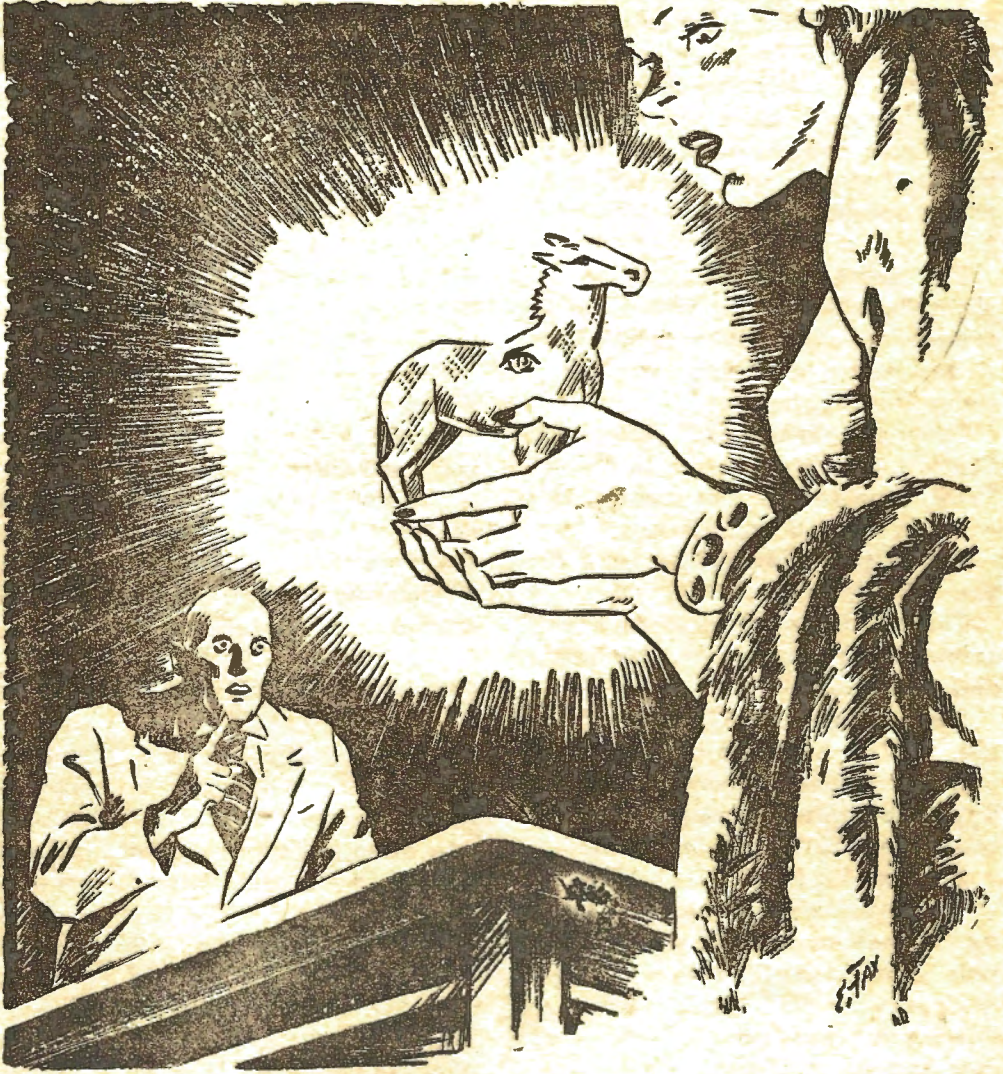


When ancient wizards foretold the future they read it in the blood and insides of horses!



Hoofs

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

SOME suggest that the Countess Montesco was born Sharon Hill, of American parents, and got her title by an ill-advised marriage abroad; that the Count, her husband, was a rank bad

man, and that the world and the Countess were better for his death. Nobody knows surely, except John Thunstone, who evinces a great talent of reticence. Yet some suggest . . .

Heading by ELTON FAX

The Countess, at the telephone in her drawing room, directed that the caller waiting in the hotel lobby be sent up. She was compactly, blondely handsome, neither doll nor siren, with a broad brow, an arched nose, and eyes just darker than sapphires. Today she wore blue silk, and no jewelry except a heart-shaped brooch of gold.

The caller appeared, smallish and plumpish, with lips that smiled and eyes as bright and expressionless as little lamps. At her gesture he sat in an armchair, his pudgy fingertips together.

"Your name is Hengist?" prompted the Countess, glancing at a note on her desk. "Yes? You sent me this message, about—certain articles I lost in Europe."

"About your husband," amended Hengist. "He loves you."

The sapphire eyes threw sparks. "That's a clumsy lie or a clumsy joke. My husband died years ago."

"But he loves you," murmured Hengist. "What blue eyes you have! And your hair is like a tawny, mellow wine they make in Slavic countries. Your husband cannot be blamed for loving you."

She shook her head. "He hated me."

"Death works many changes. Look at me. I know much about you, and about your husband. As life is to the living, so death is to the dead. Love can exist and thrive after a body's death. It lives with your husband. . . ."

His voice fell to a cadenced drone. She rose to her feet, and so did Hengist. He was no taller than she, and strangely graceful for all his plumpness. He cocked a questioning caterpillar eyebrow.

"I dislike mysteries and conjuring tricks," said the Countess. "Keep your hypnotism for morons. Good-by, Mr. Hengist."

"Your husband loves you," repeated Hengist. "I know, and so does—Rowley Thorne." He smiled as he flinched. "You

look pale. Rowley Thorne once frightened and angered you, but you know that his knowledge and practise of enchantment is genuine. Suppose he proved that your husband, who was dead—lived again?"

"Lived?" echoed the Countess. "Physically?"

"Yes. But—in another body. Rowley Thorne will show you." He moved a little closer. "Maybe I could show you something, too. About this love we have been discussing."

She slapped him. He turned and departed.

In the lobby, he entered a telephone booth and dialed a number.

"Thorne," he said to the voice that answered, "I carried out instructions. She did as you predicted."

"Splendid," replied the voice, deep and triumphant. "She believes."

SHARON, COUNTESS MONTESECO, did believe.

Alone, she called herself an idiot to accept fantasies; but Hengist had spoken of Rowley Thorne. If Rowley Thorne could raise dread evil spirits—and she had seen him do it—he could raise the spirit of Count Montesecco. The Count alive, in another body of his own; if that was true, what must she do? Would the Count claim her. Was he still selfish and cruel? John Thunstone had always called those traits the unforgiveable sins. If she had not had that disagreement with John Thunstone, a disagreement over trifles which wound up a quarrel . . . the telephone was ringing, and she took up the receiver.

"Aren't we being childish?" John Thunstone's voice asked.

She borrowed strength from her pride. "Perhaps one of us is. You worked hard to say painful things, John."

"You didn't have to work hard to say them. Sharon, I've a plane reservation, to go a considerable distance and dig into un-

pleasant mysteries with Judge Pursuivant. But I'd rather call it off, and take you to a pleasant dinner."

"I—I've a headache, John." Even as she spoke, it was true. A dull throb crawled inside her skull.

"I see." He sounded weary. "Good-by, Sharon. Sorry."

He hung up. The Countess sank into a chair. John Thunstone could have helped—would have helped. Why had she avoided seeing him, when something strange and evil was on the way to happen to her? Had that larval little Hengist hypnotized her enough to make her banish her friends? For John Thunstone was a friend. He was more than that, and she had rebuffed him, and now he'd fly away, she did not know where or for how long.

Downstairs in the lobby, a big man in a dark gray suit left the house telephone. His eyes half-narrowed, and under his small black mustache his lips clamped. John Thunstone had humbled himself to offer peace. It had been refused. Well, just time enough to go home, pack, taxi to the airport.

But then he saw someone emerge from a telephone booth opposite. The man was small and plump, and purposeful as he hurried away. John Thunstone's eyes lost their vexed bafflement, showed recognition.

He entered the same booth, almost coffin-snug for his huge frame. He telephoned to cancel his plane reservation.

ROWLEY THORNE'S garments just missed being seedy, and his linen could have been cleaner. But he strode from the elevator to the door of Countess Montesecco's suite with a confidence that was regal. He was almost as tall as John Thunstone, and burlier. His features showed broad, hawklike, but here and there were slackening. His great skull was bald, or perhaps shaven, and he had

no eyebrows or even lashes to fringe his deep, gunmetal eyes.

He knocked, and inside she ran to the door. She opened it, and a smile of welcome died quickly on her face.

"I'm not who you expected," said Rowley Thorne.

She drew herself up. "I expected no one. Go away."

"You hoped for someone, then. And I'll go, but you'll go with me."

She began to close the door, then paused. "Why?"

"Because your husband has a message for you. . . . Surely you aren't going to flatter me by fearing me?"

"I fear nothing," said Countess Montesecco proudly. "Fear is folly, for people like you to feed on."

"Since you fear nothing, you will come."

"But you're lying about my husband."

His naked head bowed. "If I lie, come and prove it." He turned to go. "Have you a coat?"

He walked along the hallway. Halfway to the elevator, he paused. The Countess came from her room and fell into step beside him, looking never at him, but ahead.

In a taxi, she looked at him.

"No, I have no fear," she said. "Only curiosity. Why are you trying to impress and amaze me?"

"Because you have things I need. Strength and serenity."

"Strength!" She made herself laugh briefly over that. "I thought you were satisfied with your own enchantments, that you needed nothing."

The great bald head shook again. "What enchantment I know and practise I won most painfully and sorrowfully. I swore to renounce personal possessions and affections. And I did." His voice grew dully soft, just for once. "I lost every cent and stick of property that I owned, in tragic ways that made the loss more bitter. My heart—and it truly ached for love—was

torn and anguished, when death took some that I loved, and others turned false or scornful. I paid: why shouldn't I value the commodity I bought?" Now he smiled again. "I have words that some day will be known to all minds, and a will to impose upon all wills. Not world domination, Countess—that's so flat and outworn an idea. I shan't bore you with my own concept of volition and right and profit. But let me assure you of this: I have a will concerning you, and I want your will to be the same. Then neither of us will defeat the other, eh?"

She kept her eyes on mean side streets that flitted by. He continued: "Any living being is a storehouse of power. A sturdy being can give physical strength, a creature of spirit can give spiritual strength. I mean no compliments, only solemn truth when I say that your own spirit is worth my effort, for the profit I can draw from it."

"You plan some sort of sacrifice. I don't think you'll succeed, Mr. Thorne."

"Some day," he sighed, "the world will know me by a name of my own choosing, a name of mastery. Once I tried to draw you into my plans. Your friend Thunstone helped you beat me. Being beaten does not suit me. The experience must be wiped out."

"I see," she said. "Your belief, or worship, or philosophy, or whatever it is, cannot accept failure."

"Exactly," nodded Thorne.

"I don't fear you in the least."

"That's a valiant lie. But you won't try to escape, for you refuse to accept failure, too—and running from me would be failure."

The taxi stopped. Rowley Thorne opened the door and helped her out. They entered the lobby of an aging apartment building.

A porter in a grubby uniform gazed at them, but said nothing. Thorne led

the Countess into an automatic elevator, and pressed the button. They rode twenty floors upward in silence.

Stepping forth into a hall, they mounted half a dozen steps to an entry above. The door opened before Thorne could knock. Hengist stood there, smiling.

"All ready," he reported to Thorne.

"Come," said Thorne to the Countess. They entered a room with drawn blinds. There was no furniture except a small table of Oriental lacquer, on which stood some article the size of a teapot, covered loosely with a napkin.

The Countess paused inside the door. "You sent word that my husband would be here, alive."

Thorne shook his head. "No," he murmured. "I said he would be here in a living body. Not necessarily human, not necessarily even flesh and blood. He is here."

He lifted the napkin from the object on the table.

IT GAVE light, or she thought it gave light. Apparently it was made of glass, with an inner substance that glowed dimly, like foxfire.

"Look closely," Rowley Thorne bade her.

It was supported on four legs, like a tiny article of furniture. A doll's chair of glass. No. Crudely but forcefully it was shaped to resemble an animal. The straight legs were vigorously planted, the body was rounded and strong, the head long and supported on a neck that arched. Two blobs of glass made upthrust ears.

"It's a toy horse," pronounced the Countess. "I think you're wasting our time."

"No toy," Thorne assured her. "Touch it."

She reached out to pick it up, but almost flung it down. Stepping back, she chafed her hands together. "It's warm," she said shakily. "Like—like—"

"Like blood?" prompted Hengist, smiling in the dimness.

"Like a living body," amended Thorne. "A spirit you know lives inside. What you see is an old, old image, sacred once to a cult that has vanished. That cult knew ways to locate and imprison ghosts. Inside the horse is all that made Count Montesecco the kind of man he was."

Both Hengist and Thorne were watching her. She forced herself to touch the horse of glass a second time. Having touched it, she forced herself not to shudder.

"You want me to believe that this phosphorescence is a soul?"

"It has been kept thus so as to convince you. The Count, as I learned, was just such a soul as might be expected to remain wretchedly near the place of his death. A European colleague used spells to snare that soul, and sent it to me. The container is designed for the single purpose of keeping it until—"

"Why a horse?" she asked.

"Horses are exceptional creatures. They are strong, intelligent, full of emotion and spirit.

Remember the kelpie, the *puka*, and Pegasus and the others. There have been horse gods in Norway, Spain, Russia, Greece, even in tropical America. When German wizards foretold the future, they read it in the blood and bowels of horses." Thorne looked from the glass image to the Countess. "Speak to your husband's soul."

"Do you really expect me—"

"I'll show you how." His bald head stooped above the dim-glowing little shape of glass. "You within, do you know this woman?"

The phosphorescence whirled, as vapor whirls in a breeze. The glass head stirred, moved. It lifted, and sagged back.

"You see," said Thorne, "it nodded affirmation."

"Nonsense!" she protested, but her voice

almost broke. "That was an optical illusion, or some piece of stage magic."

"Touch it again. Assure yourself that it is a solid, unjointed glass structure. . . . Satisfied? I'll question it again: The woman is your Countess?"

Another nod.

"You—love her?"

Yet again the glass head dipped.

"I still say it's a trick," said the Countess. "Why I came here I don't know."

"You've forgotten? Wasn't there something said about not being afraid? You came, Countess, to scorn me and to conquer me. You felt that you must show how strong and fearless you could be without John Thunstone. And it's not a trick. Lift the thing. Don't be afraid. Make sure that there are no threads or levers or other mechanism. Now look into it. Deep into it."

SHE felt a flash of pain, as if the subdued glow were too bright for her eyes, but she stared where the radiance was strongest, in the midst of the horse's body. For a moment it seemed as though an eye floated there to return her gaze, an eye she had known and had never expected to see again. The warmth of the glass communicated itself to her hands. She felt, or fancied she felt, a rhythmic pulsing from within the figure.

"Now, questions that only your husband could answer," urged Thorne.

She addressed the object: "If you are who they say you are, you will remember the words I spoke at our last parting."

The glass shape shifted in her hands. Thoughts formed in the depths of her mind, but not thoughts of her own. Those thoughts answered her question:

I remember. You said you would tolerate cruelty, but not lies.

She shuddered and swayed. Rowley Thorne took the figure from her and set it back on the table.

"You believe now, don't you?" he challenged her. "That, I say, is why I kept the soul of your Count in this strange condition—to convince you. Now it shall be transmigrated, to the body of a man. I look forward to an interesting reunion between you and him."

"I'll submit to no more extravagances," she was able to protest.

"Hengist," said Thorne, "take the Countess Montesecco to the observatory."

Hengist laid his hand upon her wrist. When she tried to pull away, he tightened his grip cunningly. Agony swelled along her arm. She had to go with him. He urged her up another flight of stairs.

This second story of the penthouse was a single room, with windows all around. Twilight was coming to the city outside and below. Hengist smiled as he shut the door behind him.

"You came here partially out of bravado, and partly out of adroit suggestion," he said. "Now the bravado is gone, and the suggestion is going. If you are convinced that your husband lives again, in human flesh, will you be bound to him by vows or sentiments?"

He turned the key in the lock. She drew herself up, pale and angry.

"I thought I was a free agent. Why do you lock me in?"

"Because you are shrugging off the last flimsy bond of suggestion. Because you must stay here and see your husband again in the flesh."

She looked around. "In what body—"

"Here," and Hengist placed a pudgy hand on his chest. "I am the body."

She sat down in an armchair. Hengist fumbled in a pocket, and brought out a slim vial. It, too, had something phosphorescent inside.

"I am instructed," he told her, "to drink this concoction and prepare myself to receive a new spirit, that will dominate and replace my own. But," he paused, smiling

sidelong at her. "Why don't we throw it away?"

"Throw it away?"

"Yes, and not be parties to the revival of the Count's life in my body. Keep me just Hengist. I'm Thorne's associate and servitor. He intends, by supernatural means, to house within me the spirit of Count Montesecco. Then you will be constrained and subdued, by use of that spirit in a living body. Your money, for one thing, will become Thorne's. And there are other ways he will triumph over you and your friends."

The Countess remembered that Thorne had spoken of his need for triumph where he had failed.

"Wouldn't you rather have me as Hengist than as Count Montesecco?" Hengist asked again. "I find you attractive. Attractive enough, in fact, to make me wish to stay myself for your sake. What do you think? But think quickly. Because Rowley Thorne will be coming."

ON THE floor below, Rowley Thorne opened a closet. From shelves inside he brought out a walking stick of jointed bamboo, marked in Japanese characters, and a tarnished bronze lamp. This he lighted, and it shed yellow light, dimming the glow within the glass figure as he placed it and the cane upon the table. While he moved and arranged the objects, he kept up a swift, indistinct mutter in a language that could be neither Latin or Greek, but which fell into cadences and rhymes, like some sort of ritual. After a moment he paused, looked around, and brought a dish out of the closet. Into it he threw white powder and red, and tilted the dish to mingle them. Finally he bit his thumb savagely, and dripped blood from it upon the mingled powder.

"That," said a quiet voice, "is one of the most disgusting commonplaces of your dirty ceremonies."

From behind a window-drape slid the broad shoulders and scornful face of John Thunstone.

Rowley Thorne faced him, his own lips writhing back from big, pointed teeth.

"She has rejected you and your help," he snarled. "I know it. I know all about your quarrel. She didn't want you, or she'd have sent for you. Get out."

Thunstone took a step closer. "The Countess, like many women, is not utterly sure what she does want. I followed your little jackal, Hengist, here. Magic of my own—a skeleton key—let me in by a side door. And I listened. I know everything—to stay within the melodramatic pattern you seem to set, I should say that I know all." He took another step. "Since you're so nervous about the Countess's feelings, be glad that I waited until she left to settle with you."

"Get out," said Thorne again. He picked up the cane.

"Spoiling the preparations for your incantation," Thunstone said, in a voice of friendly warning. "I know about this kind of thing, too. How does the little jibber-jabber go? 'He whose dead ghost has no caretaker is looking for a shelter from the night; and who speaks the Black Name, and speaks it now—'"

"Silence!" bawled Thorne. "You'll ruin—"

Thunstone eyed the collection on the table. "That would be a collector's item, yonder. Etruscan, I take it—the Equine Cult of Aradonia. May I look?" He put out a hand.

Thorne threw himself between the table and Thunstone. The cane lifted in his hand and struck at Thunstone's head. The big man dodged sidewise, caught at the cane and pulled.

But the wood seemed to give in his hand, to slide easily away. Thorne was clearing a narrow steel blade from within it. He laughed once, a sharp laugh like

the bark of a fox. Thunstone held a hollow length of cane that had served as sheath for the blade.

"I should have done this long ago," said Thorne, and fell on guard like a fencer. He lunged, speeding his point full at Thunstone's throat.

But Thunstone parried with the hollow cane he held, let the point slither out of line, then struck sharply at Thorne's weapon hand. Wood rang on knuckles, and Thorne dropped his blade with a curse. Thunstone caught it up, breaking it across his knee.

"You'd have found my murder difficult to explain," he said.

Thorne struck at him with his fist, and Thunstone took the blow high on his head. He weaved a little, but countered with both hands, to Thorne's head and body. Thorne staggered back against the table. It toppled.

Something crashed.

Thorne wailed as if his arm had broken. Thunstone moved across the room and snapped a light switch. Turning, he saw Thorne kneeling, almost in tears.

"Yes, yes," Thunstone murmured, as if to soothe him. "The collector's item is gone. Smashed. And what was inside—"

"Do you realize what this means?" jabbered Thorne, rising.

Thunstone nodded. "Perfectly. The captive soul is free—with no prepared haven. Your ceremony had not begun. Count Monteseco undergoes no reincarnation.

"But the ceremony had begun," Thorne insisted. "I'd spoken some of the words—I'd pointed the way to Hengist."

"Ah," said Thunstone. "And if Hengist isn't prepared, that is Hengist's misfortune." He eyed his adversary appraisingly. "Once more, Thorne, I'm leaving you in an embarrassing position."

"You are a stubborn creature," Hengist was saying. "One would think you

actually preferred to be the wife of the Count, and the slave of Rowley Thorne. Well, suppose I don't allow it? Suppose I move for your good, and mine, against his magic? He'll never know that I don't house the soul he sent me, and I can watch for a proper time to— What are you staring at?"

"The transom," said the Countess. "Something moved there."

"The transom's as tight shut as this door." Hengist's fat forefinger twiddled the key in its lock. "Not even Rowley Thorne could enter, unless he got a Hand of Glory somewhere on short notice. Now then, to assume? Even if you find me repulsive, you might become accustomed to me later. But what's the matter with the transom now?"

"Something moved there," she said again.

"A shadow," Hengist offered loftily.

"But it has eyes—and it shines—"

Something drifted through the closed door, as fog drifts through gauze.

Hengist goggled, backed up, and whimpered. The cloud of dead-glowing vapor billowed, churned, and abruptly lengthened. Its fore part lifted. It was shaping itself, dimly and roughly, into a form that

reared, a form with a long tossing head, an arched neck, and lean forelimbs with lumpy extremities.

Hengist's whine shrilled into a scream. He tried to get away, but floundered into a corner. Those forelegs came down upon him, and he fell, and the great shining cloud was upon him.

Then the Countess remembered that the key was in the lock. She unfastened the door and ran for the stairs. She might have fallen down them, but John Thunstone was coming up and caught her.

As far as she could remember later, he did not speak then or for quite a while afterward. He shepherded her to the elevator, out into the street, and home in a taxi.

He did not even say good-night.

The next day, when he took her to lunch, he came as close as he would ever come to discussing the adventure. "The papers," he remarked, "are interested in a man who was found dead in a penthouse. Because he seems to have been beaten all over by heavy, blunt weapons. The police say it's as if a horse had trampled him to death."

Then he gave his attention to ordering the soup.

