

# The Golgotha Dancers

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

*A curious and terrifying story about an artist who sold his soul that he might paint a living picture*

I HAD come to the Art Museum to see the special show of Goya prints, but that particular gallery was so crowded that I could hardly get in, much less see or savor anything; wherefore I walked out again. I wandered through the other wings with their rows and rows of oils, their Greek and Roman sculptures, their stern ranks of medieval armors, their Oriental porcelains, their Egyptian gods. At length, by chance and not by design, I came to the head of a certain rear stairway. Other habitués of the museum will know the one I mean when I remind them that Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead* hangs on the wall of the landing.

I started down, relishing in advance the impression Böcklin's picture would make with its high brown rocks and black poplars, its midnight sky and gloomy film of sea, its single white figure erect in the bow of the beach-nosing skiff. But, as I descended, I saw that *The Isle of the Dead* was not in its accustomed position on the wall. In that space, arresting even in the bad light and from the up-angle of the stairs, hung a gilt-framed painting I had never seen or heard of in all my museum-haunting years.

I gazed at it, one will imagine, all the way down to the landing. Then I had a close, searching look, and a final appraising stare from the lip of the landing above the lower half of the flight. So far as I can learn—and I have been diligent in my research—the thing is unknown

even to the best-informed of art experts. Perhaps it is as well that I describe it in detail.

It seemed to represent action upon a small plateau or table rock, drab and bare, with a twilight sky deepening into a starless evening. This setting, restrainedly worked up in blue-grays and blue-blacks, was not the first thing to catch the eye, however. The front of the picture was filled with lively dancing creatures, as pink, plump and naked as cherubs and as patently evil as the meditations of Satan in his rare idle moments.

I counted those dancers. There were twelve of them, ranged in a half-circle, and they were cavorting in evident glee around a central object—a prone cross, which appeared to be made of two stout logs with some of the bark still upon them. To this cross a pair of the pink things—that makes fourteen—kneeling and swinging blocky-looking hammers or mauls, spiked a human figure.

I say *human* when I speak of that figure, and I withhold the word in describing the dancers and their hammer-wielding fellows. There is a reason. The supine victim on the cross was a beautifully represented male body, as clear and anatomically correct as an illustration in a surgical textbook. The head was writhed around, as if in pain, and I could not see the face or its expression; but in the tortured tenseness of the muscles, in the slaty white sheen of the skin with jagged streaks of vivid gore upon it, agonized nature was plain and doubly plain. I

could almost see the painted limbs writhe against the transfixing nails.

By the same token, the dancers and hammerers were so dynamically done as to seem half in motion before my eyes. So much for the sound skill of the painter. Yet, where the crucified prisoner was all clarity, these others were all fog. No lines, no angles, no muscles—their features could not be seen or sensed. I was not even sure if they had hair or not. It was as if each was picked out with a ray of light in that surrounding dusk, light that revealed and yet shimmered indistinctly; light, too, that had absolutely nothing of comfort or honesty in it.

**H**OLD on, there!" came a sharp challenge from the stairs behind and below me. "What are you doing? And what's that picture doing?"

I started so that I almost lost my footing and fell upon the speaker—one of the Museum guards. He was a slight old fellow and his thin hair was gray, but he advanced upon me with all the righteous, angry pluck of a beefy policeman. His attitude surprised and nettled me.

"I was going to ask somebody that same question," I told him as austerely as I could manage. "What about this picture? I thought there was a Böcklin hanging here."

The guard relaxed his forbidding attitude at first sound of my voice. "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. I thought you were somebody else—the man who brought that thing." He nodded at the picture, and the hostile glare came back into his eyes. "It so happened that he talked to me first, then to the curator. Said it was art—great art—and the Museum must have it." He lifted his shoulders, in a shrug or a shudder. "Personally, I think it's plain beastly."

So it was, I grew aware as I looked at

it again. "And the Museum has accepted it at last?" I prompted.

He shook his head. "Oh, no, sir. An hour ago he was at the back door, with that nasty daub there under his arm. I heard part of the argument. He got insulting, and he was told to clear out and take his picture with him. But he must have got in here somehow, and hung it himself." Walking close to the painting, as gingerly as though he expected the pink dancers to leap out at him, he pointed to the lower edge of the frame. "If it was a real Museum piece, we'd have a plate right there, with the name of the painter and the title."

I, too, came close. There was no plate, just as the guard had said. But in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas were sprawling capitals, pale paint on the dark, spelling out the word *GOLGOTHA*. Beneath these, in small, barely readable script:

*I sold my soul that I might paint a living picture.*

No signature or other clue to the artist's identity.

The guard had discovered a great framed rectangle against the wall to one side. "Here's the picture he took down," he informed me, highly relieved. "Help me put it back, will you, sir? And do you suppose," here he grew almost wistful, "that we could get rid of this other thing before someone finds I let the crazy fool-slip past me?"

I took one edge of *The Isle of the Dead* and lifted it to help him hang it once more.

"Tell you what," I offered on sudden impulse; "I'll take this *Golgotha* piece home with me, if you like."

"Would you do that?" he almost yelled out in his joy at the suggestion. "Would you, to oblige me?"

"To oblige myself," I returned. "I need another picture at my place."

And the upshot of it was, he smuggled me and the unwanted painting out of the Museum. Never mind how. I have done quite enough as it is to jeopardize his job and my own welcome up there.

IT WAS not until I had paid off my taxi and lugged the unwieldy parallelogram of canvas and wood upstairs to my bachelor apartment that I bothered to wonder if it might be valuable. I never did find out, but from the first I was deeply impressed.

Hung over my own fireplace, it looked as large and living as a scene glimpsed through a window or, perhaps, on a stage in a theater. The capering pink bodies caught new lights from my lamp, lights that glossed and intensified their shape and color but did not reveal any new details. I pored once more over the cryptic legend: *I sold my soul that I might paint a living picture.*

A living picture—was it that? I could not answer. For all my honest delight in such things, I cannot be called expert or even knowing as regards art. Did I even like the Golgotha painting? I could not be sure of that, either. And the rest of the inscription, about selling a soul; I was considerably intrigued by that, and let my thoughts ramble on the subject of Satanist complexes and the vagaries of half-crazy painters. As I read, that evening, I glanced up again and again at my new possession. Sometimes it seemed ridiculous, sometimes sinister. Shortly after midnight I rose, gazed once more, and then turned out the parlor lamp. For a moment, or so it seemed, I could see those dancers, so many dim-pink silhouettes in the sudden darkness. I went to the kitchen for a bit of whisky and water, and thence to my bedroom.

I had dreams. In them I was a boy again, and my mother and sister were

leaving the house to go to a theater where—think of it!—Richard Mansfield would play *Bean Brummell*. I, the youngest, was told to stay at home and mind the troublesome furnace. I wept copiously in my disappointed loneliness, and then Mansfield himself stalked in, in full Brummell regalia. He laughed goldenly and stretched out his hand in warm greeting. I, the lad of my dreams, put out my own hand, then was frightened when he would not loosen his grasp. I tugged, and he laughed again. The gold of his laughter turned suddenly hard, cold. I tugged with all my strength, and woke.

Something held me tight by the wrist.

In my first half-moment of wakefulness I was aware that the room was filled with the pink dancers of the picture, in nimble, fierce-happy motion. They were man-size, too, or nearly so, visible in the dark with the dim radiance of fox-fire. On the small scale of the painting they had seemed no more than babyishly plump; now they were gross, like huge erect toads. And, as I awakened fully, they were closing in, a menacing ring of them, around my bed. One stood at my right side, and its grip, clumsy and rubbery-hard like that of a monkey, was closed upon my arm.

I saw and sensed all this, as I say, in a single moment. With the sensing came the realization of peril, so great that I did not stop to wonder at the uncanniness of my visitors. I tried frantically to jerk loose. For the moment I did not succeed and as I thrashed about, throwing my body nearly across the bed, a second dancer dashed in from the left. It seized and clamped my other arm. I felt, rather than heard, a wave of soft, wordless merriment from them all. My heart and sinews seemed to fail, and briefly I lay still in a daze of horror, pinned down crucifix-fashion between my two captors.

Was that a *hammer* raised above me as I sprawled?

There rushed and swelled into me the sudden startled strength that sometimes favors the desperate. I screamed like any wild thing caught in a trap, rolled somehow out of bed and to my feet. One of the beings I shook off and the other I dashed against the bureau. Freed, I made for the bedroom door and the front of the apartment, stumbling and staggering on fear-weakened legs.

One of the dim-shining pink things barred my way at the very threshold, and the others were closing in behind, as if for a sudden rush. I flung my right fist with all my strength and weight. The being bobbed back unresistingly before my smash, like a rubber toy floating through water. I plunged past, reached the entry and fumbled for the knob of the outer door.

They were all about me then, their rubbery palms fumbling at my shoulders, my elbows, my pajama jacket. They would have dragged me down before I could negotiate the lock. A racking shudder possessed me and seemed to flick them clear. Then I stumbled against a stand, and purely by good luck my hand fell upon a bamboo walking-stick. I yelled again, in truly hysterical fierceness, and laid about me as with a whip. My blows did little or no damage to those unearthly assailants, but they shrank back, teetering and dancing, to a safe distance. Again I had the sense that they were laughing, mocking. For the moment I had beaten them off, but they were sure of me in the end. Just then my groping free hand pressed a switch. The entry sprang into light.

On the instant they were not there.

**S**OMEBODY was knocking outside, and with trembling fingers I turned the knob of the door. In came a tall, slender

girl with a blue lounging-robe caught hurriedly around her. Her bright hair was disordered as though she had just sprung from her bed.

"Is someone sick?" she asked in a breathless voice. "I live down the hall—I heard cries." Her round blue eyes were studying my face, which must have been ghastly pale. "You see, I'm a trained nurse, and perhaps—"

"Thank God you did come!" I broke in, unceremoniously but honestly, and went before her to turn on every lamp in the parlor.

It was she who, without guidance, searched out my whisky and siphon and mixed for me a highball of grateful strength. My teeth rang nervously on the edge of the glass as I gulped it down. After that I got my own robe—a becoming one, with satin facings—and sat with her on the divan to tell of my adventure. When I had finished, she gazed long at the painting of the dancers, then back at me. Her eyes, like two chips of the April sky, were full of concern and she held her rosy lower lip between her teeth. I thought that she was wonderfully pretty.

"What a perfectly terrible nightmare!" she said.

"It was no nightmare," I protested.

She smiled and argued the point, telling me all manner of comforting things about mental associations and their reflections in vivid dreams.

To clinch her point she turned to the painting.

"This line about a 'living picture' is the peg on which your slumbering mind hung the whole fabric," she suggested, her slender fingertip touching the painted scribble. "Your very literal subconscious self didn't understand that the artist meant his picture would live only figuratively."

"Are you sure that's what the artist meant?" I asked, but finally I let her con-

vince me. One can imagine how badly I wanted to be convinced.

She mixed me another highball, and a short one for herself. Over it she told me her name—Miss Dolby—and finally she left me with a last comforting assurance. But, nightmare or no, I did not sleep again that night. I sat in the parlor among the lamps, smoking and dipping into book after book. Countless times I felt my gaze drawn back to the painting over the fireplace, with the cross and the nail-pierced wretch and the shimmering pink dancers.

After the rising sun had filled the apartment with its honest light and cheer I felt considerably calmer. I slept all morning, and in the afternoon was disposed to agree with Miss Dolby that the whole business had been a bad dream, nothing more. Dressing, I went down the hall, knocked on her door and invited her to dinner with me.

It was a good dinner. Afterward we went to an amusing motion picture, with Charles Butterworth in it as I remember. After bidding her good-night, I went to my own place. Undressed and in bed, I lay awake. My late morning slumber made my eyes slow to close. Thus it was that I heard the faint shuffle of feet and, sitting up against my pillows, saw the glowing silhouettes of the Golgotha dancers. Alive and magnified, they were creeping into my bedroom.

I did not hesitate or shrink this time. I sprang up, tense and defiant.

"No, you don't!" I yelled at them. As they seemed to hesitate before the impact of my wild voice, I charged frantically. For a moment I scattered them and got through the bedroom door, as on the previous night. There was another shindy in the entry; this time they all got hold of me, like a pack of hounds, and wrestled me back against the wall. I writhe even now when I think of the unearthly

hardness of their little gripping paws. Two on each arm were spread-eagling me upon the plaster. The cruciform position again!

I swore, yelled and kicked. One of them was in the way of my foot. He floated back, unhurt. That was their strength and horror—their ability to go flabby and non-resistant under smashing, flattening blows. Something tickled my palm, pricked it. The point of a spike. . . .

"Miss Dolby!" I shrieked, as a child might call for its mother. "Help! Miss D—"

The door flew open; I must not have locked it. "Here I am," came her unafraid reply.

She was outlined against the rectangle of light from the hall. My assailants let go of me to dance toward her. She gasped but did not scream. I staggered along the wall, touched a light-switch, and the parlor just beyond us flared into visibility. Miss Dolby and I ran in to the lamp, rallying there as stone-age folk must have rallied at their fire to face the monsters of the night. I looked at her; she was still fully dressed, as I had left her, apparently had been sitting up. Her rouge made flat patches on her pale cheeks, but her eyes were level.

**T**HIS time the dancers did not retreat or vanish; they lurked in the comparative gloom of the entry, jiggling and trembling as if mustering their powers and resolutions for another rush at us.

"You see," I chattered out to her, "it wasn't a nightmare."

She spoke, not in reply, but as if to herself. "They have no faces," she whispered. "No faces!" In the half-light that was diffused upon them from our lamp they presented the featurelessness of so many huge gingerbread boys, covered with pink icing. One of them, some kind

of leader, pressed forward within the circle of the light. It daunted him a bit. He hesitated, but did not retreat.

From my center table Miss Dolby had picked up a bright paper-cutter. She poised it with the assurance of one who knows how to handle cutting instruments.

"When they come," she said steadily, "let's stand close together. We'll be harder to drag down that way."

I wanted to shout my admiration of her fearless front toward the dreadful beings, my thankfulness for her quick run to my rescue. All I could mumble was, "You're mighty brave."

She turned for a moment to look at the picture above my dying fire. My eyes followed hers. I think I expected to see a blank canvas—find that the painted dancers had vanished from it and had grown into the living ones. But they were still in the picture, and the cross and the victim were there, too. Miss Dolby read aloud the inscription:

*"A living picture . . . The artist knew what he was talking about, after all."*

"Couldn't a living picture be killed?" I wondered.

It sounded uncertain, and a childish quibble to boot, but Miss Dolby exclaimed triumphantly, as at an inspiration.

"Killed? Yes!" she shouted. She sprang at the picture, darting out with the paper-cutter. The point ripped into one of the central figures in the dancing semicircle.

All the crowd in the entry seemed to give a concerted throb, as of startled protest. I swung, heart racing, to front them again. What had happened? Something had changed, I saw. The intrepid leader had vanished. No, he had not drawn back into the group. He had vanished.

Miss Dolby, too, had seen. She struck again, gashed the painted representation of another dancer. And this time the

vanishing happened before my eyes, a creature at the rear of the group went out of existence as suddenly and completely as though a light had blinked out.

The others, driven by their danger, rushed.

I met them, feet planted. I tried to embrace them all at once, went over backward under them. I struck, wrenched, tore. I think I even bit something grisly and bloodless, like fungoid tissue, but I refuse to remember for certain. One or two of the forms struggled past me and grappled Miss Dolby. I struggled to my feet and pulled them back from her. There were not so many swarming after me now. I fought hard before they got me down again. And Miss Dolby kept tearing and stabbing at the canvas—again, again. Clutches melted from my throat, my arms. There were only two dancers left. I flung them back and rose. Only one left. Then none.

They were gone, gone into nowhere.

"That did it," said Miss Dolby breathlessly.

She had pulled the picture down. It was only a frame now, with ragged ribbons of canvas dangling from it.

I snatched it out of her hands and threw it upon the coals of the fire.

"Look," I urged her joyfully. "It's burning! That's the end. Do you see?"

"Yes, I see," she answered slowly. "Some fiend-ridden artist—his evil genius brought it to life."

"The inscription is the literal truth, then?" I supplied.

"Truth no more." She bent to watch the burning. "As the painted figures were destroyed, their incarnations faded."

We said nothing further, but sat down together and gazed as the flames ate the last thread of fabric, the last splinter of wood. Finally we looked up again and smiled at each other.

All at once I knew that I loved her.