

The Red Rosary

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The circumstances surrounding the mysterious fate of Dr. David Wells have never hitherto been made public; and this is easy to explain. Not only were they terrible in themselves, but they involved so much that is abnormal and almost incredible, that the telling of the story demands some courage. Few men care to have the reputation of being accomplished liars; while still fewer wish to be regarded as superstitious and credulous. To ask the average person to believe the facts about the tragedy of Dr. Wells is to make a considerable demand upon his trust in the narrator's veracity. But the prevalence of rumours reflecting on the character of the unfortunate man, and in particular the theory of suicide that has been proposed in certain quarters, seem to render it necessary that the truth should no longer be withheld.

All who knew the late doctor were familiar with his large and valuable collection of curiosities from all quarters of the world. In fact he was a born collector, and his hobby consumed most of his time and a considerable portion of his fortune.

His sympathies were large, and he took an interest in many branches of both art and science; but his special subject was anthropology, and in particular that branch of it which deals with the origins and development of religious belief and practice among the more uncivilised races of mankind.

In this connection he indulged a fancy—for he hardly claimed it to be anything more—that possibly there might be some glimmering of a religious sense among the higher and more rational animals, apart from man. In certain of the more obscure forms of nature worship he fancied that he had found traces of a connection between non-human life and certain occult phenomena. In particular he thought that the hostility with which mankind regards the serpent tribe was a mutual one, and had its source in something that lay beneath the surface.

Thus as a collector he specialised in articles of uncivilised human workmanship, and chiefly in those connected with primitive forms of worship. His collection of fetishes from Africa and the South Sea Islands was unrivalled: he possessed articles connected with Tibetan Lamaism that no public museum had been able to obtain: while the section devoted to serpent worship was the envy of every specialist and was his greatest pride.

There were few rooms in his house that did not contain examples of his hobby; and nervous visitors did not altogether relish having to spend the night in company with some of his more fearsome idols; but the gems of the collection were housed in a large room on the ground floor which served the combined purposes of, museum, library and study. Owing to the value of certain idols and other objects, which were of precious metal and decked with costly gems, Dr. Wells had taken special precautions to guard against the intrusion of burglars or other unwelcome visitors to this room. It will be remembered that it was here that he was found dead on the tragic day; and the fact that the various burglar alarms and precautions proved that no one from outside could have entered had its bearing on the mystery surrounding his end. It was not until the possibility of human intervention had been excluded after an exhaustive investigation that the facts here recorded were reluctantly accepted as true by his friends.

A few months before his death, Dr. Wells had added to his collection a treasure for which he had patiently sought for some years. He called it a Red Rosary; and apparently he was right in believing that it was the only specimen in any collection. It came from a little known tribe on the

borders of Tartary, and was connected with a corrupt form of Lamaistic Buddhism in which animal worship was said to be practised.

He had heard of this rosary, and of its strange use, from a traveller who had visited the tribe in question through the accident of losing his way; and his account so aroused the collecting instincts of Dr. Wells that he offered him a very large sum—said to have been three thousand pounds—to revisit the tribe and endeavour to steal the coveted article. The man went, and in due course returned with the rosary; but he did not live to deliver it to his principal. Fortunately he had packed it in a box bearing Dr. Wells' name and address, and thus it reached its destination.

It appears that the rosary had been kept in a kind of fetish house, closely guarded night and day by three men who could only be described as partly monk, partly priest, and partly medicine man. After trying various less disreputable means of accomplishing his purpose, the emissary of Dr. Wells had secured the spoils by drugging the guardians with cheap gin and morphia—a mixture that has never yet been known to fail.

Then followed a chapter of strange happenings. It certainly seemed as if the theft of the Red Rosary had offended some power that was quite capable of avenging itself. And it lost no time about it! Almost every day of the journey back to England was marked by some mishap or other; and on more than one occasion the traveller narrowly escaped with his life.

On reaching London he went with his treasure to an hotel in Craven Street—and the place was burnt out that same night. He escaped in his pyjamas, but did not forget to take the box with him. After finding other quarters and getting a supply of clothes, he set out to take the box to Dr. Wells; and on the way found himself in a collision of motor buses in which the person on each side of him was killed. He escaped with some bad bruises; and again he held tightly to the box. He resolved to wait till the next day; and in the morning he was found dead in the room he had taken at the Station Hotel.

At the inquest it was stated that he was found sitting in an armchair, and that there was no sign of any injury to account for death. But his face had the expression of a man in the very extremity of utter terror. The box lay on the table before him. The medical evidence was very vague. There was no disease of any kind; and there was nothing definite that could account for the death. All that could be said was that the heart had stopped for some unknown reason; and that apparently the dead man had been frightened by something. But death by fright is not a very satisfactory kind of verdict; and at the coroner's suggestion the jury decided that the cause of death was syncope—which left things pretty much where they were before.

The box bearing the name and address of Dr. Wells was duly forwarded to him; and at last the Red Rosary reposed in a safe built into the wall of his museum, where he kept some of his most valuable specimens. Several of us saw it during the short space of life that still remained to him.

It consisted of a string of fine catgut, on which were threaded six series of six beads each; each set being separated from the next by a larger bead. In the middle of the string was a very large oval amethyst of poor quality, from which depended a short string of little beads ending in a much larger one. It will be noticed that the general appearance of the rosary was not unlike that of the familiar one used by Catholics.

The intrinsic value of the thing was considerable. The small beads were all rubies, though by no means of fine quality; and the larger ones that divided the sets were emeralds. They had been roughly ground down to a round shape in the usual native fashion; but the surface of each bead was rudely scratched all over. On careful examination it appeared that these scratches were meant to imitate the scales on a snake.

But the most remarkable thing about the rosary was the pendent bead at the end of the short string. This was oval in shape and was composed of green jade, most curiously and unusually mottled with blue, yellow and red. It was shaped just like the head of a snake, and had been carved with considerable skill. The details of the snake's head had been well worked out; and two small yellow opals had been inserted to represent its eyes. But in one way the artist had departed from his model. The snake's lips were slightly raised on each side, as if snarling—which no snake can do—and thus the fangs were visible. But the points of the fangs did not protrude, nor were the jaws made to open. The head was quite solid. It is important to remember this in view of what followed. Altogether the rosary was more uncanny in appearance than beautiful. In fact there was something distinctly repulsive about it.

Neither Dr. Wells nor his unfortunate emissary had been able to find out anything about the history of the rosary, and not much about its use. Indeed we all of us thought that much of what he told us about it was rather speculation on his part than ascertained fact. According to him, the rosary was not used in connection with the recitation of prayers but for the purposes of divination. He said it was enclosed in a tube and turned out on the ground to tell the fortune of the inquirer, which was judged by the gyrations of the snake-like rosary and the position which it finally took up.

There seemed to be something curiously unstable about the equilibrium of the thing. After laying it down on the table, it would tremble and twist a good deal more than one would expect before finally coming to rest; and, even after it had been lying still for a minute or two, it would give queer, sudden twists and jerks. Sometimes it really seemed to give one the impression that it was alive. And somehow it always looked wicked and malignant.

Apparently it was on the actual night of its arrival that Dr. Wells had the first inkling that there was something queer about the Red Rosary. He told us the tale himself. He had been carefully examining it with a lens, searching for any possible inscription or markings that might have escaped his notice; and two or three times he had almost dropped it. This puzzled him, for he was in the habit of handling things carefully, especially when he valued them highly, as he did this. He could not quite make it out, for it really felt exactly as if the rosary had twisted between his fingers—very much as a sleepy snake might do. He did not quite like it; and he found himself speculating upon possible digestive or nervous disturbance to account for it. He presently laid the rosary down on the table, took up a book, and sat down to read. A few minutes later, feeling tired, he put the book on the table, noticing distinctly at the time that he laid it between the rosary and himself. Then he sat musing over what he had read; and the natural consequence was that he fell asleep. When he woke up, the first thing that he saw was that the rosary was now in front of the book instead of behind it. And the snake-like head was looking towards him!

This was rather startling and a trifle disquieting. There seemed to be but three possible explanations. Either he had been completely wrong in supposing that he had laid the book down in front of the rosary; or he had in his sleep risen and moved it; or the rosary had moved without his intervention. The first two explanations involved the suggestion that he was not quite in the best of health—which he was not prepared to admit—while the implications of the third explanation were of a kind that he entirely repudiated. Dr. Wells was no believer in the occult.

So he deliberately laid the question aside, and resolved to leave town the next day for Cromer, where he hoped that the bracing air would blow away any mental cobwebs that might be about. Before morning his resolve was strengthened by the miseries of a restless night. Dream after dream came to keep his brain from repose; and every dream had some connection with the Red

Rosary. And in each there was an element of threatening. He was haunted by that sinister carved head with the snarling lips and the suggestion of poisoned fangs.

In the morning, before leaving town, he had occasion to go to the safe where he had placed the rosary over night; and a nasty shock met him. He was quite clear that he had laid the rosary out at length along the front of one of the shelves; and he remembered distinctly how the light had caught the contrasting rubies and emeralds in that position. But now the rosary was no longer on the shelf. It lay in the bottom of the safe, and was coiled up exactly like a snake. The head was in the centre, resting on one of the coils, but slightly drawn back as when alarmed and ready to strike. It faced him as he opened the door.

To say that Dr. Wells was puzzled is to put it too mildly. He was thoroughly bewildered. His memory was clear about the position in which he had left the rosary; and his memory was a good one. No one but himself had access to the safe, which was securely fastened by an elaborate combination lock. The shelf could not have been shaken, for the safe was built into the wall; and there had been no earthquake during the night. There was just the bare possibility that the rosary had been left in a state of unstable equilibrium and have fallen if it had rolled off the shelf, but hardly have coiled itself up in such complete fashion. Besides, it was not lying where it would have fallen if it had rolled off the shelf, but was considerably on one side. The more he thought over the mystery, the less he could make of it. So he just left it. But he did not at all like it.

Dr. Wells remained at Cromer for three weeks; but the holiday could hardly be called a success. He was out of doors all the time, and he played golf every day; but he returned to town worse than he went. True, he had not been troubled by any more dreams of the Red Rosary; but the entire holiday had been one long chapter of worries and misfortunes. Several of his recent investments went wrong, and he found himself the poorer by a sum larger than he cared to contemplate. His pet dog whom he valued as an old friend—was run over and killed by a passing motor-car, and a letter came from the firm of publishers to whom he had entrusted the manuscript of his important new book, saying that they deeply regretted that it had perished in a fire at their establishment. And the worst of it was that the duplicate copy had been accidentally destroyed a few weeks earlier.

In addition, a letter came from his solicitors informing him that an action for libel had been commenced against him by a former servant whose misdeeds he had unwisely mentioned in a letter to a person who had made inquiry. It seemed as if the stars in their courses were fighting against him; and it was in very poor spirits that he returned to town.

When he reached his house, he found the servants in a state of nervous alarm, and talking about burglars. There was, however, no evidence that any attempt had been made upon the place; but they reported that they had heard slight sounds at night in the museum and that there was a tapping and scratching kind of noise in the corner where the safe was concealed by a false panel. Twice they had called in the police, but had only been laughed at for their pains. Dr. Wells listened to the story with impatience and dismissed it with the contempt that it seemed to deserve.

But he thought there was something in it when he went to the safe and found out the state of affairs. The first thing he noticed was that the Red Rosary was missing! He had left it in a small box on one of the shelves; and now the box was overturned and empty! Not only so, but several small things on the shelf were out of place and had been pushed aside. Nothing, however, was missing except the rosary. Yet there was not the smallest indication that the safe had been tampered with. Even if the thief had used a duplicate key, how could he have discovered the

combination number to which Dr. Wells had set the lock when he left town? The thing was absurdly impossible.

The next day brought the explanation—and it could hardly have been a more unwelcome one. Dr. Wells found the missing rosary. It was coiled up, as he had seen it once before, behind a packet of papers at the back of the shelf; exactly as a living snake might have coiled itself up in its den. It really looked as if the rosary had glided out of its box, pushing the other small articles aside and incidentally causing the tapping sounds that had alarmed the servants, and had sought a resting place more to its liking. But this idea was really too absurd. How could a mere string of beads do anything of the sort? Yet, what other explanation was at all possible?

Dr. Wells told all this to an intimate friend the next day, and added that he had spent a large part of the evening in making a thorough examination of the mysterious rosary, but with entirely negative results. He tested every hypothesis that occurred to him as at all possible. He applied various chemical tests to the beads, with the idea that possibly they were not what they seemed but were composed of some substance that might be influenced by atmospheric dampness. But they proved to be genuine rubies, emeralds, one amethyst and one piece of jade. None of these could be influenced in this way.

He paid special attention to the string of catgut on which they were threaded, remembering the familiar weather-indicating figures that were formerly actuated by a short piece of this substance. But even exposure to steam failed to produce any appreciable movement. Then he tried various electric tests, but all without effect.

It is significant in view of what happened afterwards, that he most carefully and even microscopically examined the carved pendent of jade that so closely resembled the head of a snake. He seems to have had some suspicion that it could be opened and might possibly contain some substance. But he was able to satisfy himself that this was not so. The piece of jade was unquestionably solid and contained nothing enclosed in it.

Thus far the tests resulted in nothing. But, all the same, Dr. Wells could not get away from the impression that there was something uncanny about the rosary. It seemed to resist the tests! Though the idea is absurd, the beads seemed to try to slip back from his fingers; and once the whole thing suddenly wound itself round his wrist and appeared to grip. It was, of course, just possible that the warmth of the hand, acting on the string of catgut, might account for something like this: yet the effect seemed out of all proportion to such a cause.

At last Dr. Wells resigned himself to the conclusion that the whole thing was purely subjective and had no existence outside his own imagination. But it was not pleasant to think that he was in that abnormal condition when a man “sees things.” He had always prided himself on the possession of sober judgment and well-balanced critical faculty. Still, it might be well to have a chat with a specialist about it. These things need to be nipped in the bud.

The following afternoon he wrote for an appointment. The matter had suddenly become urgent. It seems that he had been again examining the rosary while seated in an armchair after lunch. Feeling drowsy, he laid the rosary on the table at his elbow and composed himself for a nap. About ten minutes later, he was roused from sleep by a loud knock at the door. Then he sprang out of the chair with a cry of alarm. The Red Rosary was no longer on the table. It was coiled on the sleeper’s chest; and the snarling head was raised as if to strike! It fell to the ground as Dr. Wells sprang up.

It was now certainly time that he took advice. Hallucinations of this kind end in madness, as he well knew. Of course it was hallucination. Any other explanation was sheer insanity. It was merely a question between two different forms of madness.

The specialist wrote next day, making an appointment for the following one. But his expected patient did not arrive to keep it. The question of his sanity would never now be solved. The Red Rosary had fulfilled its mission, if it had one; and the tragedy was complete.

Dr. Wells was found in his museum, lying apparently asleep in his lounge chair. But he did not answer when called; and the doctors said that he had been dead for some few hours. The Red Rosary lay coiled on his shoulder and fell to the floor when he was raised.

An inquest was duly held; and the coroner expressed the opinion that the evidence was highly unsatisfactory. The post-mortem examination failed to reveal the cause of death with any certainty. All that the pathologists could say was that the symptoms pointed to alkaloidal poisoning; but that no trace of any such alkaloid could be found in the organs of the body. In many details the evidence suggested death from snake-bite: but here again there was no certain proof.

There was no sign of violence, nor was there any external injury, except two very small pricks on the left cheek, just below the eye. These were just such as would be caused by the bite of a small snake. But there was no evidence that any snake could have gained access to the room; nor was there any trace of snake venom in the neighbourhood of the trifling wounds. So the jury could do nothing better than record what is called "an open verdict," which simply left matters where they were before.

As to the Red Rosary, it vanished after the tragedy. Whether it was stolen by one of the servants, or by some other person who may have been admitted to the room, no one knows. And the few who knew this tragic story were not greatly disposed to take any steps for its recovery.