you are working on now?"

"It's about a stuffed serpent that suddenly comes to life," replied Avilton. "I'm calling it *The Resurrection of the Rattlesnake*. I got the idea while I was looking at my rattler this morning."

"And I suppose you'll sit here by candlelight tonight," put in Schuler, "and go on with your cheerful little horror without turning a hair." It was well known that Avilton did much of his writing at night.

Avilton smiled. "Darkness always helps me to concentrate. And, considering that so much of the action in my tales is nocturnal, the time is not inappropriate."

"You're welcome," said Schuler, in a jocular tone. He arose to go, and God-

frey also found that it was time to depart.

"Oh, by the way," said their host, "I'm planning a little week-end party. Would you fellows care to come over next Saturday evening? There'll be two or three others of our friends. I'll have this story off my chest by then, and we'll raise the roof."

Godfrey and Schuler accepted the invitation, and went out together. Since they both lived across the bay, in Oakland, and both were on their way home, they caught the same car to the ferry.

"Old Avilton is certainly a case of the living contradiction, if ever there was one," remarked Schuler. "Of course, no one quite believes in the occult or the necromantic nowadays; but anyone who can cook up such infernally realistic horrors, such thoroughgoing hair-frizzlers as he does, simply hasn't the right to be so cold-blooded about it. I claim that it's really indecent."

"I agree," rejoined his companion. "He's so damnably matter-of-fact that he arouses in me a sort of Hallowe'en impulse: I want to dress up in an old sheet and play ghost or something, just to jar him out of that skeptical complacency of his."

"Ye gods and little ghosties!" cried Schuler. "I've got an inspiration. Remember what Avilton told us about the new story he's writing—about the serpent that comes to life?"

He unfolded the prankish idea he had conceived, and the two laughed like mischievous schoolboys plotting some novel deviltry.

"Why not? It should give the old lad a real thrill," chuckled Godfrey. "And he'll think that his fictions are more scientific than he ever dreamed before."

"I know where I can get one," said Schuler. "I'll put it in a fishing-creel, and hide the creel in my valise next Saturday when we go to Avilton's. Then we can

watch our chance to make the substitution."

ON SATURDAY evening the two friends arrived together at Avilton's house, and were admitted by a Japanese who combined in himself the rôles of cook, butler, housekeeper and valet. The other guests, two young musicians, had already come, and Avilton, who was evidently in a mood for relaxation, was telling them a story, which, to judge from the continual interruptions of laughter, was not at all in the vein for which he had grown so famous. It seemed almost impossible to believe that he could be the author of the gruesome and brain-freezing horrors that bore his name.

The evening went successfully, with a good dinner, cards, and some pre-war Bourbon, and it was after midnight when Avilton saw his guests to their chambers, and sought his own.

Godfrey and Schuler did not go to bed, but sat up talking in the room they occupied together, till the house had grown silent and it was probable that everyone had fallen asleep. Avilton, they knew, was a sound sleeper, who boasted that even a rivet-factory or a brass orchestra could not keep him awake for five minutes after his head had touched the pillow.

"Now's our chance," whispered Schuler, at last. He had taken from his valise a fishing-creel, in which was a large and somewhat restless gopher-snake, and softly opening the door, which they had left ajar, the conspirators tiptoed down the hall toward Avilton's library, which lay at the farther end. It was their plan to leave the live gopher-snake in the library in lieu of the stuffed rattler, which they would remove. A gopher-snake is somewhat similar to a rattler in its markings; and, in order to complete the verisimilitude, Schuler had even provided himself with a set of rattles, which he

meant to attach with thread to the serpent's tail before freeing it. The substitution, they felt, would undoubtedly prove a trifle startling, even to a person of such boilerplate nerves and unrelenting skepticism as Avilton.

As if to facilitate their scheme, the door of the library stood half open. Godfrey produced a flashlight, and they entered. Somehow, in spite of their merry mood, in spite of the schoolboy hoax they had planned, and the Bourbon they had drunk, the shadow of something dim and sinister and disquieting fell on the two men as they crossed the threshold. It was like a premonition of some unknown and unexpected menace, lurking in the darkness of the book-peopled room where Avilton had woven so many of his weird and spectral webs. They both began to remember incidents of nocturnal horror from his stories—happenings that were ghoulishly hideous or necromantically strange and terrible. Now, such things seemed even more plausible than the author's diabolic art had made them heretofore. But neither of the men could have quite defined the feeling that came over them or could have assigned a reason for it.

"I feel a little creepy," confided Schuler, as they stood in the dark library. "Turn on that flashlight, won't you?"

The light fell directly on the low bookcase where the stuffed rattler had been coiled, but to their surprize, they found the serpent missing from its customary place.

"Where is the damned thing, anyway?" muttered Godfrey. He turned the light on the neighboring bookcases, and then on the floor and chairs in front of them, but without revealing the object of his search. At last, in its circlings, the ray struck Avilton's writing-table, and they saw the snake, which, in some mood of grotesque humor, Avilton had evidently

placed on his pile of manuscript to serve in lieu of a paperweight. Behind it gleamed the two serpentine candlesticks.

"Ah! there you are," said Schuler. He was about to open his creel when a singular and quite unforeseen thing occurred. He and Godfrey both saw a movement on the writing-table, and before their incredulous eyes the rattlesnake coiled on the pile of paper slowly raised its arrow-shaped head and darted forth its forked tongue! Its cold, unwinking eyes, with a fixation of baleful intensity well-nigh hypnotic, were upon the intruders, and as they stared in unbelieving horror, they heard the sharp rattling of its tail, like withered seeds in a wind-swung pod.

"My God!" exclaimed Schuler. "The thing is alive!"

As he spoke, the flashlight fell from Godfrey's hand and went out, leaving them in soot-black darkness. As they stood for a moment, half petrified with astonishment and terror, they heard the rattling again, and then the sound of some object that seemed to strike the floor in falling. Once more, in a few instants, there came the sharp rattle, this time almost at their very feet.

Godfrey screamed aloud, and Schuler began to curse incoherently, as they both turned and ran toward the open door. Schuler was ahead, and as he crossed the threshold into the dim-lit hall, where one electric bulb still burned, he heard the crash of his companion's fall, mingled with a cry of such infinite terror, such atrocious agony, that his brain and his very marrow were turned to ice. In the paralyzing panic that overtook him, Schuler retained no faculty except that of locomotion, and it did not even occur to him that it would be possible to stop and ascertain what had befallen Godfrey. He had no thought, no desire, except to put the length of the hall between

himself and that accursed library and its happenings.

Avilton, dressed in pajamas, stood at the door of his room. He had been aroused by Godfrey's scream of terror.

"What's the matter?" the story-writer queried, with a look of amiable surprise, which turned to a real gravity when he saw Schuler's face. Schuler was as white as a marble headstone and his eyes were preternaturally dilated.

"The snake!" Schuler gasped. "The snake! the snake! Something awful has happened to Godfrey—he fell with the thing just behind him."

"What snake? You don't mean my stuffed rattler by any chance, do you?"

"Stuffed rattler?" yelled Schuler. "The damned thing is alive! It came crawling after us, rattling under our very feet a moment ago. Then Godfrey stumbled and fell—and he didn't get up."

"I don't understand," purred Avilton. "The thing is a manifest impossibility—really quite contrary to all natural laws, I assure you. I killed that snake four years ago, in El Dorado County, and had it stuffed by an expert taxidermist."

"Go and see for yourself," challenged Schuler.

Avilton strode immediately to the li-

brary and turned on the lights. Schuler, mastering a little his panic and his dreadful forebodings, followed at a cautious distance. He found Avilton stooping over the body of Godfrey, who lay quite still in a huddled and horribly contorted position near the door. Not far away was the abandoned fishing-creel. The stuffed rattlesnake was coiled in its customary place on top of the bookshelves.

Avilton, with a grave and brooding mien, removed his hand from Godfrey's heart, and observed:

"He's quite dead—shock and heart-failure, I should think." Neither he nor Schuler could bear to look very long at Godfrey's upturned face, on which was stamped as with some awful brand or acid an expression of fear and suffering beyond all human capacity to endure. In their mutual desire to avoid the lidless horror of his dead staring, their eyes fell at the same instant on his right hand, which was clenched in a hideous rigidity and drawn close to his side.

Neither could utter a word when they saw the thing that protruded from between Godfrey's fingers. It was a bunch of rattles, and on the endmost one, where it had evidently been torn from the viper's tail, there clung several shreds of raw and bloody flesh.

