

PALLADIUM SHORT STORY PAGE

CHAGIN'S CURSE

By J. R. Stafford

It was a perilous time to be abroad on the treacherous bars of the Missouri, for, besides a thick fog, the last of night yet lay deep everywhere. Nevertheless, Chagin, heavily laden with his shooting gear, when he heard the ominous roar of a gun far out toward the Main Channel, plunged recklessly down the steep bank of the river and strode unhesitatingly out upon the sands. For, having hunted on Eiselman's bar for more than thirty years, he knew there were no such things as quicksands on it, and, since some one was shooting out at the Point already, he knew he must make haste.

On a sudden, however, his right foot sank deeply, and he felt it gripped down and down as in the mouth of some horrid monster of the gloom. With a cry of brute terror, he struggled until he gained firm ground. As he fell, exhausted, there rose from behind the soft clucking of the quicksands when they give up their prey. Chagin shivered from head to foot at the sound, and then, springing up in precipitous haste, chattered foolishly: "Never wuz bogs on this bar! Never kin be! Never kin be! Never kin be! It must a been"—and his voice ended in a hoarse shout of dread.

He groped in the gray darkness for his spade and gun and sheaf of decoys, and, having secured them, hastened forward, now and again pausing abruptly to wheel and stare back into the gloom where death had so nearly seized him. But again, just as before, his foot sank, and again, just as before, he struggled out, blind from his exertions, yet weaker from his fear. And it was as if some giant hand had caught him by the throat and hurled him to the ground. He lay shuddering like some beast in the throes of a dreadful death. The hand tightened until he choked. It was the hand of Fear. A torrent of wild gibberish rattled from his lips, in the pauses of which his voice uttered fearfully, "It's come! It's come!"

After a time he struggled to his feet and, again making sure of his impedimenta, rushed forward in a kind of panic akin to that of beasts. And as he advanced in a succession of desperate struggles with the engulfing pits, he chattered again his wild gibberish, in the pauses of which his words fell fearfully, "It's come! It's come!"

At last, however, he reached a narrow oval of sand, on three sides of which lay the purling darkness of the Main Channel. There he sat down, apparently forgetting to dig a shooting pit or to set out his decoys.

When the February sun struggled up and sent its cheerless light down through the fog, he was sitting there, yet heedlessly—his gun lay in the hollow of his arm; no pit was dug, the sheaf of profile decoys lay beneath the heels of his rubber boots. His hulking body bent as under some heavy burden, while his stolid, heavy countenance, fringed with gray, worked strangely like a foolish mask as his lips from time to time opened and repeated fearfully, "It's come! It's come!"

Broad day at last came, but so flanked was the sky with sombre clouds and so heavy did the fog hang that always it seemed night was about to fall. Down from the north a bitterly cold wind roared and, sweeping up the dry sands everywhere, blurred all the prospects in an indescribable desolation. Overhead, like lost spirits, wandering waterfowl struggled in the gloom, uttering their throaty, plaintive cries. And Chagin, searched to the very bones by the cold, huddled in his hunting coat, yet stared stupidly like a mask and muttered, "It's come! It's come!"

An hour passed and he yet sat and muttered. Another and yet another. But now at times, when the tension of his fear grew great, he would suddenly whirl about to look behind him.

It was about noon that, chancing to look up, he saw a lone goose, directly overhead. It was far out of range, and he knew it. Nevertheless, obeying an unconquerable impulse, he raised his gun and fired. Then, without looking up to note the effect of the shot, or without removing the exploded shell, he put the weapon back between his knees and gave vent to a peal of foolish laughter. Then, as if frightened at his own unmeaning cackle, he whirled round and looked behind him.

There, not ten yards away on the dark waters of the rushing Main Channel, a skiff rocked under backing oars that obeyed the powerful arms of a murderous looking one-eyed man. He leered cunningly for an instant at the awestruck Chagin, and then, bending his back, shot the craft round the oval of sand and disappeared quickly in the fog down stream.

Chagin dug his fingers into the sand as if to keep himself from falling. His face showed the fright of one stumbling suddenly upon an awful brink. His lips and throat worked strangely and his voice was cracked and broken as he muttered. He sat for an hour or more thus gibbering, and he dared not look around again.

Then there came the swish at last of a boat softly bumping into the sand, but a bare three yards behind him, then voices and the whining of a dog. There was something so inexpressibly reassuring in these sounds that he laughed wildly, and, turning his yet hideously contorted face, gazed upon a big skiff loaded



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with armed men. These were the Sheriff of the county and half a score of deputies.

To Chagin's over-grateful greeting they replied with silent nods. They pushed a long-eared hound out over the bow and settled in their seats to watch him. The animal scampered over the sands, sniffed a moment here, and then suddenly emitted a long-drawn howl, so mournful and hopeless in its cadences that Chagin involuntarily started. At that the men in the boat leaped out with leveled guns and with face that leered cunningly. "Surrender!" they cried.

Chagin, unnerved at this strange turn, dropped weakly down and, staring stupidly at the sand, muttered as before, "It's come! It's come!"

Immediately the yelping of the dog drew all attention from him, and some one, picking up his spade, bounded over and began digging just in front of the brute. After a few spadefuls this one threw down the implement, and, groveling with his hands for an instant, rose up with frightened face and called: "He's here. Dead. Killed with a shotgun at close range."

The Sheriff strode forward and, seizing Chagin's gun, opened it. He drew out the exploded shell and nodded significantly to his men.

They put irons on Chagin's wrists and ankles and tumbled him into the boat. Then some, catching up blankets from the seats, took them to the place where they had dug. They returned presently with a long and heavy bundle which they placed at Chagin's feet. He shuddered fearfully, and at last cried out: "This yere is Skeleton Bar. I wouldn't a come here fur the world!"

"But you did," the Sheriff returned sternly.

"But I did."

"Then why did you come?"

"I dunno; I dunno how I come to git in sich a place," Chagin answered helplessly.

"They never do after they are caught," the officer answered somberly.

He was lodged that night in a cell in the county jail. In the morning the prosecuting attorney came and, in the name of the Commonwealth of Missouri, charged him with the murder of one James Sinclair. When the reading of the indictment was finished he shook from head to foot and chattered wildly: "I never seed 'im! Never could a killed 'im! Never could! Never could! Never could!"

"You will fight the case then?"

Chagin, feeling as he had felt when he trod in a bog where he knew there could be no bogs, answered blindly: "Yeh, I'll fight the case."

A lawyer was sent him. He was an able and businesslike fellow, and he asked: "How did you happen to be on Skeleton Bar? You are an old hunter on the Missouri, and you and every one else knows that it is no place for shooting, or any other thing, unless it be something a man might wish to hide. What made you go there?"

"I dunno. Fust I knowed I wuz on hit, an' I jis kep' a-goin. Hit was dark, ye see."

"Chagin, it is four miles, as I understand it, from your farm to the river. Had you gone straight to it Skeleton Bar would have been two miles north of you, while Eiselman's Bar would have been the same distance south. Now, if you had no intention of going to Skeleton Bar, can you explain to me how you got off the road?"

"I dunno. I wuz afeared when I left the house. I might a-been studyin' about that an' never noticed whar I wuz goin' in the fog."

"What had you done to make you afraid?"

"Nothin'. I wuz afeared o' my mother-in-law."

"But, Chagin, you have been a widower twenty-odd years, and it is a notorious fact that your wife's people have never had anything to do with you in all that time. Besides, your mother-in-law is too old and feeble to hurt anyone."

"I know that; but all the same, I'm skeared o' her whenever I start a-huntin'."

"Why, when you start hunting?"

"Cause when I come back from the river that time, twenty year ago this comin' March, an' found my wife had died that alone while I wuz off on three or four days' shootin', this yere ole mother-in-law o' mine, she stood up over the bed an' pinted 'er finger at me, and she says, sez she, 'I hope an' pray that some time ye'll go to the river an' git on Skeleton Bar, an' that ye'll git into some fix whar ye'll die by inches, an' have time to think o' how ye murdered my girl, by leavin' 'er sick an' alone, to do yer work an' hers, whilst ye hunted an' had yer fun.' Yeh. That's what she said. Hit wuz a curse. I allus think o' hit whenever I pick up my gun to go," and Chagin shivered as he spoke.

"In the face of that, when you found you were on Skeleton Bar, why didn't you get off of it?"

"When I found I wuz on hit, I wuz skeared mighty nigh to

death. I wuz afeared it had come, an' all I could do wuz to run. It 'peared to be behind me, so I run straight ahead."

"What had come? From what did you think you were running?"

"The Curse."

"You are a stupid but cold-blooded simpleton," said the lawyer, "and no attorney could afford to risk his reputation in such a case. You had better plead guilty and throw yourself on the mercy of the Court."

"But I never done nothin'. I never seed that feller at all."

"Oh!" the man of the law laughed incredulously and went away.

One after another, some half dozen members of that bar were sent by the prosecutor to prepare his defense, but always, when he had answered their questions, as he had those of the first one, they advised him to plead guilty. When he protested his innocence, they laughed shortly and went away.

Finally, on the morning set for the trial, the prosecutor came and begged him to plead guilty. "It may save your life; nothing else can. It would be as foolish for you to try to fight this case, the way everything hangs against you, as—as"—he stumbled for an adequate comparison—"as for a man to try running blindfolded over the quicksands of Skeleton Bar."

Chagin blinked like a bull into whose face a club has been thrust, and then, in a panic of blind fear, fairly bellowed: "I'll go on! I'll go on!"

When he was led into the courtroom he seemed to the bailiffs to be trying all the time to break away from them. He struggled desperately, just as he struggled in the bogs. And when at last he sat manacled to the fatal chair he looked up and saw in the faces of everyone around that same look of inscrutable cunning that he saw in the face of the one-eyed man in the boat. And his stolid countenance, fringed with gray, became a mask of terror that twisted strangely as his lips opened to utter his dreadful chatter, "It's come! It's come!"

After the deliberate fashion of courts wherein matters of life and death are decided, the case began.

When the State's attorney had finished, Circumstance had convicted him in almost every mind. But the Judge, who knew the frailty of appearance, was unsatisfied. He smiled kindly at Chagin and asked him a series of questions substantially the same as those the attorney had put in the secrecy of the cell.

But Chagin answered them just as he had the others. His story told nothing but fear of the Curse.

Not content, though less doubtful, the Court turned to the Sheriff and ordered: "Call this man's nearest neighbor to the stand."

"Your Honor, his nearest neighbor is an old woman. She is his mother-in-law."

"Swear her!"

She came, one of those tottering wrecks of womanhood that only farm drudgery can make. She was sworn.

The Judge gazed at her for a long time before he put his solemn question:

"Remembering that you are on your oath before God to tell the truth, answer me. Did this man leave his wife, to do not only her work but his own, in order that he might go away to shoot on the river, although at the time he knew she was sick and ailing?"

"E did, Yeer Honor. I went over to see 'er that night, knowin' she was threatened with pneumonia, fur 'e stopped an' tole me as he passed, an' I'd a-stayed with 'er that night only my men folks bein' gone I had to git back an' do the chores in the mornin'. An' she wuz dead when I come back at noon."

"When was this?"

"Just as he said. Twenty year ago this comin' March."

"And did you pronounce this curse, as he says you did?"

"That I did. That I did," she chuckled uncannily, while her faded eyes fixed themselves feastingly upon the prisoner.

A look of stern righteousness filled the face of the judge as he dismissed her and ordered the jury sent out for its verdict. Presently the twelve men returned, and almost immediately he stood up from his docket and read: "We, the jury in this case, find the defendant, William Chagin, guilty of murder in the first degree, and under the instructions of the court, recommend the extreme penalty provided in the statutes."

When he had discharged them he turned to Chagin and questioned unpitifully: "Sir, do you wish to take an appeal?"

But Chagin, with his eyes fixed on the floor in a stupid gaze, never lifted them as he went on muttering: "It's come! It's come!"

Six months afterward they led him out to the scaffold. And there, after the fashion of that day, the whole countryside was assembled to witness his death.

As he stood, gazing down into the sea of unpitiful yet merely curious faces, he beheld one upturned in a kind of dreadful fascination. It was that of a murderous-looking, one-eyed man who leered cunningly for an instant, and then, bending his back, shot round the foot of the gibbet and disappeared quickly in the crowd. Chagin tried to shout, but only a rattle came from his throat. The black cap was thrust upon his head, and under it he chattered as of old: "It's come! It's come!"

And then as the trap sprung, an old woman in the press near the foot of that ill-omened platform cackled gleefully as she cried: "It has come! Praise God!"

HE WAS WISE.

Friend—Why do you have such misspelled and ungrammatical notices in your front window?

Sharp Tradesman—People think I'm a dunce, and come in to awindle me. Trade's just booming.

"Remember, boys," said the teacher, "that in the bright lexicon of youth there's no such word as 'fail.' After a few moments a boy raised his hand.

"Well, what is it, Socrates?" asked the teacher.

"I was merely going to suggest," replied the youngster, "that if such is the case it would be advisable to write to the publishers of that lexicon and call their attention to the omission."

HIS FEELINGS.

She—You were in that elevator that fell fourteen stories to the basement? Mercy! How did you feel?

He—I was never so taken down in my life.

Mrs. Richquick—John, I want you to buy a new parlor suit.

Mr. Richquick—Maria, I've been agreeable enough so far to get different clothes for morning, noon, afternoon and night, but I'm concerned if I'll change 'em every time I go into a different room.

"I refused him because I want a husband who has known sorrow and acquired wisdom."

"But, my dear, if you had accepted him he would soon have met your requirements."

First Stranger (at Douglas)—Ah, sir, it seems a shame to see all this water going to waste.

Second Stranger—Jesso, Jesso.

First Stranger—Are you a mechanical engineer, sir?

Second Stranger—No, sir; I'm a milkman.

Prospective Employer (perusing references)—Have you any knowledge of the silk and satin departments?

Applicant—Spent all my life among 'em, sir.

Prospective Employer—And sheets and blankets?

Applicant (forcibly)—Born among 'em, sir!

Mary—That top-floor boarder moved to-day.

Jane—I didn't see any luggage go out.

Mary—There was none. I think he placed his effects in an envelope and posted 'em to the new address.

"My husband has never spoken a cross word to me."

"You lucky woman! How long have you been married?"

"Nearly two weeks."

Friend—Why do you encourage these woman suffrage meetings? Surely you don't approve of them?

Husband—Approve? With all my heart. I can come home as late as I like now without finding my wife at home to ask questions.

"There is nothing more unsatisfactory than a boarding house breakfast," growled the chronic grumbler.

"Oh, I don't know," rejoined the impressionable young man. "Did you ever get a kiss from a pretty girl over the telephone?"

An English tourist was doing the Scottish Highlands, and, foregathering with the village policeman in an out-of-the-way place, said: "I suppose you have some pretty long tramps in this district, my man?"

"Week, I'm thinking," replied the keeper of the peace, as he surveyed the lengthy stranger with a kind of sarcastic eye. "You're the longest I've seen."

A lady gave a children's party, to which a very small boy was invited.

The next day he was giving some account of the fun, and said that every little visitor had contributed either song or recitation, dance or music, for the pleasure of the rest.

"Oh, dear, Jack," said his mother, "how very unfortunate you could do nothing."

Jack (with pride): "Yes I could; I was not to be beaten, so I stood up and said my prayers."

Clergyman (examining a Sunday-school class)—Now, can any of you tell me what are sins of omission?

Small Scholar—Please, sir, they're sins you ought to have committed and haven't.

Caller (to the lady of the house): "Perhaps, madame, you could get your husband to put his name down upon the roll of our society. The subscription is only \$5 for a life membership."

Lady of the House: "What is your society?"

"The Society for the Repression of Crime."

"I don't think my husband would care to put his name down for any such thing."

"Not?"

"Because he makes his living by crime."

"What! Is he a criminal?"

"No. He is a detective."