



They came again, their cloaked forms mounted on horses more black than the night from which they emerged, only the yellowish glow of their eyes breaking the Stygian blackness. They had come in past nights like this, I seemed to remember, their hoofbeats silent but still shaking the ground as they bore down upon me. I stood, the only obstacle before them, armed only with a pistol holding mere blanks but

doubting I could have stopped them with a fully-loaded scattergun. I kept waiting for the director to yell "Cut!" and the lights to come on and expose the shadowy riders as mere costumed extras in our latest Miskatonic Pictures cowboy movie.

I knew better, though. I'd had this dream before.

Dream! The realization brought me fully awake, and I sat up with a cry, drenched in perspiration. The shadows did indeed fade into normality, taking the forms of other crew members sleeping in bunks around mine, some stirring restlessly at the noise I'd made but none of them, thank goodness, waking up. Moonlight streamed through a window into the makeshift bunkhouse, a place not only to sleep on location but which could be utilized for ranch scenes in the picture.

It was a much brighter night than the one in my nightmare.

As quietly as I could, I pulled on my jeans and boots. I knew the layout of the place well enough to make it to the door without bumping anything. I felt a little sick to my stomach. Outside, the night air was cool on my damp skin, and I walked across the long open space separating our sleeping quarters from the water wagon. I found a towel, pumped enough water to wet part of it which I wiped across my chest and neck, then used the rest of it to dry myself.

Where were these dreams coming from? This was the third night since we'd been out here that they had afflicted me. It couldn't be the locale. I'd been here dozens of times, as a horse wrangler and later as a stunt double, sometimes dressed as an Indian for the morning shoot and a cavalry rider in the afternoon, chasing myself when the film was edited together. It couldn't be the picture; Phantom Riders was hardly different

from all the other little westerns on which I'd worked with the likes of Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Harry Carey, George O'Brien, Ken Maynard, Bob Steele, Hoot Gibson, Randy Scott and even Rin-Tin-Tin, stars who'd managed to survive the recent transition from silent to sound pictures.

Warner Baxter probably deserved that Oscar a few years ago as the Cisco Kid in In Old Arizona, if for no other reason than how he'd had to say his lines into mikes barely concealed in brush and cactuses. They tried Tim McCoy's serial, The Indians Are Coming, as both a silent and talkie, and grossed more than a million bucks with sound. It had been barely three years since Buck Jones completed a sound western, The Lone Rider, and only been four since Paramount did its first, The Virginian, with that lanky Cooper drawling the script. Duke Wayne as "Singin' Sandy" didn't really have to warble in his recently-wrapped Riders of Destiny, but someone else did while he mouthed the words. Crazy idea, I figured. Even with sound, audiences would never go for the idea of a singing cowboy.

At least our current star, Lucas Dark, didn't pretend to be a singer. After working with him on the picture for the past two weeks, with him directing as well as starring, I still wasn't sure just what he was.

I hung the towel on the wagon and found my gaze drawn toward the mountainous horizon. Even while serving in France during the big war, I'd never felt so shaken by anything as what I'd seen coming over it in those dreams.

"Don't worry, Curt Phillips," a gentle voice emanated from a shadowy corner of the wagon. "This will not be coming tonight."

My hand reached for a six-gun which wasn't there, a reflex from working in so many of these oaters, and I could literally feel my heart thumping. "Who's that?" I demanded.

He stepped out into the moonlight, and I almost laughed in relief. The little old man couldn't have looked more out of place on a western set than if he'd stepped off the cover of one of those scientificion pulps that Chuck Walla, my stunt buddy, was always reading. Tufts of white hair stuck out from behind his ears, and he smiled benignly at me over a pair of spectacles. He wore a dark suit and tie, and looked so harmless that it didn't occur to me to wonder where he'd popped from.

"Who are you?" I asked again. "What are you doing out here?"

He bobbed his head. "My name is Mr. Lazarus. Think of me as, ah, a technical advisor for this particular film."

That wasn't too much of a stretch. He looked old enough to have been around during the time period we were depicting, and it wasn't uncommon for directors to seek advice from other survivors, like Emmett

Dalton and Wyatt Earp.

"Well, Mr. Lazarus, you're a little late. We'll be finishing our location work out here by tomorrow," I said.

He nodded. "Yes, yes, that's why I'm here. It mustn't be finished. You have to stop it."

I blinked.

"Wait a minute. I don't get..."

"Allow me to explain, Mr. Phillips. There is more being assembled here than a simple moving picture. You are the only one I've found among the participants with the sensitivity to recognize that. The fact that you've been having those dreams proves it."

How could he know about those dreams? Even by moonlight, my confusion must have shown.

"The president of your little studio is a graduate of a New England university where some of the darker arts have manifested themselves," the little man went on, peering at me over his rimless spectacles. "He even named his studio after it. Perhaps that influence made him more susceptible to the blandishments of your erstwhile star to take this particular script."

"What's wrong with the script?" I asked.

"Have you read it?"

I hadn't, of course. Stunters like Chuck and myself only had to know what was wanted from a particular action scene. We didn't need to know the entire scenario, which didn't differ much from picture to picture, anyway.

"I just know I'm wearing black a lot," I said, "doubling for Lucas." An awful lot, it occurred to me. For a western leading man being introduced in his first movie, Lucas didn't bother himself to do much of his own physical stuff. Certainly nothing like Maynard, Mix or Wayne did.

"Yes, indeed," the little man said, "black attire will become quite fashionable in these movies before very long. Lash LaRue, the Durango Kid, Hopalong Cassidy...but your star dresses that way for another reason entirely."

I'd only heard one of the names. "Hopalong Cassidy? I've been reading books about him for a couple of decades, but nobody's ever done a movie."

Mr. Lazarus waved a hand. "Trust me, they will. But tell me, haven't you wondered at all about this new star of yours?"

Actually, I'd wondered a lot about Lucas Dark, I thought, as I gazed off at the mountains again. I hadn't been around for his interior scenes,

back at the studio, except for a saloon scene where I'd doubled him for a fight. His direction seemed to come in whispers, often vague ones. I even had the nagging feeling that he looked slightly different, physically, each time I glanced at him -- maybe a bit taller than I thought he'd been, a little shorter, darker eyebrows, a more narrow face...

"Yes, I see you have been able to pierce his veil," said Mr. Lazarus. "I knew I had come to the right person."

I started to ask what he meant by that. But when I turned back at where he'd been standing, the little man was gone.

"Action!"

The buckboard went past the cameras, with stuntwoman Mel O'Neal pretending to hold on for dear life, as the blond wig she wore to make her look like our leading lady streamed out behind her. I kept my back to the camera as I ran to the hitch-rail where Cocoa stood waiting for me to do a croupier mount up over his rump and into the saddle. I only needed a slight knee pressure for him to turn in the buckboard's direction and start galloping. He and I had done this many times before.

Cocoa, a big black Morgan horse I'd used at various studios, was being called Midnight in this picture. He was supposed to be Lucas Dark's horse, but Lucas hadn't done a single scene with him. The one time he'd tried, Cocoa kept shying away from him. It was the only time I could remember Cocoa objecting to a rider.

So whenever there was a riding sequence involving Lucas, I was there instead in the black outfit with my hat pulled down to hide my face. The camera car picked us up on a chase road alongside the one where Melanie and I were racing, to catch the sequence where I reached over and picked her up from the buckboard. My arm went around her waist and I lifted her free, and Cocoa veered off from the "runaway" which continued out of sight -- so the real driver, lying flat behind the seat, could pull up the horses out of camera range.

I released Mel, then dismounted while the camera was still on us, since Cocoa wouldn't have allowed Lucas to get near him even for that little sequence. I assumed Lucas and the leading lady had already filmed their close-ups for whatever scene followed.

"Nice pickup, Curt," Mel said once the cameras stopped. "At least you didn't almost drop me, like last time."

"Well, if you can keep those extra pounds off..." I began, then ducked as she pretended to take a swing at me. "Was that your last piece of work on this shoot, Mel?"

"Yeah. Well, except for the big finale tonight," she said. "You're hanging around for that, too, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Guess I have to, since our director insists we all be present and accounted for. I've never heard of a scene being kept under wraps like this, except maybe for that giant ape movie they're doing over at RKO." All any of us knew was that our director-star wanted the entire cast and crew on hand tonight. I noticed him checking with one of the cameramen, probably about our last scene. "Hey, Mel, tell me something. How would you describe Lucas Dark? No, don't look at him, just tell me from memory."

Mel regarded me doubtfully for a few seconds. "Well, I don't know. I guess, kind of like Tom Tyler -- tall, dark eyes that flash a little. What a strange question," she said. "But then this whole picture has been kind of strange."

"How's that?"

"Oh, you know. It's like all these scenes we've been doing don't mean anything, just warm-ups for the big finish tonight. I mean, think of the direction you get from Bob Bradbury, or Henry Hathaway, or Lambert Hillyer. Lucas seems to be directing strictly by rote. I know it's stuff we've done dozens of times before, but you'd think he'd want to tell us a little more than, okay, do the runaway buckboard pickup, or, do the ride behind the rock to duck the posse. But that's all he ever says, in that soft hissy voice of his. He sure doesn't sound much like a cowboy, does he?"

He didn't, for a fact. Of course, neither did Bill Hart or Bronco Billy Anderson, which may be why they hadn't been doing much since sound came along. I wondered how this Poverty Row studio's new star would do in his initial outing.

The old gentleman last night had been right -- I didn't know anything about the script. Usually when I worked in one of these little quickies, I'd pick up some semblance of what the screenplay was about, but on this one I had not the slightest idea. Our second unit crew had done our bit with the stagecoach holdup, saloon brawl and the usual gags, but it occurred to me I hadn't seen the first dialog scene filmed either here or back at the studio.

It suddenly seemed strange that I hadn't wondered about that before.

The air all but turned blue around Chuck Walla, as he swore with an intensity which set new standards even for him.

"Can't leave? I'll show them leaving. Those high-binding lizard-headed..." And then he was into creative cursing again.

"What's got you so riled?" I asked, walking up to where he stood at the edge of the makeshift parking lot.

Chuck and I had both been working cowboys before the war. When we mustered out in New York and headed back toward home, we decided to keep on going until we hit the Pacific since we might never have the money or inclination to travel that far again. We kind of blundered into a studio cattle call over at Gower Gulch, the Hollywood watering hole where we'd met up with some other refugees from cow country who were now working as extras. And the rest was history.

"Lucas' studio goons!" he grumbled. "They won't let me even take a drive anywhere. They say nobody can leave until everything's in the can tonight!"

"So what? Where were you wanting to go?"

He pointed to the big old radio he'd hauled out here and been fiddling with whenever he wasn't reading one of his weird magazines. "I can't pick up beans around here, for some reason. Always could before this shoot. I wanted to haul it closer to town and give it a try, if I could find some place to plug it up. That new Buck Rogers show has another fifteen-minute episode tonight."

I didn't laugh. I knew Chuck was entirely serious, even though I had my doubts that a radio show based on a comic strip would last long. Truth to tell, I was getting a little restless at this enforced idleness myself.

"Tell you what," I said, lowering my voice. "Why don't we just borrow a couple horses and not mention it to the studio guards?"

Chuck's eyes lit up. "You're on," he said. And that's what we did, very unobtrusively, or so I thought until Mel came cantering up behind us on a buckskin gelding named Starburst.

"Hello, boys," she said. "I spotted you saddling up back there. I'm getting cabin fever, too. Mind if I join you?"

We didn't, of course. Mel was plenty good company for any reasonably healthy adult male. Chuck was still complaining about having to hang around when his work on the film was done, with his radio show coming on at seven-fifteen that night, but even that couldn't alter the buoyancy which seemed to lift our spirits, the further we got from where we'd been working. I'd almost forgotten my recent nightmares. That is, until I spotted the incongruous figure of a little man in a suit riding a donkey on the ridge opposite where we were.

"Mr. Lazarus," I breathed.

"Mister what?" Chuck demanded.

"Be back in a minute," I said, as I turned Cocoa toward the ridge and galloped him over to where the newcomer had stopped. "Howdy, Mr. Lazarus. Not lost, are you?" I said, pulling up beside him.

"No, my boy. Frankly, I had hoped to run into you. Have you given any more thought to our conversation of last night?"

I didn't know why he thought he'd run into me out here, when our little excursion had been totally unplanned, but I answered him. "Sure, but I still don't know what you meant about stopping the movie."

"If what happens tonight is preserved on film, and if it is shown to audiences across the country, it will mean the end of human civilization," he said with utter seriousness.

"Come on. This movie isn't that bad..."

"I mean it! The dark ones cannot be constrained as mere images on film. They will feed on the fear their images will create in the growing numbers of their viewers, and take on physical realities that will spread them across the country, and the world. This picture must not be completed, must not be distributed."

I must've unconsciously pulled back on my reins, because Cocoa began backing away from him. The little man was starting to make me nervous.

"All right," he sighed, as though he knew my thoughts. "I've done all I can, finding and alerting the one person who might understand. There is always one, you know. Just as every action in physical science has an equal and opposite reaction, the manifestation of the dark ones can draw the likes of me to whatever might counter-balance their incursions. Whatever happens now is up to you, my boy."

"Up to me? What am I supposed to do? Flatter Lucas by telling him this movie isn't worthy of his talents?"

The little man suddenly smiled. "Remember what the epigrammatist said: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

So saying, he turned his donkey and went bouncing off along a little path until he disappeared around some rocks. I found myself staring after him, then mentally shook myself and rode Cocoa back to where Mel and Chuck stood waiting on their horses.

I gave them an uneasy grin, shaking my head. "I'm a little worried about that old man. Maybe he's been out in the sun too long."

They looked at each other, and then back at me. "What old man?" they asked in unison.

"This is crazy," Chuck grumbled as we watched Lucas Dark arranging the set-up for the final scene. "Nobody shoots stuff at night. There ain't enough light. You shoot your night scenes during the day with a filter over the camera lens to make it look like night. Everybody knows that."



"Not our director and star, apparently," Mel said. We stood with the rest of the cast and crew, all of us facing the mountainous horizon as we'd been told to do, even though that didn't make sense, either. You wouldn't film a cast and crew mixture in a movie, half of us in costume and the rest in regular clothing.

So why were we being placed here?

Lucas seemed to be having an argument with the cameraman. He wasn't watching the rest of us. I took the opportunity to break ranks, and began backing slowly toward the rear of our little crowd while everyone was waiting curiously for whatever was going to be coming at us. I wasn't curious, myself. I thought I already knew.

When I got back to the props tent, I emptied the blanks of my six-shooter into a supply bin, and reloaded it with real bullets from my pocket. Then I moved through the tent and out the other side, to where I'd left Cocoa saddled and bridled, and mounted up. Nobody seemed to notice.

I swung wide around the shooting location complex, keeping Cocoa to the shadows of trees and rocks as I headed us uphill in the direction where the single camera was pointed. Just one camera, I thought. If this was as expensive or complicated a shoot as it seemed from its buildup, it didn't make sense to have just one camera recording it. Little studios like ours couldn't afford such retakes.

Cocoa was clearly uneasy, unusual for him, the further we got from our encampment, or maybe it was the closer we got to whatever was waiting over the hill. He was glad to keep going higher, though, away from one or the other, or both. Even in the dark, I trusted his surefootedness, but I held him to a walk even when he wanted to canter.

I didn't know what I was looking for. I just knew that Mr. Lazarus -- and I was sure I hadn't imagined him, even if Chuck and Mel both insisted they hadn't seen any little old man on a donkey chatting with me that afternoon -- had added considerably to the nightmares I'd been having, and I just had to see what was out there before it came at us.

Cocoa sensed it before I did. He froze, his ears laid back as he stared at something in the little valley below us, and I could feel his whole body give a shiver beneath me. At first, I saw nothing. Then they began to appear, tiny yellow dots like lightning bugs, only not the pleasant yellow twinkles of a summer night but an almost sulfurous-looking glitter, the eyes of things not of this world, not even out of one of Chuck's strange magazines. These were creatures being formed even as I watched, creatures unlike anything that walked the earth, creatures that could in no way coexist with our kind of life...



They took form, seeming to rise up right out of the ground, assuming those shapes I'd seen in my nightmares -- black riders on steeds shaped vaguely like horses, but no horse ever stood as massive as these, or had glowing eyes like those of their riders, eyes both alien and evil.

I knew what would happen next! Lucas Dark wanted no witnesses to what he was recording on his film, images that would sweep out of movie theaters everywhere, riding down their viewers just as they would soon ride down every member of our cast and crew who might otherwise spread the warning of their coming. That was why Lucas didn't want anyone to leave. Lucas planned that none of us would leave here, ever.

Lucas was one of them.

I didn't know how he'd assumed human form, and I didn't care. He was on the verge of doing what Mr. Lazarus had warned me about, whoever Mr. Lazarus was, however he knew. He was here to spread his kind across the globe, these dark ones, forming below where I sat all but paralyzed at the sight.

Then, even in the night, it seemed their formation was complete. Even up here, I could feel the ground shake as those dragon-like steeds pawed it. The pairs of yellow eyes, riders and mounts alike, moved about randomly as though seeking direction. And then they stopped moving. With one accord, all of them turned to look directly at where Cocoa and I stood and froze on us.

Their regard was palpable. With no direction at all from me, Cocoa spun around and began moving down the hillside away from them. Yes, I thought. We had to get back to where everyone was waiting, and warn them.

Somehow, even as fast as he was moving, Cocoa navigated us down to level ground in the dark without spilling us. I bent low over his neck as we hit the plain, the wind from his movement trying to tear away my black hat despite its chin strap, and gave him his head. I didn't have to apply any leg pressure to speed him up. He was galloping as full out as he could possibly go, perhaps faster than he had ever gone before.

But as I settled into the rhythm of his flight, I could feel those others behind us, the ground shaking as they pursued us. I realized I was bringing not a warning to my friends and co-workers, but death and destruction in my wake, even as I saw them gathered ahead of where we raced.

They seemed mesmerized as I had been, staring beyond me at those dark riders approaching. Perhaps they still thought it was somehow being staged. I could see the eye of that single camera ahead, recording all this, with Lucas himself working it. Apparently he was taking no chances with

one of our regular cameramen abandoning the equipment at what he would have seen in the lens.

I pulled Cocoa to a halt, which was no easy task. He reared up as I yelled at those who regarded us. "Scatter!" I called. "Get away! Stampede!" I'm sure I said more things that made as little sense, but they seemed to get the idea. The tight group in front of me began to break up. As I had found my voice, they began finding theirs, repeating my admonitions to move out, take cover, flee.

It seemed good advice for me, too, as I glanced over my shoulder and saw the images of my nightmare bearing down. I spun Cocoa off to my right, at an angle away from the path of the furies behind us. Cocoa responded with a new burst of speed, and I thought for a minute we would get clear of our pursuers.

Another glimpse behind me showed that those shadowy forms had also veered off, and were following where we rode.

Panic arose within me. They followed us! Why? Out of nowhere, I seemed to hear the calm voice of the little old man, quoting some epigram, something about imitation...

It hit me. I was still dressed to double for Lucas Dark, at least his human form. His creatures mistook me for him. They followed because they thought I was leading them.

Well, I would lead them, all right. Once more I wheeled Cocoa, back toward where the real Lucas -- or the real whatever he was -- remained behind the camera, the only figure which had not fled from where everyone had been gathered like cattle to the slaughter. He was the only figure still there and, even as I bore down on him, the figure wavered and began to change. I could see appendages other than arms swaying around him, no doubt waiting to seize me when I got close enough. But he could not leave that camera, not if he wanted to record all this. He was pinned, and I was not.

Cocoa swerved at my guidance, avoiding that first elongated grasping thing which shot out at us. We dodged a second one, Cocoa responding instantly to my slightest rein or knee pressure. And then my pistol was in my hand, and I was emptying it at the form behind the camera, knowing even as I did that whatever could change form like that could ignore the passage of bullets through it...

The camera erupted into flame on its tripod.

I never knew why it happened. One of my bullets must have sparked an electric cable or some other component. The flammable film inside blazed up, silhouetting the figure behind it. Still, that which had been

Lucas Dark stood before us, ignoring the flames which engulfed him, and I could feel the vibrations of the dark riders almost upon us from behind. I urged Cocoa past the camera and its unearthly operator, feeling the ground tremble increasingly as our pursuers seemed about to swallow us up...

The pulsating stopped.

The only sound was that of Cocoa's hooves, as I slowed him to a stop, turned him and looked back.

Nothing remained, but a crushed and blackened camera. The horizon was empty. Cocoa stood panting beneath me as I regarded the sudden stillness, and started to wonder if I had imagined it, after all. I was still sitting there, minutes or hours later, when Chuck and Mel and some of the others crept out of their hiding places and over to where I stared, mouth agape, hardly breathing, at nothing.

"I've seen some strange things in my time," Chuck told me later, when the picture had been written off as a loss, Lucas Dark was believed to have been the victim of a freak fire so hot it left nothing of him, and absolutely nobody else tried to explain what they'd experienced. "But nothing, ever, like that."

I couldn't help asking. "You saw what happened, Chuck?"

"All I saw was some dark forms that seemed to be chasing you, and Lucas somehow raring up in front of you, and they came together when you flashed past -- and then they were all gone. Like they cancelled one another out." He shook his head. "I think I'm going to quit reading those magazines. My imagination's gone plumb haywire."

"Maybe they'd just been waiting," I said, thinking aloud. "Waiting until our technology came up with movie screens, something they could use to propagate their images and, somehow, themselves everywhere. All in the guise of a simple cowboy movie."

Chuck gave me a wary look. "Partner, I don't even want to know what you're talking about. But they'll probably come up with something even more pervasive than movie screens in the future, if those stories I been reading ever come true. Imagine a little screen called a televisor or televiwer, or something in every home. They might actually invent it one of these days."

I suppressed a shudder. "If they ever try to spread though something like that, I hope Mr. Lazarus is still around," I murmured. "But something like that in every home? Nah, that's not likely. Shoot, that's as unlikely as..." I thought for a few seconds. "As singing cowboys catching on. I'm not worried."