

JUNE

# STRANGE TALES

OF MYSTERY

AND TERROR

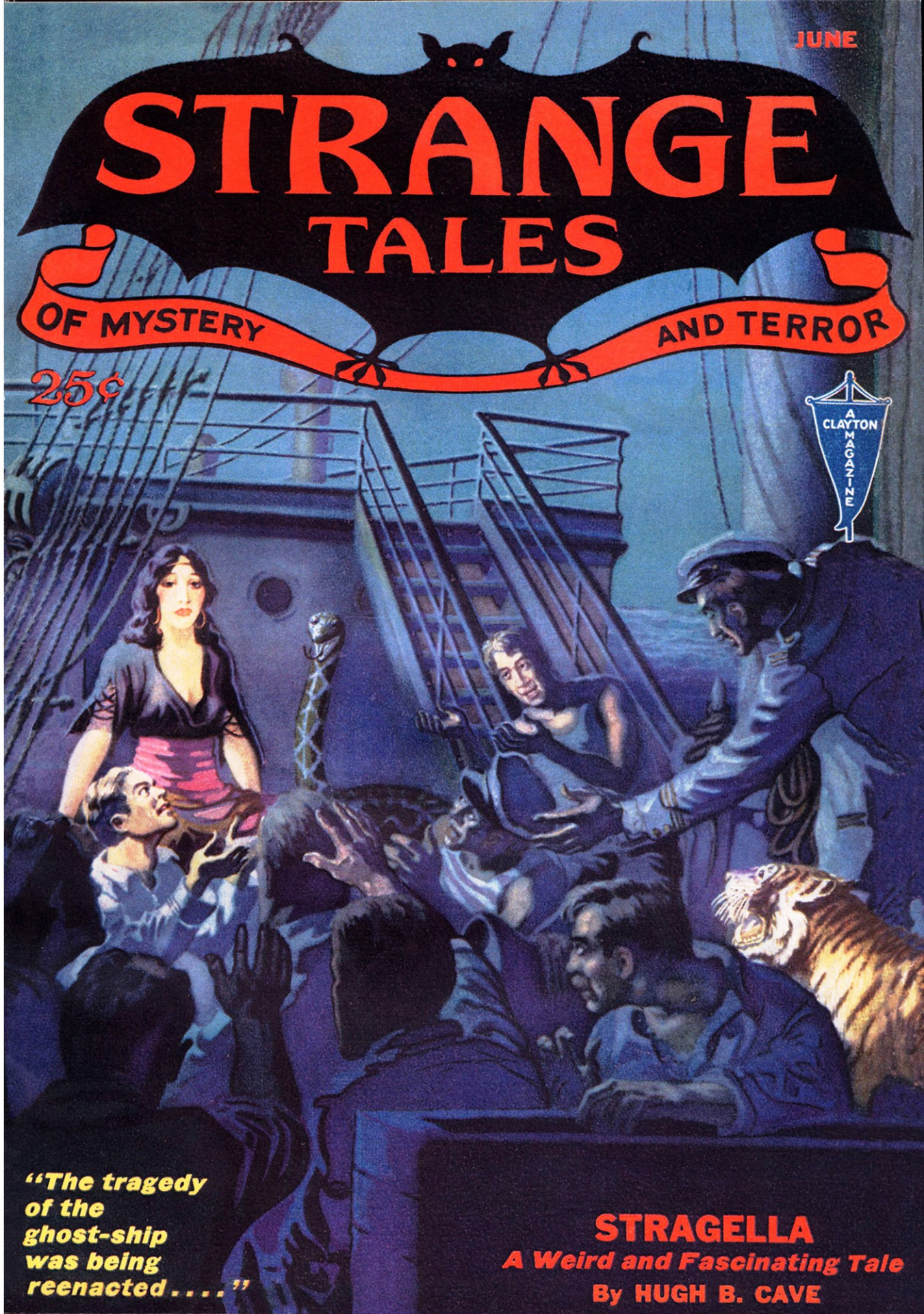
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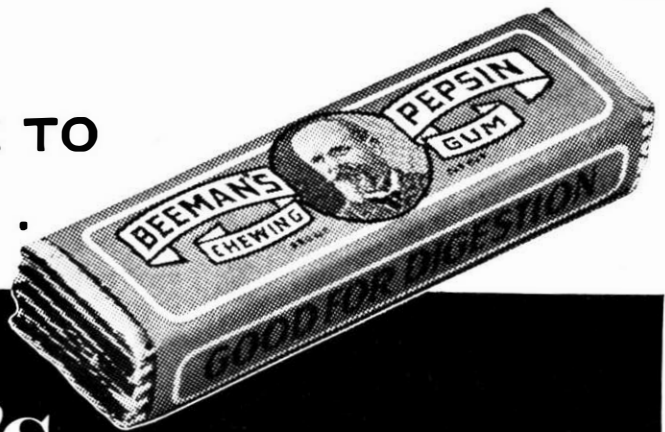


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VOL. II, No. 2

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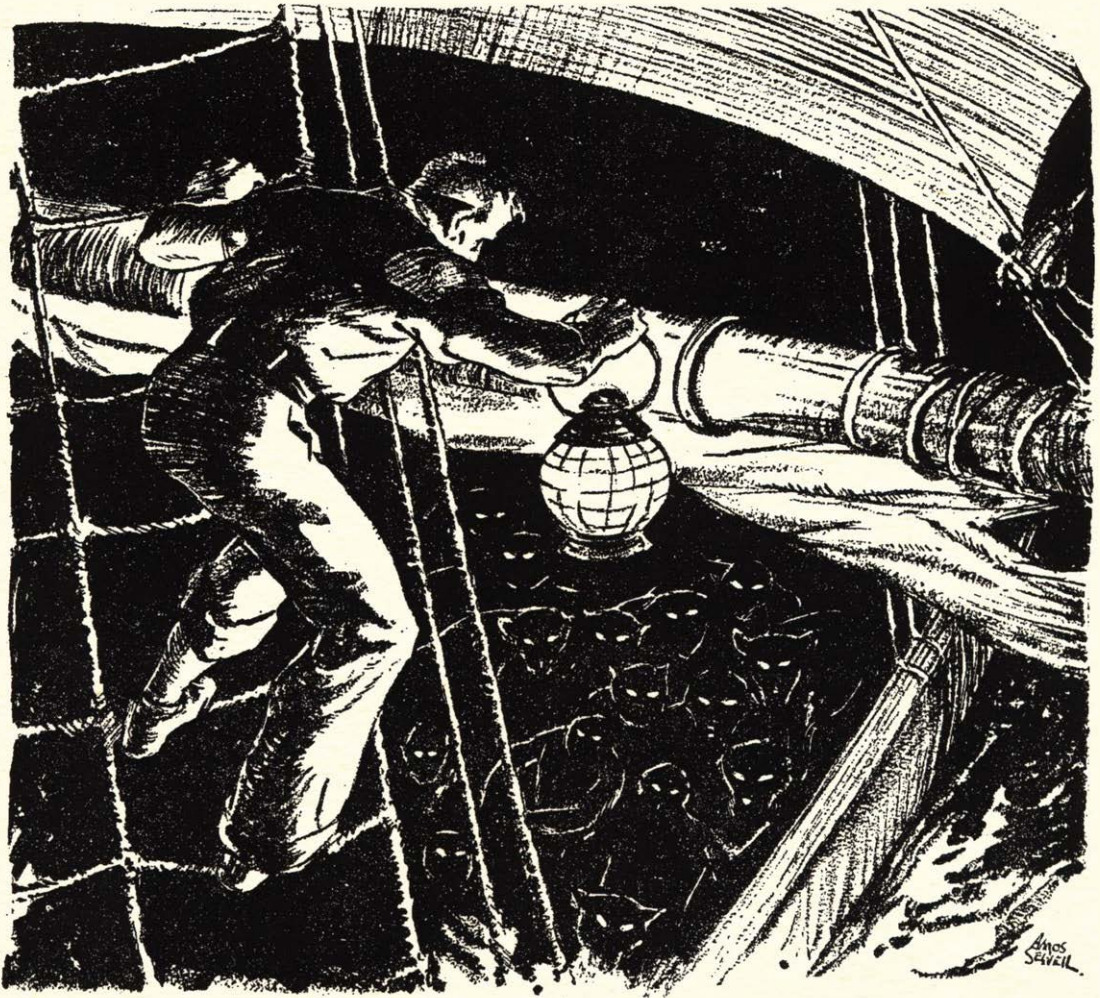
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*Blurred shadows seemed to be prowling through the darkness.*

# Stragella

By Hugh B. Cave

**N**IGHT, black as pitch and filled with the wailing of a dead wind, sank like a shapeless specter into the oily waters of the Indian Ocean, leaving a great gray expanse of sullen sea, empty except for a solitary speck that rose and dropped in the long swell.

The forlorn thing was a ship's boat. For seven days and seven nights it had drifted through the waste, bearing its ghastly burden. Now, groping to his knees, one of the two survivors peered away into the East, where the first glare of a red sun filtered over the rim of the world.

Within arm's

The meeting with Stragella, under the mist that was a shroud.

reach, in the bottom of the boat, lay a second figure, face down. All night long he had lain there. Even the torrential shower, descending in the dark hours and flooding the dory with life-giving water, had failed to move him.

The first man crawled forward. Scooping water out of the tarpaulin with a battered tin cup, he turned his companion over and forced the stuff through receded lips.

"Miggs!" The voice was a cracked whisper. "Miggs! Good God, you ain't dead, Miggs? I ain't left all alone out here—"

John Miggs opened his eyes feebly.

"What—what's wrong?" he muttered.

"We got water, Miggs! Water!"

"You're dreamin' again, Yancy. It—it ain't water. It's nothin' but sea—"

"It rained!" Yancy screeched. "Last night it rained. I stretched the tarpaulin. All night long I been lyin' face up, lettin' it rain in my mouth!"

Miggs touched the tin cup to his tongue and lapped its contents suspiciously. With a mumbled cry he gulped the water down. Then, gibbering like a monkey, he was crawling toward the tarpaulin.

Yancy flung him back, snarling.

"No you won't!" Yancy rasped. "We got to save it, see? We got to get out of here."

Miggs glowered at him from the opposite end of the dory. Yancy sprawled down beside the tarpaulin and stared once again over the abandoned sea, struggling to reason things out.

THEY were somewhere in the Bay of Bengal. A week ago they had been on board the *Cardigan*, a tiny tramp freighter carrying its handful of passengers from Maulmain to Georgetown.

The *Cardigan* had foundered in the typhoon off the Mergui Archipelago. For twelve hours she had heaved and groaned through an inferno of swirling seas. Then she had gone under.

Yancy's memory of the succeeding events was a twisted, unreal parade of horrors. At first there had been five men in the little boat. Four days of terrific heat, no water, no food, had driven the little Persian priest mad; and he had jumped overboard. The other two had drunk salt water and died in agony. Now he and Miggs were alone.

The sun was incandescent in a white hot sky. The sea was calm, greasy, unbroken except for the slow, patient black fins that had been following the boat for days. But something else, during the night, had joined the sharks in their hellish pursuit. Sea snakes, hydrophiinae, wriggling out of nowhere, had come to haunt the dory, gliding in circles round and round, venomous, vivid, vindictive. And overhead were gulls wheeling, swooping in erratic arcs, cackling fiendishly and watching the two men with relentless eyes.

Yancy glanced up at them. Gulls and snakes could mean only one thing—land! He supposed they had come from the Andamans, the prison isles of India. It didn't much matter. They were here. Hideous, menacing harbingers of hope!

His shirt, filthy and ragged, hung open to the belt, revealing a lean chest tattooed with grotesque figures. A long time ago—too long to remember—he had gone on a drunken binge in Goa. Jap rum had done it. In company with two others of the *Cardigan's* crew he had shambled into a tattooing establishment and ordered the Jap, in a bloated voice, to "paint anything you damned well like, professor. Anything at all!" And the Jap, being



of a religious mind and sentimental, had decorated Yancy's chest with a most beautiful Crucifix, large, ornate, and colorful.

IT brought a grim smile to Yancy's lips as he peered down at it. But presently his attention was centered on something else—something unnatural, bewildering, on the horizon. The thing was a narrow bank of fog lying low on the water, as if a distorted cloud had sunk out of the sky and was floating heavily, half submerged in the sea. And the small boat was drifting toward it.

In a little while the fog bank hung dense on all sides. Yancy groped to his feet, gazing about him. John Miggs muttered something beneath his breath and crossed himself.

The thing was shapeless, grayish-white, clammy. It reeked—not with the dank smell of sea fog, but with the sickly, pungent stench of a buried jungle or a subterranean mushroom cellar. The sun seemed unable to penetrate it. Yancy could see the red ball above him, a feeble, smothered eye of crimson fire, blotted by swirling vapor.

"The gulls," mumbled Miggs. "They're gone."

"I know it. The sharks, too—and the snakes. We're all alone, Miggs."

An eternity passed, while the dory drifted deeper and deeper into the cone. And then there was something else—something that came like a moaning voice out of the fog. The muted, irregular, sing-song clangor of a ship's bell!

"Listen!" Miggs cackled. "You hear—"

But Yancy's trembling arm had come up abruptly, pointing ahead.

"By God, Miggs! Look!"

Miggs scrambled up, rocking the boat beneath him. His bony fingers gripped Yancy's arm. They stood

there, the two of them, staring at the massive black shape that loomed up, like an ethereal phantom of another world, a hundred feet before them.

"We're saved," Miggs said incoherently. "Thank God, Nels—"

Yancy called out shrilly. His voice rang through the fog with a hoarse jangle, like the scream of a caged tiger. It choked into silence. And there was no answer, no responsive outcry—nothing so much as a whisper.

THE dory drifted closer. No sound came from the lips of the two men as they drew alongside. There was nothing—nothing but the intermittent tolling of that mysterious, muted bell.

Then they realized the truth—a truth that brought a moan from Miggs' lips. The thing was a derelict, frowning out of the water, inanimate, sullen, buried in its winding-sheet of unearthly fog. Its stern was high, exposing a propeller red with rust and matted with clinging weeds. Across the bow, nearly obliterated by age, appeared the words: *Golconda—Cardiff*.

"Yancy, it ain't no real ship! It ain't of this world—"

Yancy stooped with a snarl, and picked up the oar in the bottom of the dory. A rope dangled within reach, hanging like a black serpent over the scarred hull. With clumsy strokes he drove the small boat beneath it; then, reaching up, he seized the line and made the boat fast.

"You're—goin' aboard?" Miggs said fearfully.

Yancy hesitated, staring up with bleary eyes. He was afraid, without knowing why. The *Golconda* frightened him. The mist clung to her tenaciously. She rolled heavily, ponderously in the long swell; and the bell was still tolling softly.

somewhere within the lost vessel.

"Well, why not?" Yancy growled. "There may be food aboard. What's there to be afraid of?"

Miggs was silent. Grasping the ropes, Yancy clambered up them. His body swung like a gibbet-corpse against the side. Clutching the rail, he heaved himself over; then stood there, peering into the layers of thick fog, as Miggs climbed up and dropped down beside him.

"I—don't like it," Miggs whispered. "It ain't—"

Yancy groped forward. The deck planks creaked dismally under him. With Miggs clinging close, he led the way into the waist, then into the bow. The cold fog seemed to have accumulated here in a sluggish mass, as if some magnetic force had drawn it. Through it, with arms outstretched in front of him, Yancy moved with shuffling steps, a blind man in a strange world.

**S**UDDENLY he stopped—stopped so abruptly that Miggs lurched headlong into him. Yancy's body stiffened. His eyes were wide, glaring at the deck before him. A hollow, unintelligible sound parted his lips.

Miggs cringed back with a livid screech, clawing at his shoulder.

"What—what is it?" he said thickly.

At their feet were bones. Skeletons—lying there in the swirl of vapor. Yancy shuddered as he examined them. Dead things they were, dead and harmless, yet they were given new life by the motion of the mist. They seemed to crawl, to wriggle, to slither toward him and away from him.

He recognized some of them as portions of human frames. Others were weird, unshapely things. A tiger skull grinned up at him with jaws that seemed to widen hungrily. The vertebrae of a huge

python lay in disjointed coils on the planks, twisted as if in agony. He discerned the skeletal remains of tigers, tapirs, and jungle beasts of unknown identity. And human heads, many of them, scattered about like an assembly of mocking, dead-alive faces, leering at him, watching him with hellish anticipation. The place was a morgue—a charnel house!

Yancy fell back, stumbling. His terror had returned with triple intensity. He felt cold perspiration forming on his forehead, on his chest, trickling down the tattooed Crucifix.

Frantically he swung about in his tracks and made for the welcome solitude of the stern deck, only to have Miggs clutch feverishly at his arm.

"I'm goin' to get out of here, Nels! That damned bell—these here things—"

Yancy flung the groping hands away. He tried to control his terror. This ship—this *Golconda*—was nothing but a tramp trader. She'd been carrying a cargo of jungle animals for some expedition. The beasts had got loose, gone amuck, in a storm. There was nothing fantastic about it!

In answer, came the intermittent clang of the hidden bell below decks and the soft lapping sound of the water swishing through the thick weeds which clung to the ship's bottom.

"Come on," Yancy said grimly. "I'm goin' to have a look around. We need food."

**H**E strode back through the waist of the ship, with Miggs shuffling behind. Feeling his way to the towering stern, he found the fog thinner, less pungent.

The hatch leading down into the stern hold was open. It hung before his face like an uplifted hand, scarred, bloated, as if in mute warn-

ing. And out of the aperture at its base straggled a spidery thing that was strangely out of place here on this abandoned derelict—a curious, menacing, crawling vine with mottled triangular leaves and immense orange-hued blossoms. Like a living snake, intertwined about itself, it coiled out of the hold and wormed over the deck.

Yancy stepped closer, hesitantly. Bending down, he reached to grasp one of the blooms, only to turn his face away and fall back with an involuntary mutter. The flowers were sickly sweet, nauseating. They repelled him with their savage odor.

"Somethin'—" Miggs whispered sibilantly, "is watchin' us, Nels! I can feel it!"

Yancy peered all about him. He, too, felt a third presence close at hand. Something malignant, evil, unearthly. He could not name it.

"It's your imagination," he snapped. "Shut up, will you?"

"We ain't alone, Nels. This ain't no ship at all!"

"Shut up!"

"But the flowers there—they ain't right. Flowers don't grow aboard a Christian ship, Nels!"

"This hulk's been here long enough for trees to grow on it," Yancy said curtly. "The seeds probably took root in the filth below."

"Well, I don't like it."

"Go forward and see what you can find. I'm goin' below to look around."

**M**IGGS shrugged helplessly and moved away. Alone, Yancy descended to the lower levels. It was dark down here, full of shadows and huge gaunt forms that lost their substance in the coils of thick, sinuous fog. He felt his way along the passage, pawing the wall with both hands. Deeper and deeper into the labyrinth he went, until he found the galley.

The galley was a dungeon, reeking of dead, decayed food, as if the stench had hung there for an eternity without being molested; as if the entire ship lay in an atmosphere of its own—an atmosphere of the grave—through which the clean outer air never broke.

But there was food here; canned food that stared down at him from the rotted shelves. The labels were blurred, illegible. Some of the cans crumbled in Yancy's fingers as he seized them—disintegrated into brown, dry dust and trickled to the floor. Others were in fair condition, air-tight. He stuffed four of them into his pockets and turned away.

Eagerly now, he stumbled back along the passage. The prospects of food took some of those other thoughts out of his mind, and he was in better humor when he finally found the captain's cabin.

Here, too, the evident age of the place gripped him. The walls were gray with mold, falling into a broken, warped floor. A single table stood on the far side near the bunk, a blackened, grimy table bearing an upright oil lamp and a single black book.

He picked the lamp up timidly and shook it. The circular base was yet half full of oil, and he set it down carefully. It would come in handy later. Frowning, he peered at the book beside it.

It was a seaman's Bible, a small one, lying there, coated with cracked dust, dismal with age. Around it, as if some crawling slug had examined it on all sides, leaving a trail of excretion, lay a peculiar line of black pitch, irregular but unbroken.

**Y**ANCY picked the book up and flipped it open. The pages slid under his fingers, allowing a scrap of loose paper to flutter to the floor. He stooped to retrieve it;

then, seeing that it bore a line of penciled script, he peered closely at it.

The writing was an apparently irrelevant scrawl—a meaningless memorandum which said crudely:

“It’s the bats and the crates. I

know it now, but it is too late.

God help me!”

With a shrug, he replaced it and thrust the Bible into his belt, where it pressed comfortingly against his body. Then he continued his exploration.

In the wall cupboard he found two full bottles of liquor, which proved to be brandy. Leaving them there, he groped out of the cabin and returned to the upper deck in search of Miggs.

Miggs was leaning on the rail, watching something below. Yancy trudged toward him, calling out shrilly:

“Say, I got food, Miggs! Food and brand—”

He did not finish. Mechanically his eyes followed the direction of Miggs’ stare, and he recoiled involuntarily as his words clipped into stifled silence. On the surface of the oily water below, huge sea snakes paddled against the ship’s side—enormous slithering shapes, banded with streaks of black and red and yellow, vicious and repulsive.

“They’re back,” Miggs said quickly. “They know this ain’t no proper ship. They come here out of their hell-hole, to wait for us.”

Yancy glanced at him curiously. The inflection of Miggs’ voice was peculiar—not at all the phlegmatic, guttural tone that usually grumbled through the little man’s lips. It was almost eager!

“What did you find?” Yancy faltered.

“Nothin’. All the ship’s boats are hangin’ in their davits. Never been touched.”

“I found food,” Yancy said

abruptly, gripping his arm. “We’ll eat; then we’ll feel better. What the hell are we, anyhow—a couple of fools? Soon as we eat, we’ll stock the dory and get off this blasted death ship and clear out of this stinkin’ fog. We got water in the tarpaulin.”

“We’ll clear out? Will we, Nels?”

“Yah. Let’s eat.”

ONCE again, Yancy led the way below decks to the galley. There, after a twenty-minute effort in building a fire in the rusty stove, he and Miggs prepared a meal, carrying the food into the captain’s cabin, where Yancy lighted the lamp.

They ate slowly, sucking the taste hungrily out of every mouthful, reluctant to finish. The lamp-light, flickering in their faces, made gaunt masks of features that were already haggard and full of anticipation.

The brandy, which Yancy fetched out of the cupboard, brought back strength and reason—and confidence. It brought back, too, that unnatural sheen to Miggs’ twitching eyes.

“We’d be damned fools to clear out of here right off,” Miggs said suddenly. “The fog’s got to lift sooner or later. I ain’t trustin’ myself to no small boat again, Nels—not when we don’t know where we’re at.”

Yancy looked at him sharply. The little man turned away with a guilty shrug. Then hesitantly:

“I—I kinda like it here, Nels.”

Yancy caught the odd gleam in those small eyes. He bent forward quickly.

“Where’d you go when I left you alone?” he demanded.

“Me? I didn’t go nowhere. I—I just looked around a bit, and I picked a couple of them flowers. See.”

Miggs groped in his shirt pocket and held up one of the livid, orange-colored blooms. His face took on an unholy brilliance as he held the thing close to his lips and inhaled its deadly aroma. His eyes, glittering across the table, were on fire with sudden fanatic lust.

**F**OR an instant Yancy did not move. Then, with a savage oath, he lurched up and snatched the flower out of Miggs' fingers. Whirling, he flung it to the floor and ground it under his boot.

"You damned thick-headed fool!" he screeched. "You— God help you!"

Then he went limp, muttering incoherently. With faltering steps he stumbled out of the cabin and along the black passageway, and up on the abandoned deck. He staggered to the rail and stood there, holding himself erect with nerveless hands.

"God!" he whispered hoarsely. "God—what did I do that for? Am I goin' crazy?"

No answer came out of the silence. But he knew the answer. The thing he had done down there in the skipper's cabin—those mad words that had spewed from his mouth — had been involuntary. Something inside him, some sense of danger that was all about him, had hurled the words out of his mouth before he could control them. And his nerves were on edge, too; they felt as though they were ready to crack.

But he knew instinctively that Miggs had made a terrible mistake. There was something unearthly and wicked about those sickly sweet flowers. Flowers didn't grow aboard ship. Not real flowers. Real flowers had to take root somewhere, and, besides, they didn't have that drunken, etherish odor. Miggs should have left the vine alone.

Clinging at the rail there, Yancy *knew* it, without knowing why.

**H**E stayed there for a long time, trying to think and get his nerves back again. In a little while he began to feel frightened, being alone, and he returned below-decks to the cabin.

He stopped in the doorway, and stared.

Miggs was still there, slumped grotesquely over the table. The bottle was empty. Miggs was drunk, unconscious, mercifully oblivious of his surroundings.

For a moment Yancy glared at him morosely. For a moment, too, a new fear tugged at Yancy's heart—fear of being left alone through the coming night. He yanked Miggs' arm and shook him savagely; but there was no response. It would be hours, long, dreary, sinister hours, before Miggs regained his senses.

Bitterly Yancy took the lamp and set about exploring the rest of the ship. If he could find the ship's papers, he considered, they might dispel his terror. He might learn the truth.

With this in mind, he sought the mate's quarters. The papers had not been in the captain's cabin where they belonged; therefore they might be here.

But they were not. There was nothing—nothing but a chronometer, sextant, and other nautical instruments lying in curious positions on the mate's table, rusted beyond repair. And there were flags, signal flags, thrown down as if they had been used at the last moment. And, lying in a distorted heap on the floor, was a human skeleton.

Avoiding this last horror, Yancy searched the room thoroughly. Evidently, he reasoned, the captain had died early in the *Golconda's* unknown plague. The mate had

brought these instruments, these flags, to his own cabin, only to succumb before he could use them.

Only one thing Yancy took with him when he went out: a lantern, rusty and brittle, but still serviceable. It was empty, but he poured oil into it from the lamp. Then, returning the lamp to the captain's quarters where Miggs lay unconscious, he went on deck.

**H**E climbed the bridge and set the lantern beside him. Night was coming. Already the fog was lifting, allowing darkness to creep in beneath it. And so Yancy stood there, alone and helpless, while blackness settled with uncanny quickness over the entire ship.

He was being watched. He felt it. Invisible eyes, hungry and menacing, were keeping check on his movements. On the deck beneath him were those inexplicable flowers, trailing out of the unexplored hold, glowing like phosphorescent faces in the gloom.

"By God," Yancy mumbled, "I'm goin' to get out of here!"

His own voice startled him and caused him to stiffen and peer about him, as if someone else had uttered the words. And then, very suddenly, his eyes became fixed on the far horizon to starboard. His lips twitched open, spitting out a shrill cry.

"Miggs! Miggs! A light! Look, Miggs—"

Frantically he stumbled down from the bridge and clawed his way below decks to the mate's cabin. Feverishly he seized the signal flags. Then, clutching them in his hand, he moaned helplessly and let them fall. He realized that they were no good, no good in the dark. Gibbering to himself, he searched for rockets. There were none.

Suddenly he remembered the lantern. Back again he raced through the passage, on deck, up on the

bridge. In another moment, with the lantern dangling from his arm, he was clambering higher and higher into the black spars of the mainmast. Again and again he slipped and caught himself with outflung hands. And at length he stood high above the deck, feet braced, swinging the lantern back and forth. . . .

**B**ELOW him the deck was no longer silent, no longer abandoned. From bow to stern it was trembling, creaking, whispering up at him. He peered down fearfully. Blurred shadows seemed to be prowling through the darkness, coming out of nowhere, pacing dolefully back and forth through the gloom. They were watching him with a furtive interest.

He called out feebly. The muted echo of his own voice came back up to him. He was aware that the bell was tolling again, and the swish of the sea was louder, more persistent.

With an effort he caught a grip on himself.

"Damned fool," he rasped. "Drivin' yourself crazy—"

The moon was rising. It blurred the blinking light on the horizon and penetrated the darkness like a livid yellow finger. Yancy lowered the lantern with a sob. It was no good now. In the glare of the moonlight, this puny flame would be invisible to the men aboard that other ship. Slowly, cautiously, he climbed down to the deck.

He tried to think of something to do, to take his mind off the fear. Striding to the rail, he hauled up the water butts from the dory. Then he stretched the tarpaulin to catch the precipitation of the night dew. No telling how long he and Miggs would be forced to remain aboard the hulk.

He turned, then, to explore the forecabin. On his way across the

deck, he stopped and held the light over the creeping vine. The curious flowers had become fragrant, heady, with the fumes of an intoxicating drug. He followed the coils to where they vanished into the hold, and he looked down. He saw only a tumbled pile of boxes and crates. Barred boxes which must have been cages at one time.

**A** GAIN he turned away. The ship was trying to tell him something. He felt it—felt the movements of the deck planks beneath his feet. The moonlight, too, had made hideous white things of the scattered bones in the bow. Yancy stared at them with a shiver. He stared again, and grotesque thoughts obtruded into his consciousness. The bones were moving. Slithering, sliding over the deck, assembling themselves, gathering into definite shapes. He could have sworn it!

Cursing, he wrenched his eyes away. Damned fool, thinking such thoughts! With clenched fists he advanced to the forecastle; but before he reached it, he stopped again.

It was the sound of flapping wings that brought him about. Turning quickly, with a jerk, he was aware that the sound emanated from the open hold. Hesitantly he stepped forward—and stood rigid with an involuntary scream.

Out of the aperture came two horrible shapes—two inhuman things with immense, clapping wings and glittering eyes. Hideous; enormous. *Bats!*

Instinctively he flung his arm up to protect himself. But the creatures did not attack. They hung for an instant, poised over the hatch, eyeing him with something that was fiendishly like intelligence. Then they flapped over the deck, over the rail, and away into the night. As they sped away to-

wards the west, where he had seen the light of that other ship twinkling, they clung together like witches hell-bent on some evil mission. And below them, in the bloated sea, huge snakes weaved smoky, golden patterns—waiting! . . .

**H**E stood fast, squinting after the bats. Like two hellish black eyes they grew smaller and smaller, became pinpoints in the moon-glow, and finally vanished. Still he did not stir. His lips were dry, his body stiff and unnatural. He licked his mouth. Then he was conscious of something more. From somewhere behind him came a thin, throbbing thread of harmony—a lovely, utterly sweet musical note that fascinated him.

He turned slowly. His heart was hammering, surging. His eyes went suddenly wide.

There, not five feet from him, stood a human form. Not his imagination. Real!

But he had never seen a girl like her before. She was too beautiful. She was wild, almost savage, with her great dark eyes boring into him. Her skin was white, smooth as alabaster. Her hair was jet black; and a waving coil of it, like a broken cobweb of pitch strings, framed her face. Grotesque hoops of gold dangled from her ears. In her hair, above them, gleamed two of those sinister flowers from the straggling vine.

He did not speak; he simply gaped. The girl was bare-footed, bare-legged. A short, dark skirt covered her slender thighs. A ragged white waist, open at the throat, revealed the full curve of her breast. In one hand she held a long wooden reed, a flute-like instrument fashioned out of crude wood. And about her middle, dangling almost to the deck, twined a scarlet, silken sash, brilliant as the sun, but not so scarlet as her

lips, which were parted in a faint, suggestive smile, showing teeth of marble whiteness!

"Who—who are you?" Yancy mumbled.

She shook her head. Yet she smiled with her eyes, and he felt, somehow, that she understood him. He tried again, in such tongues as he knew. Still she shook her head, and still he felt that she was mocking him. Not until he chanced upon a scattered, faltering greeting in Serbian, did she nod her head.

"Dobra!" she replied, in a husky, rich voice which sounded, somehow, as if it were rarely used.

**H**E stepped closer then. She was a gipsy evidently. A Tzany of the Serbian hills. She moved very close to him with a floating, almost ethereal movement of her slender body. Peering into his face, flashing her haunting smile at him, she lifted the flute-like instrument and, as if it were nothing at all unnatural or out of place, began to play again the song which had first attracted his attention.

He listened in silence until she had finished. Then, with a cunning smile, she touched her fingers to her lips and whispered softly:

"You—mine. Yes?"

He did not understand. She clutched his arm and glanced fearfully toward the west, out over the sea.

"You—mine!" she said again, fiercely. "Papa Bocito—Seraphino—they no have you. You—not go—to them!"

He thought he understood then. She turned away from him and went silently across the deck. He watched her disappear into the fore-castle, and would have followed her, but once again the ship—the whole ship—seemed to be struggling to whisper a warning.

Presently she returned, holding in her white hand a battered silver goblet, very old and very tarnished, brimming with scarlet fluid. He took it silently. It was impossible to refuse her. Her eyes had grown into lakes of night, lit by the burning moon. Her lips were soft, searching, undeniable.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

"Stragella," she smiled.

"Stragella. . . . Stragella. . . ."

The name itself was compelling. He drank the liquid slowly, without taking his eyes from her lovely face. The stuff had the taste of wine—strong, sweet wine. It was intoxicating, with the same weird effect that was contained in the orange blooms which she wore in her hair and which groveled over the deck behind her.

Yancy's hands groped up weakly. He rubbed his eyes, feeling suddenly weak, powerless, as if the very blood had been drained from his veins. Struggling futilely, he staggered back, moaning half inaudibly.

**S**TRAGELLA'S arms went about him, caressing him with sensuous touch. He felt them, and they were powerful, irresistible. The girl's smile maddened him. Her crimson lips hung before his face, drawing nearer, mocking him. Then, all at once, she was seeking his throat. Those warm, passionate, deliriously pleasant lips were searching to touch him.

He sensed his danger. Frantically he strove to lift his arms and push her away. Deep in his mind some struggling intuition, some half-alive idea, warned him that he was in terrible peril. This girl, Stragella, was not of his kind; she was a creature of the darkness, a denizen of a different, frightful world of her own! Those lips, wanting his flesh, were inhuman, too fervid—



Suddenly she shrank away from him, releasing him with a jerk. A snarling animal-like sound surged through her flaming mouth. Her hand lashed out, rigid, pointing to the thing that hung in his belt. Talonic fingers pointed to the Bible that defied her!

But the scarlet fluid had taken its full effect. Yancy slumped down, unable to cry out. In a heap he lay there, paralyzed, powerless to stir.

He knew that she was commanding him to rise. Her lips, moving in pantomime, formed soundless words. Her glittering eyes were fixed upon him, hypnotic. The Bible—she wanted him to cast it over the rail! She wanted him to stand up and go into her arms. Then her lips would find a hold. . . .

But he could not obey. He could not raise his arms to support himself. She, in turn, stood at bay and refused to advance. Then, whirling about, her lips drawn into a diabolical curve, beautiful but bestial, she retreated. He saw her dart back, saw her tapering body whip about, with the crimson sash out-flung behind her as she raced across the deck.

**Y**ANCY closed his eyes to blot out the sight. When he opened them again, they opened to a new, more intense horror. On the *Golconda's* deck, Stragella was darting erratically among those piles of gleaming bones. But they were bones no longer. They had gathered into shapes, taken on flesh, blood. Before his very eyes they assumed substance, men and beasts alike. And then began an orgy such as Nels Yancy had never before looked upon—an orgy of the un-dead.

Monkeys, giant apes, lunged about the deck. A huge python reared its sinuous head to glare.

On the hatch cover a snow-leopard, snarling furiously, crouched to spring. Tigers, tapers, crocodiles—fought together in the bow. A great brown bear, of the type found in the lofty plateaus of the Pamirs, clawed at the rail.

And the men! Most of them were dark-skinned—dark enough to have come from the same region, from Madras. With them crouched Chinamen, and some Anglo-Saxons. Starved, all of them. Lean, gaunt, mad!

Pandemonium raged then. Animals and men alike were insane with hunger. In a little struggling knot, the men were gathered about the number-two hatch, defending themselves. They were wielding firearms—firing pointblank with desperation into the writhing mass that confronted them. And always, between them and around them and among, darted the girl who called herself Stragella.

They cast no shadows, those ghost shapes. Not even the girl, whose arms he had felt about him only a moment ago. There was nothing real in the scene, nothing human. Even the sounds of the shots and the screams of the cornered men, even the roaring growls of the big cats, were smothered as if they came to him through heavy glass windows, from a sealed chamber.

**H**E was powerless to move. He lay in a cataleptic condition, conscious of the entire pantomime, yet unable to flee from it. And his senses were horribly acute—so acute that he turned his eyes upward with an abrupt twitch, instinctively; and then shrank into himself with a new fear as he discerned the two huge bats which had winged their way across the sea. . . .

They were returning now. Circling above him, they flapped down

one after the other and settled with heavy, sullen thuds upon the hatch, close to that weird vine of flowers. They seemed to have lost their shape, these nocturnal monstrosities, to have become fantastic blurs, enveloped in an unearthly bluish radiance. Even as he stared at them, they vanished altogether for a moment; and then the strange vapor cleared to reveal the two creatures who stood there!

Not bats! Humans! Inhumans! They were gypsies, attired in moldy, decayed garments which stamped them as Balkans. Man and woman. Lean, emaciated, ancient man with fierce white mustache; plump old woman with black, rat-like eyes that seemed unused to the light of day. And they spoke to Stragella—spoke to her eagerly. She, in turn, swung about with enraged face and pointed to the Bible in Yancy's belt.

But the pantomime was not finished. On the deck the men and animals lay moaning, sobbing. Stragella turned noiselessly, calling the old man and woman after her. Calling them by name.

"Come—Papa Bocito, Seraphino!"

**T**HE tragedy of the ghost-ship was being reenacted. Yancy knew it, and shuddered at the thought. Starvation, cholera had driven the *Golconda's* crew mad. The jungle beasts, unfed, hideously savage, had escaped out of their confinement. And now—now that the final conflict was over—Stragella and Papa Bocito and Seraphino were proceeding about their ghastly work.

Stragella was leading them. Her charm, her beauty, gave her a hold on the men. They were in love with her. She had *made* them love her, madly and without reason. Now she was moving from one to another, loving them and holding them close to her. And as she

stepped away from each man, he went limp, faint, while she laughed terribly and passed on to the next. Her lips were parted. She licked them hungrily—licked the blood from them with a sharp, crimson tongue.

How long it lasted, Yancy did not know. Hours, hours on end. He was aware, suddenly, that a high wind was screeching and wailing in the upper reaches of the ship; and, peering up, he saw that the spars were no longer bare and rotten with age. Great gray sails stood out against the black sky—fantastic things without any definite form or outline. And the moon above them had vanished utterly. The howling wind was bringing a storm with it, filling the sails to bulging proportions. Beneath the decks the ship was groaning like a creature in agony. The seas were lashing her, slashing her, carrying her forward with amazing speed.

Of a sudden came a mighty grinding sound. The *Golconda* hurtled back, as if a huge, jagged reef of submerged rock had bored into her bottom. She listed. Her stern rose high in the air. And Stragella, with her two fellow fiends, was standing in the bow, screaming in mad laughter in the teeth of the wind. The other two laughed with her.

**Y**ANCY saw them turn toward him, but they did not stop. Somehow, he did not expect them to stop. This scene, this mad pantomime, was not the present; it was the past. He was not here at all. All this had happened years ago! Forgotten, buried in the past!

But he heard them talking, in a mongrel dialect full of Serbian words.

"It is done, Papa Bocito! We shall stay here forever now. There is land within an hour's flight, where fresh blood abounds and will

always abound. And here, on this wretched hulk, they will never find our graves to destroy us!"

The horrible trio passed close. Stragella turned, to stare out across the water, and raised her hand in silent warning. Yancy, turning wearily to stare in the same direction, saw that the first streaks of daylight were beginning to filter over the sea.

With a curious floating, drifting movement the three undead creatures moved toward the open hatch. They descended out of sight. Yancy, jerking himself erect and surprised to find that the effects of the drug had worn off with the coming of dawn, crept to the hatch and peered down—in time to see those fiendish forms enter their coffins. He knew then what the crates were. In the dim light, now that he was staring directly into the aperture, he saw what he had not noticed before. Three of those oblong boxes were filled with dank grave-earth!

He knew then the secret of the unnatural flowers. They *had* roots! They were rooted in the soil which harbored those undead bodies!

Then, like a groping finger, the dawn came out of the sea. Yancy walked to the rail, dazed. It was over now—all over. The orgy was ended. The *Golconda* was once more an abandoned, rotted hulk.

**F**OR an hour he stood at the rail, sucking in the warmth and glory of the sunlight. Once again that wall of unsightly mist was rising out of the water on all sides. Presently it would bury the ship, and Yancy shuddered.

He thought of Miggs. With quick steps he paced to the companion-way and descended to the lower passage. Hesitantly he prowled through the thickening layers of dank fog. A queer sense of foreboding crept over him.

He called out even before he reached the door. There was no answer. Thrusting the barrier open, he stepped across the sill—and then he stood still while a sudden harsh cry broke from his lips.

Miggs was lying there, half across the table, his arms flung out, his head turned grotesquely on its side, staring up at the ceiling.

"Miggs! Miggs!" The sound came choking through Yancy's lips. "Oh, God, Miggs—what's happened?"

He reeled forward. Miggs was cold and stiff, and quite dead. All the blood was gone out of his face and arms. His eyes were glassy, wide open. He was as white as marble, shrunken horribly. In his throat were two parallel marks, as if a sharp-pointed staple had been hammered into the flesh and then withdrawn. The marks of the vampire.

For a long time Yancy did not retreat. The room swayed and lurched before him. He was alone. Alone! The whole ghastly thing was too sudden, too unexpected.

Then he stumbled forward and went down on his knees, clawing at Miggs' dangling arm.

"Oh God, Miggs," he mumbled incoherently. "You got to help me. I can't stand it!"

He clung there, white-faced, staring, sobbing thickly—and presently slumped in a pitiful heap, dragging Miggs over on top of him.

**I**T was later afternoon when he regained consciousness. He stood up, fighting away the fear that overwhelmed him. He had to get away, get away! The thought hammered into his head with monotonous force. Get away!

He found his way to the upper deck. There was nothing he could do for Miggs. He would have to leave him here. Stumbling, he moved along the rail and reached down to draw the small boat closer,

where he could provision it and make it ready for his departure.

His fingers clutched emptiness. The ropes were gone. The dory was gone. He hung limp, staring down at a flat expanse of oily sea.

For an hour he did not move. He fought to throw off his fear long enough to think of a way out. Then he stiffened with a sudden jerk and pushed himself away from the rail.

The ship's boats offered the only chance. He groped to the nearest one and labored feverishly over it.

But the task was hopeless. The life boats were of metal, rusted through and through, wedged in their davits. The wire cables were knotted and immovable. He tore his hands on them, wringing blood from his scarred fingers. Even while he worked, he knew that the boats would not float. They were rotten, through and through.

He had to stop, at last, from exhaustion.

After that, knowing that there was no escape, he had to do something, anything, to keep sane. First he would clear those horrible bones from the deck, then explore the rest of the ship. . . .

It was a repulsive task, but he drove himself to it. If he could get rid of the bones, perhaps *Stragella* and the other two creatures would not return. He did not know. It was merely a faint hope, something to cling to.

**W**ITH grim, tight-pressed lips he dragged the bleached skeletons over the deck and kicked them over the side, and stood watching them as they sank from sight. Then he went to the hold, smothering his terror, and descended into the gloomy belly of the vessel. He avoided the crates with a shudder of revulsion. Ripping up that evil vine-thing by the roots, he carried it to the rail and flung

it away, with the mold of grave-earth still clinging to it.

After that he went over the entire ship, end to end, but found nothing.

He slipped the anchor chains then, in the hopes that the ship would drift away from that vindictive bank of fog. Then he paced back and forth, muttering to himself and trying to force courage for the most hideous task of all.

The sea was growing dark, and with dusk came increasing terror. He knew the *Golconda* was drifting. Knew, too, that the undead inhabitants of the vessel were furious with him for allowing the boat to drift away from their source of food. Or they *would* be furious when they came alive again after their interim of forced sleep.

And there was only one method of defeating them. It was a horrible method, and he was already frightened. Nevertheless he searched the deck for a marlin spike and found one; and, turning sluggishly, he went back to the hold.

A stake, driven through the heart of each of the horrible trio. . . .

The rickety stairs were deep in shadow. Already the dying sun, buried behind its wreath of evil fog, was a ring of bloody mist. He glanced at it and realized that he must hurry. He cursed himself for having waited so long.

It was hard, lowering himself into the pitch-black hold when he could only feel his footing and trust to fate. His boots scraped ominously on the steps. He held his hands above him, gripping the deck timbers.

And suddenly he slipped.

**H**IS foot caught on the edge of a lower step, twisted abruptly, and pitched him forward. He cried out. The marlin spike dropped from his hand and clattered on one of the crates below. He tum-

bled in a heap, clawing for support. The impact knocked something out of his belt. And he realized, even as his head came in sharp contact with the foremost oblong box, that the Bible, which had heretofore protected him, was no longer a part of him.

He did not lose complete control of his senses. Frantically he sought to regain his knees and grope for the black book in the gloom of the hold. A sobbing, choking sound came pitifully from his lips.

A soft, triumphant laugh came out of the darkness close to him. He swung about heavily—so heavily that the movement sent him sprawling again in an inert heap.

He was too late. She was already there on her knees, glaring at him hungrily. A peculiar bluish glow welled about her face. She was ghastly beautiful as she reached behind her into the oblong crate and began to trace a circle about the Bible with a chunk of soft, tarry, pitch-like substance clutched in her white fingers.

Yancy stumbled toward her, finding strength in desperation. She straightened to meet him. Her lips, curled back, exposed white teeth. Her arms coiled out, enveloping him, stifling his struggles. God, they were strong. He could not resist them. The same languid, resigned feeling came over him. He would have fallen, but she held him erect.

She did not touch him with her lips. Behind her he saw two other shapes take form in the darkness. The savage features of Papa Bocito glowered at him; and Seraphino's ratty, smoldering eyes, full of hunger, bored into him. Stragella was obviously afraid of them.

Yancy was lifted from his feet. He was carried out on deck and borne swiftly, easily, down the companionway, along the lower pas-

sage, through a swirling blanket of hellish fog and darkness, to the cabin where Miggs lay dead. And he lost consciousness while they carried him.

HE could not tell, when he opened his eyes, how long he had been asleep. It seemed a long, long interlude. Stragella was sitting beside him. He lay on the bunk in the cabin, and the lamp was burning on the table, revealing Miggs' limp body in full detail.

Yancy reached up fearfully to touch his throat. There were no marks there; not yet.

He was aware of voices, then. Papa Bocito and the ferret-faced woman were arguing with the girl beside him. The savage old man in particular was being angered by her cool, possessive smile.

"We are drifting away from the prison isles," Papa Bocito snarled, glancing at Yancy with unmasked hate. "It is his work, lifting the anchor. Unless you share him with us until we drift ashore, we shall perish!"

"He is mine," Stragella shrugged, modulating her voice to a persuasive whisper. "You had the other. This one is mine. I shall have him!"

"He belongs to us all!"

"Why?" Stragella smiled. "Because he has looked upon the resurrection night? Ah, he is the first to learn our secret."

Seraphino's eyes narrowed at that, almost to pinpoints. She jerked forward, clutching the girl's shoulder.

"We have quarreled enough," she hissed. "Soon it will be daylight. He belongs to us all because he has taken us away from the isles and learned our secrets."

The words drilled their way into Yancy's brain. "The resurrection night!" There was an ominous sig-

nificance in it, and he thought he knew its meaning. His eyes, or his face, must have revealed his thoughts, for Papa Bocito drew near to him and pointed into his face with a long, bony forefinger, muttering triumphantly.

"You have seen what no other eyes have seen," the ancient man growled bitterly. "Now, for that, you shall become one of us. Stragella wants you. She shall have you for eternity—for a life without death. Do you know what that means?"

Yancy shook his head dumbly, fearfully.

"We are the undead," Bocito leered. "Our victims become creatures of the blood, like us. At night we are free. During the day we must return to our graves. That is why"—he cast his arm toward the upper deck in a hideous gesture—"those other victims of ours have not yet become like us. They were never buried; they have no graves to return to. Each night we give them life for our own amusement, but they are not of the brotherhood—yet."

**Y**ANCY licked his lips and said nothing. He understood then. Every night it happened. A nightly pantomime, when the dead became alive again, reenacting the events of the night when the *Golconda* had become a ship of hell.

"We are gypsies," the old man gloated. "Once we were human, living in our pleasant little camp in the shadow of Pobyezdin Potok's crusty peaks, in the Morava Valley of Serbia. That was in the time of Milutin, six hundreds of years ago. Then the vampires of the hills came for us and took us to them. We lived the undead life, until there was no more blood in the valley. So we went to the coast, we three, transporting our grave-earth with us. And we lived

there, alive by night and dead by day, in the coastal villages of the Black Sea, until the time came when we wished to go to the far places."

Seraphino's guttural voice interrupted him, saying harshly:

"Hurry. It is nearly dawn!"

"And we obtained passage on this *Golconda*, arranging to have our crates of grave-earth carried secretly to the hold. And the ship fell into cholera and starvation and storm. She went aground. And—here we are. Ah, but there is blood upon the islands, my pretty one, and so we anchored the *Golconda* on the reef, where life was close at hand!"

Yancy closed his eyes with a shudder. He did not understand all of the words; they were a jargon of gipsy tongue. But he knew enough to horrify him.

Then the old man ceased gloating. He fell back, glowering at Stragella. And the girl laughed, a mad, cackling, triumphant laugh of possession. She leaned forward, and the movement brought her out of the line of the lamplight, so that the feeble glow fell full over Yancy's prostrate body.

**A**T that, with an angry snarl, she recoiled. Her eyes went wide with abhorrence. Upon his chest gleamed the Crucifix—the tattooed Cross and Savior which had been indelibly printed there. Stragella held her face away, shielding her eyes. She cursed him horribly. Backing away, she seized the arms of her companions and pointed with trembling finger to the thing which had repulsed her.

The fog seemed to seep deeper and deeper into the cabin during the ensuing silence. Yancy struggled to a sitting posture and cringed back against the wall, waiting for them to attack him. It would be finished in a moment, he

knew. Then he would join Miggs, with those awful marks on his throat and Stragella's lips crimson with his sucked blood.

But they held their distance. The fog enveloped them, made them almost indistinct. He could see only three pairs of glaring, staring, phosphorescent eyes that grew larger and wider and more intensely terrible.

He buried his face in his hands, waiting. They did not come. He heard them mumbling, whispering. Vaguely he was conscious of another sound, far off and barely audible. The howl of wolves.

Beneath him the bunk was swaying from side to side with the movement of the ship. The *Golconda* was drifting swiftly. A storm had risen out of nowhere, and the wind was singing its dead dirge in the rotten spars high above decks. He could hear it moaning, wheezing, like a human being in torment.

Then the three pairs of glittering orbs moved nearer. The whispered voices ceased, and a cunning smile passed over Stragella's features. Yancy screamed, and flattened against the wall. He watched her in fascination as she crept upon him. One arm was flung across her eyes to protect them from the sight of the Crucifix. In the other hand, outstretched, groping ever nearer, she clutched that hellish chunk of pitch-like substance with which she had encircled the Bible!

**H**E knew what she would do. The thought struck him like an icy blast, full of fear and madness. She would slink closer, closer, until her hand touched his flesh. Then she would place the black substance around the tattooed cross and kill its powers. His defense would be gone. Then—those cruel lips on this throat. . . .

There was no avenue of escape.

Papa Bocito and the plump old woman, grinning malignantly, had slid to one side, between him and the doorway. And Stragella writhed forward with one alabaster arm feeling . . . feeling . . .

He was conscious of the roar of surf, very close, very loud, outside the walls of the fog-filled enclosure. The ship was lurching, reeling heavily, pitching in the swell. Hours must have passed. Hours and hours of darkness and horror.

Then she touched him. The sticky stuff was hot on his chest, moving in a slow circle. He hurled himself back, stumbled, went down, and she fell upon him.

Under his tormented body the floor of the cabin split asunder. The ship buckled from top to bottom with a grinding, roaring impact. A terrific shock burst through the ancient hulk, shattering its rotted timbers.

The lamp caromed off the table, plunging the cabin in semi-darkness. Through the port-holes filtered a gray glare. Stragella's face, thrust into Yancy's, became a mask of beautiful fury. She whirled back. She stood rigid, screaming lividly to Papa Bocito and the old hag.

"Go back! Go back!" she railed. "We have waited too long! It is dawn!"

She ran across the floor, grappling with them. Her lips were distorted. Her body trembled. She hurled her companions to the door. Then, as she followed them into the gloom of the passage, she turned upon Yancy with a last unholy snarl of defeated rage. And she was gone.

**Y**ANCY lay limp. When he struggled to his feet at last and went on deck, the sun was high in the sky, bloated and crimson, struggling to penetrate the cone of fog which swirled about the ship.

The ship lay far over, careened on her side. A hundred yards distant over the port rail lay the heaven-sent sight of land—a bleak, vacant expanse of jungle-rimmed shore line.

He went deliberately to work—a task that had to be finished quickly, lest he be discovered by the inhabitants of the shore and be considered stark mad. Returning to the cabin, he took the oil lamp and carried it to the open hold. There, sprinkling the liquid over the ancient wood, he set fire to it.

Turning, he stepped to the rail. A scream of agony, unearthly and prolonged, rose up behind him. Then he was over the rail, battling in the surf.

When he staggered up on the beach, twenty minutes later, the *Golconda* was a roaring furnace. On all sides of her the flames snarled skyward, spewing through that hellish cone of vapor. Grimly Yancy turned away and trudged along the beach.

He looked back after an hour of steady plodding. The lagoon was empty. The fog had vanished. The sun gleamed down with warm brilliance on a broad, empty expanse of sea.

**H**OURS later he reached a settlement. Men came and talked to him, and asked curious ques-

tions. They pointed to his hair, which was stark white. They told him he had reached Port Blair, on the southern island of the Andamans. After that, noticing the peculiar gleam of his blood-shot eyes, they took him to the home of the governor.

There he told his story—told it hesitantly, because he expected to be disbelieved, mocked.

The governor looked at him critically.

“You don’t expect me to understand?” the governor said. “I am not so sure, sir. This is a penal colony, a prison isle. During the past few years, more than two hundred of our convicts have died in the most curious way. Two tiny punctures in the throat. Loss of blood.”

“You—you must destroy the graves,” Yancy muttered.

The governor nodded silently, significantly.

After that, Yancy returned to the world, alone. Always alone. Men peered into his face and shrank away from the haunted stare of his eyes. They saw the Crucifix upon his chest and wondered why, day and night, he wore his shirt flapping open, so that the brilliant design glared forth.

But their curiosity was never appeased. Only Yancy knew; and Yancy was silent.

## The Sleep-Bringers of Weeng

**I**N the mythology of the Algic Indians occur little creatures who bear a striking resemblance to the fairies of Europe. Their powers are chiefly directed to putting people to sleep, and they accomplish this in a novel manner under the direction of their prince, Weeng. Gnomelike, invisible, hosts of them are everywhere present, each armed with a tiny club, and when one observes a person sitting or reclining under conditions favorable to sleep he will nimbly climb upon his forehead and strike three blows. The first blow creates drowsiness; the second makes the person lethargic, so that he begins to close

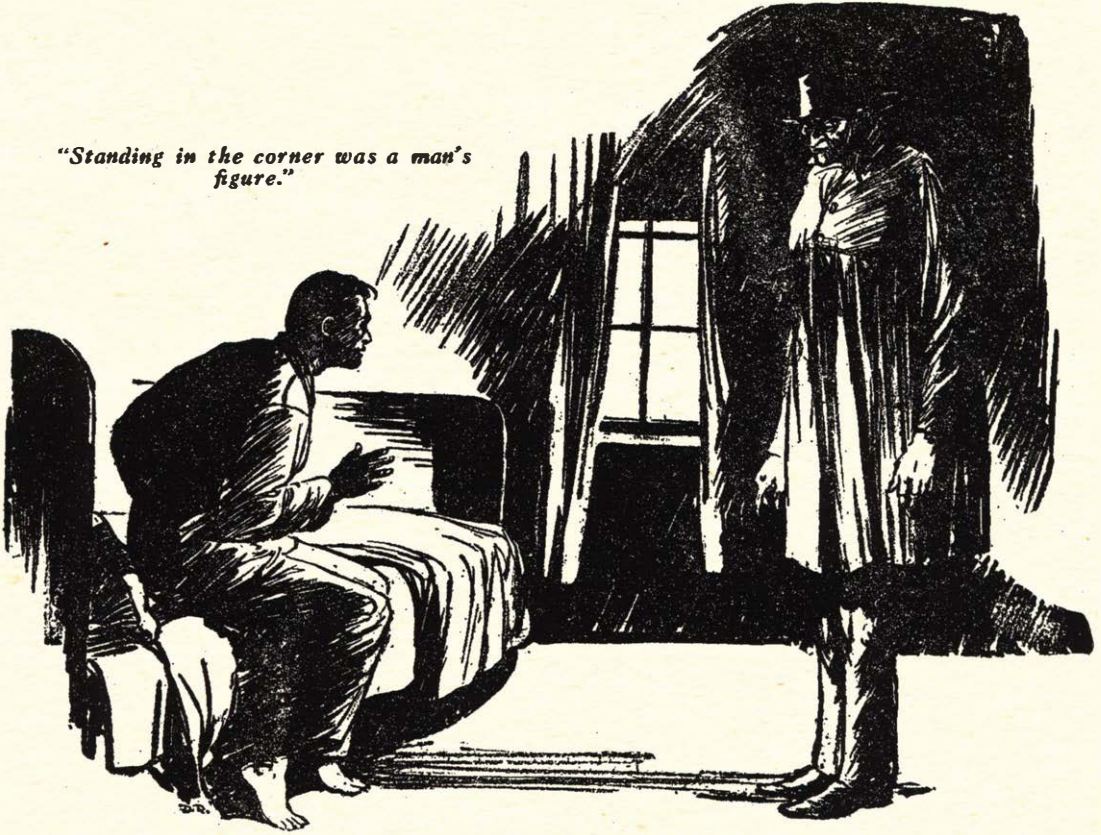
his eyelids and nod; and the third produces sound sleep.

It is the constant duty of these little creatures to put to sleep every one whom they encounter—men, women and children. They hide themselves everywhere, and are always ready to fly out and compel human beings to sleep, though their special time for action is the night.

Weeng is not only the dispenser of sleep but also the author of dulness. If an orator fails, he is said to have been struck by Weeng. When his auditors fail it is again the work of the little gnomes, rather than the orator.



*"Standing in the corner was a man's figure."*



## Dread Exile

By Paul Ernst

**T**HE fact that I hadn't heard the man come into the room is not to be wondered at. Living on the third floor of a hotel in one of the noisiest spots in the city, I can scarcely hear my own footsteps sometimes. Besides, I was tired out from a strenuous day; and I may have dozed for a few moments over my book.

Nevertheless, it was with a start that I suddenly looked up to find I had a visitor. And such a visitor!

Before me, standing in the gloom just outside the circle of light cast by my reading lamp, was one of the tallest men I had ever seen. And one of the thinnest. Like a human tent-pole he stood there, with a

voluminous topcoat billowing loosely over his thin frame in a tent-like way that completed the simile. The fact that he should wear a coat was in itself remarkable, for it was a roasting hot summer night. Why a man should bundle himself up as this one did, was certainly beyond my comprehension.

Who was the grotesque stranger—  
a maniac or the teller of an incredible truth?

The collar of the coat was drawn up, and the brim of his black felt hat was pulled down so that all I could see of his face were his eyes, gleaming like live coals. The coat swelled hugely over his chest, as though a bundle was concealed under his coat; and this protrusion gave him the appearance of a grotesque, stoop-shouldered pouter-pigeon.

"Hello!" I exclaimed. "How did you get in here?" A silly question. Obviously he had walked in. On hot nights I often leave my door on the latch, and he could have done so easily. But I was taken so unawares, so oddly disturbed by something about the look of him, that I could speak only nonsense.

He said nothing, but just stared at me with his gleaming eyes.

"I didn't hear you come in," I went on.

**S**TILL he made no reply, merely gazing at me out of those piercing eyes and standing before me in the gloom, this stoop-shouldered pouter-pigeon of a man. I wondered what was in the big bundle concealed over his chest.

"What do you want?" I demanded then, annoyed at his crazy silence, and disquieted by his eyes. In my work as a reporter I have had to do several times with people mentally unbalanced; and I didn't half like the glints in those unblinking eyes. "What do you want?" I repeated.

Now at last, he spoke.

"I want to tell you a story," he said.

His voice was most peculiar. He treated the English in a way unfamiliar to me. Not as a foreigner would, with a broad accent; but as a man might who had seldom spoken at all, in any language. His voice was thick and creaky, and his tongue formed syllables as though it had been made of wood. A dumb man, who had but recently learned to talk, might have spoken as this man did.

At his peculiar answer, my annoyance and disquiet increased. At two o'clock in the morning a man you've never seen before in your life comes into your room, and, at your repeated demands as to what he wants, says he wants to tell you a story!

The fellow moved closer and I noticed that he was unsteady on his long legs. I saw that he was frightfully emaciated from some illness; it couldn't have been from starvation, for the excellence of his topcoat indicated a well-lined purse. And then I saw his hands.

Long, thin, with talon-like fingers, they were more closely covered with hair than any human hands I'd ever seen before. And the hair was peculiar. It was fine, close-set, more like *fur* than hair.

He saw me gazing at them, and abruptly thrust them into the pockets of his coat.

"This is to be a long story," he said, in that curious, muffled voice of his. "May I sit down?" He moved uncertainly toward a chair.

"Certainly, sit down," I replied. I started up to help him, but he waved me away as though fearful of my touch.

**H**E seated himself, sighed deeply, and began:

"I want to tell you this story because you are a writer and may be able to get it before the public eye. Publicity! It is the only way I can think of to have justice done. I cannot go to the police. They would laugh at me. Publicity is the only answer—and even that may be useless. . . ."

He sighed again, the manner of which struck me as very odd. I mean, he sighed for so long a time. For seconds on end the air was exhaled steadily from his lungs, and still it issued forth. It is hard to convey the queerness of it. Draw into your own lungs as much air as you can. Exhale it as slowly as you can, till it is all gone. Multiply by three the number of seconds your exhalation endured, and you will have about the length of time this man's sigh lasted.

A trivial thing to mention, yet I can't describe how the oddity of it

sfruck me. It indicated, you see, that the big bundle that swelled out his coat over his chest, was not a bundle at all—but the chest itself! And who ever saw, particularly on a thin and narrow shouldered man, a chest measuring some seventy inches around?

“Uncover your typewriter, please, and take down my story,” was my bizarre visitor’s demand. “I’ll speak slowly so you can get it all.”

Now this seemed unbearably high-handed. My expression must have showed that I was about to protest. The man’s eyes gleamed more brightly. His hands, thrust in his coat pockets, moved a little as though they had been convulsively clenched.

“Take down my story!” he said, his voice very harsh now. “Quickly! I have little time left me here!”

By now I was thoroughly convinced, naturally, that I was dealing with a lunatic. It became a question of humoring him till I could make up an excuse for telephoning, and call for help. I moved to the card table on which my typewriter was resting, and sat down before it.

He began to dictate, abruptly, without preliminaries, as a man might wander into a public stenographer’s office, dictate a letter, only to wander casually out again with no explanations of any kind.

“MY name,” he began, “is well known to you. But I will not reveal it till later. You wouldn’t believe me if I told you now.

“My story has to do with a theft as incredible as it is horrible, by a thief that no detectives could ever run down; that no power save aroused public opinion can ever bring to justice.

“It began two days ago, when I was a young man with a healthy, athletic body, a fortune with which to indulge it, and not a care on earth.”

I started, here, and gazed in amazement at my mad visitor. Young? He looked to be at least sixty! Athletic body? He was as emaciated as death, with his skinny shoulders stooped as though with the weight of whatever it was that bulged out the breast of his coat so far! I calculated the distance to the telephone stand, decided I couldn’t reach it without a fight that might be disastrous to his feeble old frame, and resumed my typing. My visitor went on:

“Two days ago, almost to the hour, I got my first indication of the change that was to come swiftly and fatally into my life. Two short days ago! In those forty-eight hours I passed from life to death, from sane health to mad dissolution. . . . But I’ll try to keep from wandering, George, and give you this as it all happened.”

Again I started with amazement. This queer stranger knew my name and used it intimately, yet I *knew* I’d never seen him before. But I did not interrupt his narrative.

**I** WAS sitting alone in the bedroom of my apartment in town when it happened—this first step in the change that was to be mine. I had dismissed my man for the night, and was smoking a last cigarette before getting into bed and snapping off the lights. At my feet lay my dog, Flix, his eyes half shut and his tail thumping the floor occasionally when I let my hand slide down over the arm of my chair to touch his head.

“The first thing I noticed was that it had suddenly become very quiet. Amazingly quiet for the city. It was as though a shell of silence had been drawn around that room, shutting out the sounds of late traffic, making the quiet so intense that it almost hurt.

“Wondering a little at it, I put out my cigarette, and started to

rise from my chair. But I sank back into it again as my eyes happened to rest on Flix, at my feet.

"The dog, of a sudden, was acting very queerly. His head had jerked up as though on a string. His eyes, wide and alert, were staring into a dark corner of the room, as though they saw something I could not see.

"Even as I watched, a phosphorescent greenish glare came into those eyes. His lips twitched back from his fangs and a low growl sounded deep in his throat. Slowly he got up and stood, trembling slightly, while his eyes continued to probe the darkened corner.

"Perplexedly, I, too, stared at the corner. There was absolutely nothing to be seen. It was only dimly lit by the reading light above my head; but it was illuminated enough to show there was nothing there. Nothing!

"'What's up, Flix?' I murmured, patting the dog's head. To my astonishment he moved away from my hand as though not recognizing its touch, and growled louder as he shrank back from the empty corner. There were minute whitish flecks on his jaws now.

**S**TILL I had no warning premonition of the tremendous thing that was about to happen. It had been a hot day; Flix's coat is furry; the heat might have affected him. Vowing to clip him next morning, I got up and opened the bedroom door and ordered him out of the room. The corridor was cooler, anyway; and out there he wouldn't disturb my sleep by snarling feverishly at imaginary burglars all night.

"He slunk out, and I got into bed. For one more moment I gazed at the corner that had held Flix's attention. In that moment a distinct feeling of uneasiness, of ill-being, came over me. But I ignored it, and turned out the lights.

"However, sleep would not come. Wakefully I tossed, and watched the sinking moon send its slanting rays more and more levelly in through my window. The feeling of disquiet grew within me till, for no reason whatever that I could think of, I was in the grip of actual horror.

"I was, I admit, in the unreasoning frame of mind where a man can see and hear anything. Had I never again seen and heard what happened a moment later, I'd have gone to my death thinking it was only the product of imagination.

"My eyes had continually strayed to that corner, now sunk in blackness unpenetrated by the moonlight. And now it seemed they rested on other eyes. A pair of eyes that peered from the gloom about six feet from the floor, where the eyes of a tall man might be—if, of course, there had been a man there.

"Increasingly apparent, the eyes became. Now I could see them clearly enough to read their expression—or it seemed I could. And the expression was one blended of desperation and invincible purpose. Furthermore, the eyes were red!

"Red eyes! I don't mean they were blood-shot. The whites were clear rings around the pupils. The pupils themselves were red. Red as fire; red as crimson glass beads.

**I** STARED into those red eyes as though hypnotized, unable to make a move or a sound. Spell-bound. I've often heard that word used. I know now what it means!

"And then I began to make out a shadowy background for the eyes: a human seeming head; a tall, dim body. All seemed to materialize out of empty air as though conjured up by my fancy.

"I lay there, breathless, staring at the shadowy head in which were set those burning, fire-red eyes, glinting with desperate purpose.

From the street, seeming to penetrate with difficulty the shell of silence drawn around the room, came the single toot of a motor horn. Its prosaic sound seemed but to intensify the reality of the impossible vision growing ever clearer before my gaze.

"Now I fought with the helplessness that bound my muscles. I struggled to get out of bed, to spring to the corner and come to grips with this inhuman thing—or prove to myself that there was nothing there after all.

"I couldn't move a finger. And as I lay there, with my heart thumping in my breast and cold sweat standing out on my forehead, I distinctly heard a low, soft sigh. A voice came to my ears:

"Go to sleep. I will you go to sleep.'

"At that a film seemed to gather before me. The red, red eyes faded into far distances. The flooding moonlight went dark. Swiftly, against all the protest of my quivering senses, I *did* go to sleep! It was as though I'd been chloroformed.

"I couldn't have been sunk long in that unearthly sleep. Five minutes, perhaps. For when my eyes jerked open again the moon's rays had slanted very little lower.

**I** WAS waked by the sound of my own voice. And for an instant, in a helpless sort of doze, I floated in a half-slumber where I could hear strange words coming from my own lips as though I were another person standing off at a distance and listening to myself.

"And strange indeed were the words! Incredible! Incomprehensible!

"... exiled ... doomed forever ... never to leave this ghastly place and go back home ... racked and wasted by disease ... but another body. . . ."

"And this raving, this mumbling of thoughts that could not possibly have originated in my brain, was yet coming from *my* lips! As though I had suddenly become a mere mouthpiece for another's mind!

"I stirred slightly, and tried harder for full wakefulness. Slowly it came, as the chains of my nightmare were broken. And with wakefulness came an increase of the unreasoning horror that had gripped me since I had turned out the lights.

"With an exclamation that should have been a shout, but which was hardly more than a whisper, I sat up.

"Standing in the corner, disclosed by the moonlight, was a man's figure. Complete in every detail I saw it—from sunken cheeks and fire-red eyes, to emaciated legs and unbelievably swollen chest.

"For an instant we stared at each other. Then, with an enormous effort of will, I tensed my muscles for a spring. A little of the hypnotic tension that had held me was released, somehow, by the realization that this figure was after all of solid flesh and blood.

"The man must have read my purpose in my eyes, for he started to move aside. But before he could, I had launched myself at him.

"My hands tore at his throat. . . .

**F**OR a fleeting second my fingers pressed against solid substance. Then the column of the throat drained away like water running out of a tap. Another second and my fingers had met and were pressing only against each other. Under me the form I'd sprung upon, and had thought was flesh and blood and bone, was gone. I collapsed against the chair, utterly alone in the room.

"Shuddering, with my eyes starting from my head, I stared around

me. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing! Yet I had clearly seen that figure in the chair—had *felt* it for a moment.

"I thought I heard a foostep outside the door, and the next instant I heard Flix howl in the hall, as if the dog had seen something pass out through the wood panels of the door. Then there was silence.

"The silence was now a normal one, broken frequently by the night noises of the city. The queer shell of quiet that had seemed to surround the place was lifted. Reassured a little by the familiar discords that told of people living and moving all around me, I got back into bed.

"But I didn't go to sleep. I couldn't! Instinct told me surely that I had narrowly escaped something awful and final. What could it be? What kind of thing was it that had sat in that chair, staring at my sleeping form with its flame-red eyes? What kind of creature could appear and disappear at will, and pass through solid wood doors? Something weird and supernatural, something inexplicable to the mind of man, had kept vigil over me in my room! That was all I knew.

"Wide-eyed and wakeful, I waited for day to come and for the honest sunlight to relieve me of the freezing fear that still clutched me.

"IN the morning I did feel better.

I had managed to compose myself a little during the slow hours of dawn. I was beginning to be convinced somewhat when I told myself the fears of the night had been entirely ungrounded and due to nightmare-induced superstition. I had imagined a spectral figure, and had been childishly horrified by it, that was all. Tall men with red eyes don't *really* appear and then disappear, under one's very fingers, into thin air. Flix had growled at nothing, and on that

flimsy foundation I had built the things I'd thought to see and hear during the night.

"After my morning shower I stepped to the mirror and inspected myself critically. It was reassuring to look at my square-jawed, tanned face and the muscular, tanned body under it. They were so palpably the face and body of a man who ought to have a well balanced mind; who should certainly know better than to let himself 'see things' during the night.

"I dressed and went to the breakfast table, feeling more and more foolish about the nocturnal absurdity I'd indulged in. And there, just as I was succeeding in dismissing all thought of the vision of the night, something occurred that started again the cold sweat that had drenched me during the black hours.

"My servant, the man-of-all-work who went with me everywhere, held out a hat. It was a black felt hat with a down-drooping brim, like no hat I'd ever worn.

"'Whoever visited you last night after I was gone, sir,' he said, 'went off without his hat. Shall I call and return it, or shall I just—'

"HE stopped there and stared, with open mouth, at my face. I have no doubt my face was arresting enough. I could feel it go chalk white as I gazed at that hat. And I braced myself with my hands on the table as the room began to revolve crazily around me.

"'Just keep it, Saunders,' I managed to say at last. 'Maybe the person—who left it will come back for it.'

"But after a while I got over even that shock. Indeed, after I'd thought it over, the incident looked hopeful rather than alarming.

"There actually had been a man in my room. The hat proved it. That released me from the charge

of childish superstition, and also from the suspicion that perhaps my mind wasn't as well balanced as I'd always assumed it was. There *had* been a man there.

"How had he melted away under my throttling fingers? How had he hidden in the corner where I'd first seen those implacable red eyes? There was no place in that corner to hide. Why hadn't I seen him at once, as Flix apparently had? And how had I come to fall asleep in spite of all my effort not to—and half waked to hear myself mumbling those strange things?

"These questions, at first apparently unanswerable, I worked out promptly enough. At least to my own satisfaction. Hypnotism! All I'd seen and heard and felt had been transmitted to my brain from that of the red-eyed stranger. He had broken into my room somehow, and from the moment of his entrance had taken hypnotic charge of my thoughts. Why? For the purpose of common burglary, probably.

"There it was: nothing to be alarmed about. All could be explained in a logical, common sense way. God, what mockery is logic, common sense. . . .

"I FOLLOWED my regular routine for the rest of the day. I kept a tennis engagement in the afternoon, and a dinner engagement in the evening. But I went back to my rooms early. I was thick-witted from lack of sleep, and felt that an extra long night of rest was in order.

"Now, on that second night I was sure I'd be let alone. Having been convinced by the black felt hat that my visitor was solid and mortal enough, I had put him comfortably out of my thoughts. It seemed reasonable that the midnight marauder would avoid visiting the same spot two evenings in succession.

The man with the curious eyes would know that this time I'd be prepared for him. He'd stay away, of course.

"So, in my ignorance of the unearthly force I was up against, I reasoned. And so, secure in my damned logic, I prepared again for bed.

"I had taken a few precautions, however. My man, instead of going home to his own rooms, was to sleep in my flat that night, in the dining room next door to my bedroom. My automatic, freshly oiled and loaded, was placed on a chair beside my bed. Flix, absolved like his master of 'seeing things,' was to sleep in my bedroom. If the red-eyed trespasser was foolhardy enough to call again, he'd find a warm reception waiting for him!

"Hardly had I got into bed when the opening incident of the night before was repeated: noises coming in from the open window were curiously stilled. Once again it was as though a shell of silence had been drawn about the room. A hush descended in which the beating of my own heart seemed unbearably loud—a hush broken only at rare intervals by some unusually penetrating street noise. A second time I was gripped by the vague horror, the feeling that something terrible and supernatural was threatening me.

"Flix howled once, and scrambled under the bed, where I could hear him squirm in an abject attempt to make himself as small as possible. Flix, who had proved time and again that he would attack man or beast with utter recklessness when his master was menaced!

"Simultaneously with that, I could see, in the dark corner, a pair of clear red eyes grow more and more distinct. And now at last I knew, with a thrill of such fear as I never thought a man could endure, that my visitor was repeating

his call, that it would be his last, and that he—or It—was never of this earth!

**T**HE room was unlighted this time. It was not yet late enough for the moon to slant in the windows. In this thick, even darkness, I saw the eyes come closer and closer to me.

“And now something happened that I hardly know how to tell about.

“It seemed as though those eyes were, somehow, drawing the soul and mind and consciousness of me out of the shell of my body and into their own red depths! They were draining the real me from the mold of my flesh!

“I panted and groaned as I tried to combat the hypnotic glare of those eyes in which desperation and resolve were blended in equal parts. I strained to reach the gun on the chair beside me, and a long drawn out, soft high sounded in my ears, and a voice said: ‘Go to sleep. Do not struggle. Go to sleep.’

“I felt darkness close around my senses like a blanket. And I was washed with great waves of terror. I must not lose consciousness! This thing with the red eyes must not bind me, helpless, for my own destruction!

“I groaned. ‘Flix!’ I whispered. ‘Flix! Get him, boy, get him.’

“I heard a faint whimper from under the bed, but that was all. I remembered my man, who was staying here at my orders.

“‘Saunders! Here—for God’s sake.’

“With the last words my whispering had sunk to inaudibility. There was no move in the hall to indicate that Saunders had heard my low cry and was coming.

“And still those fearful red eyes bored into mine, draining me, draining me, pulling the heart and soul and mind of me.

“‘Go to sleep,’ the voice crooned again. ‘To sleep. . . .’

“Frantically I willed to stay awake. It was essential to the thing’s plan that I lose consciousness. Well, that I would not do!

“But I knew as I vowed it that it was beyond my power to resist. This creature, whatever he was, and from whatever unearthly sphere, was stronger willed than I.

“Things blackened before me. I was sinking into oblivion. I could see only those hypnotic red eyes. They too faded. I was done!

**W**HEN I next woke, or rather, partially woke, the moon had circled the sky so that its first steep rays were crawling over the window sill. I strained to wake fully, and to get my bearings; I could do neither. Swallowed in a black sea of fear I lay in a coma while the awful, unbelievable drama played itself out. I will try to tell about it, just as it happened.

“I saw the red eyes again. But it seemed to me they came from the bed. My bed! From a shadowy head resting on the pillow. My pillow! From a vaguely seen, tanned and square-jawed face that was horribly, impossibly familiar to me. . . .

“I glanced down, and my eyes rested on the arm of a chair—the chair in which for a fleeting second I had seen the dim, emaciated body the night before. But surely I was still in the bed. How had I got to the chair? Or—was I in the chair?

“For a moment I stumbled in a dread shadowland where I was in two places at once—and in neither place. Oh. . . . I can’t describe it.

“The voice sounded in my ears that I had heard before. And the voice, one moment, seemed to come from the figure lying on the bed; and the next, from the chair. And when it came from the chair, I was in the bed, and when it—oh, God!



"The voice rambled along, not as though addressing me, but as if speaking aloud the thoughts of the mind that ruled it:

"I am taking his body. In another moment the transfer will be complete. I shall have escaped death. The terrors that infest this globe! The crude perils, the bestial men and raw, untamed elements! Above all, the awful diseases!

"Exiled! I shall never get back to the lovely globe called, by these brute people, Mars. My own body, evolved to exist in its thinner air, is about to die of their hideous diseases. My new body, evolved for earth's atmosphere, will never let me go back. The puny, insufficient lungs in this small chest. . . .

"I am an exile for all of time! Doomed to live here, in one body or another, till I tire of it and allow my spirit to die with whatever form encases it at the moment. Was it for this I went exploring, on the wings of thought?"

**T**HESE were the words I heard in that low, strange voice. And toward the end of the fantastic soliloquy, I noticed something that sent my senses reeling, and plunged me once more into unconsciousness.

"The voice, shifting less and less often from the form on the bed to the form in the chair, at last was coming continually from the bed! And the voice was now my own voice! And I who heard it was sitting definitely in the chair!

"That was the last thing I knew for an unguessable length of time.

"My next awakening was slower, more complete and normal. But if the awakening was normal—the surroundings, the conditions I woke to find myself in, were not! They were unbelievable! Impossible! Terrible!

"My first sensation was that I was cold. Frightfully cold. Yet somehow I did not suffer.

"I could feel under me a frigid, smooth slab of something. It felt like marble to the touch of my limp hands. I could dimly hear a constant dripping of water. A grim odor came to me—a mixture of chemicals and death. If death were a flower, and a perfume were distilled from that flower, it would be somewhat like the ghastly aroma that came to my nostrils then.

"I tried to move, and could not. I tried to speak, and felt my lips stiff and cold as ice. I tried to open my eyes, and felt my eyelids like twin small curtains of ice that would not move.

"Then I sensed a figure bending over my prone body. I heard words that brought shriek after shriek to my ice cold lips, battering there for the utterance they were denied.

"I have never seen such a curious enlargement of the chest,' the unseen person was saying. 'The lungs must be huge. I wonder. . . . We must have an autopsy. And how wasted the body is! The man was a walking pest-house. Where did you find him?"

"'Floating in the river,' answered another unseen one. 'No marks of identification of any kind.'

**T**HE unseen talkers moved away. While I—I wrestled with the cold flesh that tied me down. Wrestled, and was hopelessly defeated. For I was dead. . . .

"After a time I discovered something that gave me a slight ray of hope—not that I could regain my own healthy, living body which this traveler from a far planet had usurped, but that I might tell my story and have the usurper killed before he stole other people's bodies.

"I found that, with his wasted, disease-racked, dead frame, I had inherited some slight trace of his marvelous ability to will himself

from place to place. I could not move the solid flesh by thought transference as he could; but I could transport my intelligence, clothed in a semblance of the body.

"When I stopped wrestling with the cold clay that tied my spirit down, I found I could rise quite easily. Too easily, in fact, for no thing of weight ever soared as lightly upward as I did.

"From beside the marble slab I stared down at the shell I had left, but to which I was still chained. I saw, line for line, the body of the monster that had robbed me of life and flesh. The tall, emaciated form; the long, thin hands, covered with fine, mouse-colored fur; the sunken cheeks; the enormous chest, twice as big as that of any average mortal—in a word, the body you seem to see me wearing now.

"I gazed, soul-sick, at that travesty of the human form, and reflected that I would shortly be exiled with it to the grave. Exile? The creature who had robbed me faced an exile far less fearful than mine!

"And then I came to you. For you, George, will try to have this story published, and let the people know of the alien horror that stalks in their midst. And you will try to get justice done the murderer of—John Carmody."

**A**T the mention of that name I felt the breath catch in my throat, while my heart pounded in the grip of a superstitious terror.

I had been amazed at this stranger's mention of a dog named Flix, and utterly astounded at his further mention of a servant named Saunders. For both those names were familiar to me. Now, to have him go on and claim he was John Carmody, one of my closest friends and as husky a young athlete as ever inherited a million dollars, was appalling!

But I climbed determinedly out of my momentary lapse into credulity. These were names any one could find out easily.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?" said the tall stranger. "I swear I'm not. George, look at me! Closely! My eyes—my expression."

Almost against my will I searched that pallid face, now disclosed to me by the turning down of the coat collar. Of course I found there no shadow of proof of the madman's claim. The eyes were certainly not those of my friend, Carmody. Nor were they red.

There was nothing to be done but call assistance and have the maniac put away as gently as possible. I got up from the chair before my typewriter, and moved close to him.

**I**'VE taken down your story," I told him soothingly. "I'll see that it's brought to public notice, and that justice is done. Now don't you think you ought to turn in for the rest of the night? I'll call the room clerk and have him find a place for you—"

"I read your thoughts as though your forehead were made of glass," said the man wearily. "Well, I didn't really hope I'd be believed. I could only try. And now I've got to be getting back to my body."

"Your body is right here," I said. "Don't worry."

"You fool!" he blazed. "If you don't believe what I'm telling you—try to touch me. Your hand will go through me as it would through a bit of fog."

With this I turned to the telephone. Regardless of the risk to his feeble body, it was time to end this farce. I must phone the house doctor, and have him put in custody.

Hardly had I turned my back when some sixth sense warned me to whirl around again.

I did so, crouching instinctively to defend myself against a maniacal attack—

The man was gone.

Dumbfounded, I glanced around the room. There was nowhere he could have hid. I dashed to the door, though I was sure he could not have reached it in the second my back was turned to him. There was no one in the long corridor outside.

The man had gone, as though he had indeed been but an intelligence clothed in the mere semblance of a body—a bit of fog dispelled by a breeze.

**S**UCH was my strange visitor's story, set down precisely as he dictated it. Such was his exit.

A creature from distant Mars dragging his body here by thought transference? Attacked unexpectedly by half a dozen fatal diseases unknown on his sphere? Projecting his iron will from his own dying, huge-chested frame into the small-chested frame of an earth-man, and hence chaining himself forever to the denser atmosphere of earth? Who would believe such a thing!

I didn't, of course. But, more for curiosity than any other reason, I began some quiet investigating. The results were rather strange.

Well, I'll give them to you so that you may have all the facts in your judging of this fantastic tale.

John Carmody is at this moment

—two days after the eery visit the pouter-pigeon of a man paid me—still in his town flat. I called on him, and he refused to see me, though we have been close friends for years. He sent out word that he was preparing for a long trip and was at that time too busy to see anybody.

Saunders confided to me that he is going to leave Carmody's employ as soon as he can. In the last two days Carmody has been acting so strangely that Saunders is uneasy: he denies himself to all his old friends, and constantly performs deep-breathing and other chest expanding exercises. Too, his eyes have taken on a curious reddish tinge that alarms and puzzles Saunders.

Carmody's dog, Flix, had to be taken away day before yesterday. It had gone mad; and alternately tried to attack his master, and fled howling from him.

On a marble slab in the morgue lies a most unusual corpse. It is the body of a very tall man, incredibly emaciated, with fine furry hair on the backs of the hands, and with a malformation of the chest that makes it look like the remains of an enormous pouter-pigeon. In every detail it is the twin brother of the madman who called on me six hours after this one's reported death.

These are the facts. Make of them what you wish.

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## The Ghost of Agrippina

**A**MONG the great number of Romans who made use of magicians was the Emperor Nero. He is said to have been stricken with fits of deepest remorse whenever he recollected the enormity of his offense in causing the assassination of his mother, Agrippina. Notwithstanding the ostentatious applause and congratulations which he was always receiving from the senate, the army and the people, he

complained that he was perpetually haunted by the ghost of his mother, and pursued by the Furies with flaming torches and whips. He caused himself, therefore, to be constantly attended by magicians, who employed their arts to conjure up the shade of Agrippina, so as to try to obtain her forgiveness for the crime perpetrated by her son.

It is not known that they had any success.



# The Great Circle

*A Complete Novelette*

By Henry S. Whitehead

**T**HE transition from those hours-on-end of looking down on the dark-green jungle of virgin forest was startling in its abruptness. We had observed this one break in the monotonous terrain, of course, well before we were directly over it. Then Wilkes, the pilot, slowed and began to circle. I think he felt it, the element I have referred to as startling; for, even from the first—before we landed, I mean—there was something—an atmosphere—of strangeness about this vast circular space entirely bare of trees with the exception of the giant which crowned the very slight elevation at its exact center.

I know at any rate that I felt it; and Dr. Pelletier told me afterward that it had seemed to lay hold on him like a quite definite physical sensation. Wilkes did not circle very long. There was no need for it and I think he continued the process, as though looking for a landing place, as long as he did, on account of that eeriness rather than because of any necessity for prolonged observation.

At last, almost, I thought, as though reluctantly, he shut off his

engine—"cut his gun" as airmen express it—and brought the plane down to an easy landing on the level greenward within a hundred yards of the great tree standing there in its majestic, lonely grandeur. The great circular space about it was like a billiard table, like an English deer park. The great tree looked, too, for all the world like an ash, itself an anomaly

here in the uncharted wilderness of Quintana Roo.

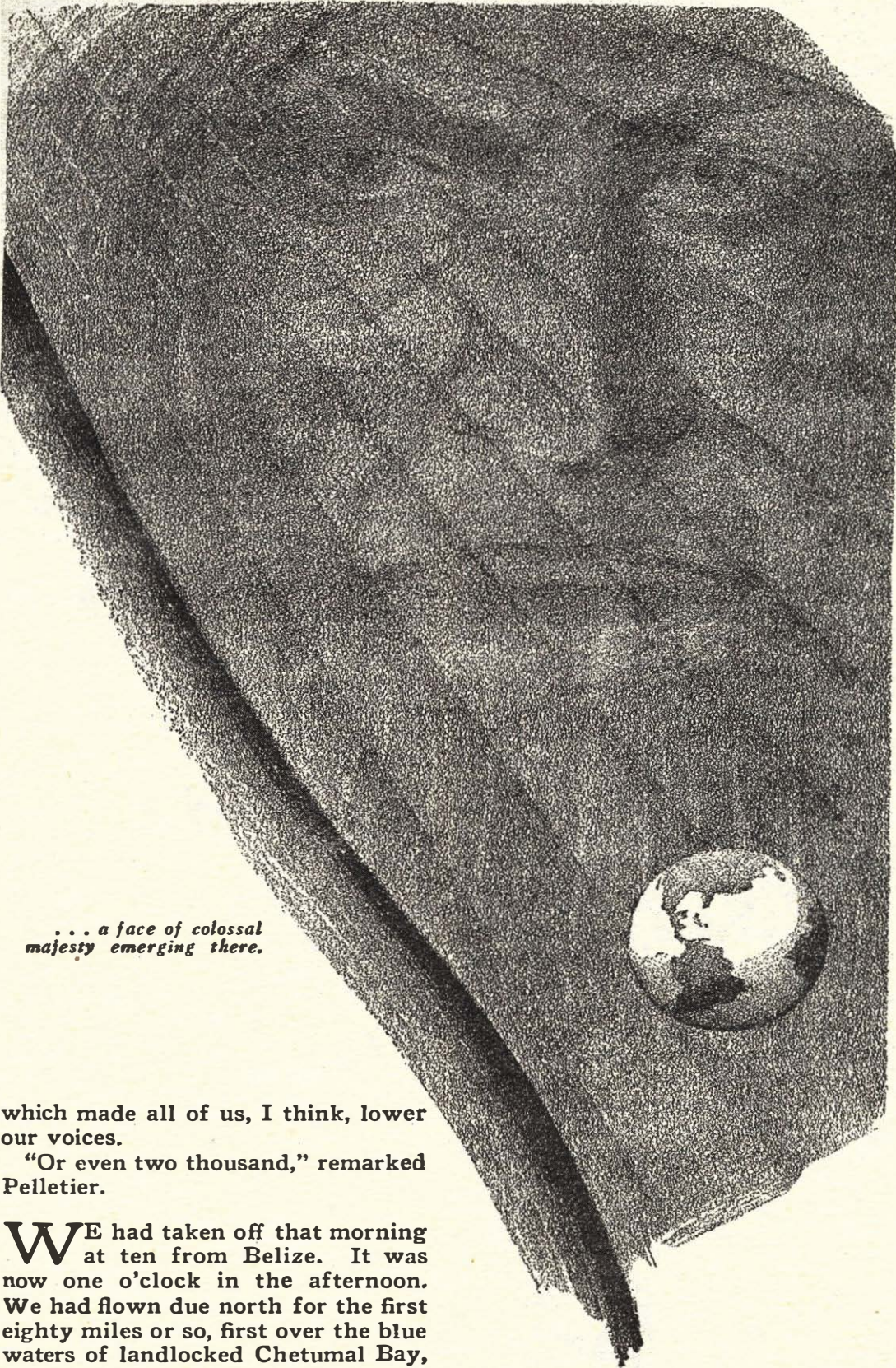
We sat there in the plane and looked about us.

On every side, for a radius of more than half a mile from the center where we were, the level grassy plain stretched away in every direction and down an almost imperceptible gradual slope to the horizon of dense forest which encircled it.

There was not a breath of air stirring. No blade of the fine short grass moved. The tree, dominating everything, its foliage equally motionless, drew our gaze. We all looked at it at the same time. It was Wilkes the pilot who spoke first, his outstretched arm indicating the tree.

"Might be a thousand years old!" said Wilkes, in a hushed voice. There was something about this place

Canevin crosses the "bridge" that is a sinister English ash in Quintana Roo.



*... a face of colossal  
majesty emerging there.*

which made all of us, I think, lower our voices.

"Or even two thousand," remarked Pelletier.

**W**E had taken off that morning at ten from Belize. It was now one o'clock in the afternoon. We had flown due north for the first eighty miles or so, first over the blue waters of landlocked Chetumal Bay,

leaving Ambergris Cay on our right, and then Xkalok, the southeastern point of Quintana Roo; then over dry land, leaving the constricted northern point of the bay behind where parallel 19, north latitude, crosses the 88th meridian of longitude. Thence still due north until we had turned west at Santa Cruz de Bravo, and continued in that direction, glimpsing the hard, metallic luster of the noon sun on Lake Chihaucañab, and then, veering southwest in the direction of Xkanba and skirting a tremendous wooden plateau on our left, we had been attracted, after cursory, down-looking views of innumerable architectural remains among the dense forestation, to our landing place by the abrupt conspicuousness of its treeless circularity.

That summarizes the geography of our flight. Our object, the general interest of the outlook rather than anything definitely scientific, was occasioned by Pelletier's vacation, as per the regulations of the U. S. Navy, of whose Medical Corps he is one of the chief ornaments; from his duties as Chief of the Naval Hospital in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. Pelletier wanted to get over to Central America for this vacation. He talked it over with me several times on the cool gallery of my house on Denmark Hill. Almost incidentally he asked me to accompany him. I think he knew that I would come along.

We started, through San Juan, Porto Rico, in which great port we found accommodation in the Bull Line's *Catherine* with our friend Captain Rumberg, who is a Finn, as far as Santo Domingo City. From there we trekked, across the lofty intervening mountains, with a guide and pack burros, into Haiti. At Port au Prince we secured accommodations as the sole passengers on a tramp going to Belize in British Honduras, which made only one stop, at Kingston, Jamaica.

IT was between Kingston and Belize that the idea of this air voyage occurred to Pelletier. The idea of looking down comfortably upon the Maya remains, those cities buried in impenetrable jungles, grew upon him and he waxed eloquent out of what proved an encyclopedic fund of knowledge of Maya history. I learned more about these antiquities than I had acquired in my entire life previously! One aspect of that rather mysterious history, it seemed, had intrigued Pelletier. This was the abrupt and unaccountable disappearance of what he called the earlier of major civilization. The superior race which had built the innumerable temples, palaces and other elaborate and ornate structures now slowly decaying in the jungles of the Yucatan Peninsula, had been, apparently, wiped out in a very brief period. They had, it seemed, merely disappeared. Science, said Pelletier, had been unable to account for this catastrophe. I had, of course, read of it before, but Pelletier's enthusiasm made it vastly intriguing.

Our two-men-and-hired-pilot expedition into this unexplored region of vast architectural ruins and endless forestation had landed, as though by the merest chance, here in a section presenting topographical features such as no previous explorers had reported upon! We were, perhaps, two hours by air, from Belize and civilization—two months, at least, had we been traveling afoot through the thick jungles, however well equipped with food, guides, and the machetes which all previous adventurers into the Yucatan jungles report as the first essential for such travel.

Pelletier, with those small verbal creakings and gruntings which invariably punctuate the shifting of position in his case, was the first to move. He heaved his ungainly bulk laboriously out of the plane and stood on the grassy level ground looking up

at Wilkes and me. The sun beat down pitilessly on the three of us. His first remark was entirely practical.

"Let's get into the shade of that tree, and eat," said Dr. Pelletier.

TEN minutes later we had the lunch basket unpacked, the lunch spread out, and were starting in to eat, there in the heart of Quintana Roo. And, to all appearances, we might have been sitting down picnicking in Kent, or Connecticut!

I remember, with a vivid clarity which is burned indelibly into my mind, Wilkes reaching for a tongue sandwich, when the wind came.

Abruptly, without any warning, it came, a sudden, violent gust out of nowhere, like an unexpected blow from behind, upsetting our peaceful little session there, sociably, on the grass in the quiet shade of the ancient tree which looked like an English ash. It shredded to filaments the paper napkin I was holding. It caused the squat mustard bottle to land twenty feet way. It sucked dry the brine out of the saucerful of stuffed olives. It sent Pelletier lumbering after a rapidly rolling pith sun helmet. And it carried the pilot Wilkes' somewhat soiled and grimy Shantung silk jacket—which he had doubled up and was using to sit on, and had released by virtue of half rising to reach for that tongue sandwich—and blew it, fluttering, folding and unfolding, arms now stiffly extended, now rolled up into a close ball, up, off the ground, and then, in a curve upward and flattened out and into the tree's lower branches, and then straight up among these, out of our sight.

Having accomplished all these things, and scattered items of lunch broadcast, the sudden wind died a natural death, and everything was precisely as it had been before, save for the disorganization of our lunch—and save, too, for us!

I WILL not attempt to depart from the strict truth: we were, all of us, quite definitely startled. Wilkes swore picturesquely at the disappearance of his jacket, and continued to reach, with a kind of baffled ineptitude which was quite definitely comic, after the now scattered tongue sandwiches. Pelletier, returning with the rescued sun helmet, wore a vastly puzzled expression on his heavy face, much like an injured child who does not know quite what has happened to him. As for me, I daresay I presented an equally absurd appearance. That gust had caught me as I was pouring limeade from a quart thermos into three of those half-pint paper cups which are so difficult to manage as soon as filled. I found myself now gazing ruefully at the plate of cold sliced ham, inundated with the cup's contents.

Pelletier sat down again in the place he had vacated a moment before, turned to me, and remarked:

"Now where did *that* come from?"

I shook my head. I had no answer to that. I was wondering myself. It was Wilkes who answered, Wilkes goaded to a high pitch of annoyance over the jacket, Wilkes unaware of the singular appropriateness of his reply.

"Right out of the corner of hell!" said Wilkes, rather sourly, as he rose to walk over to that enormous trunk and to look up into the branches, seeking vainly for some glimpse of Shantung silk with motor grease on it.

"Hm!" remarked Pelletier, as he bit, reflectively, into one of the sandwiches. I said nothing. I was trying at the moment to divide what was left of the cold limeade evenly among three half-pint paper cups.

IT was nearly a full hour later, after we had eaten heartily and cleared up the remains of the lunch, and smoked, that Wilkes prepared to

climb the tree. I know because I looked at my watch. It was two fourteen—another fact burned into my brain. It was estimating when, starting then, we should get back to Belize, where I had a dinner engagement at seven. I thought about five or five fifteen.

"The damned thing is up there somewhere," said Wilkes, looking up into the branches and leaves. "It certainly hasn't come down. I suppose I'll have to go up after it!"

I gave him a pair of hands up, his foot on them and a quick heave, a lower limb deftly caught, an overhand pull; and then our Belize pilot was climbing like a cat up into the great tree's heart after his elusive and badly soiled garment.

The repacked lunch basket had to be put in the plane, some hundred yards away from the tree. I attended to that while Pelletier busied himself with his notebook, sitting cross-legged in the shade.

I sauntered back after disposing of the lunch basket. I glanced over at the tree, expecting to see Wilkes descending about then with the rescued jacket. He was still up there, however. There was nothing to take note of except a slight—a very slight—movement of the leaves, which, looking up the tree and seeing, I remarked as unusual because not a single breath of air was stirring anywhere. I recall thinking, whimsically, that it was as though the great tree were laughing at us, very quietly and softly, over the trouble it was making for Wilkes.

I sat down beside Pelletier, and he began to speak, perhaps for the third or fourth time, about that strange clap of wind. That had made a very powerful impression on Pelletier, it seemed. After this comment Pelletier paused, frowned, looked at his watch and then at the tree, and remarked:

"Where is that fellow? He's been up there ten minutes!" We walked

over to the tree's foot and looked up among the branches. The great tree stood there inscrutable, a faint movement barely perceptible among its leaves. I remembered that imagined note of derision which this delicate movement had suggested to me, and I smiled to myself.

Pelletier shouted up the tree:

"Wilkes! Wilkes—can't you find the coat?"

Then again:

"Wilkes! Wilkes—we've got to get started back pretty soon!"

But there was no answer from Wilkes, only that almost imperceptible movement of the leaves, as though there were a little breeze up there; as though indeed the tree were quietly laughing at us. And there was something—something remotely sinister, derisive, like a sneer, in that small, dry, rustling chuckle.

PELLETIER and I looked at each other, and there was no smile in the eyes of either one of us.

We sat down on the grass then as though by agreement. Again we looked at each other. I seemed to feel the tree's derision; more openly now, less like a delicate hint, a nuance. It seemed to me quite open now, like a slap in the face! Here indeed was an unprecedented predicament. We were all ready to depart, and we had no pilot. Our pilot had merely performed a commonplace act. He had climbed a tree.

But—he had not come down—that was all.

It seemed simple to state it to oneself that way, as I did, to myself. And yet, the implications of that simple statement involved—well, what *did* they involve? The thing, barring an accident: Wilkes having fallen into a decay-cavity or something of the sort; or a joke: Wilkes hiding from us like a child among the upper branches—barring those explanations for his continued absence up there and his refusal to an-



swer when called to, the thing was—well, impossible.

Wilkes was a grown man. It was inconceivable that he should be hiding from us up there. If caught, somehow, and so deterred from descending, at least he could have replied to Pelletier's hail, explained his possible predicament. He had, too, gone far up into the tree. I had seen him go up agilely after my initial helping hand. He was, indeed, well up and going higher far above the lower trunk area of possible decay-cavities, when I had left him to put the lunch basket back in the plane. He had been up nearly twenty minutes now, and had not come down. We could not see him. A slightly cold sensation up and down my spine came like a presage, a warning. There seemed—it was borne in abruptly upon me—something sinister here, something menacing, deadly. I looked over at Pelletier to see if anything of this feeling might be reflected in his expression, and as I looked, he spoke:

"Canevin, did you notice that this deforested area is circular?"

I nodded.

"Does that suggest anything to you?"

I PAUSED, took thought. It suggested several things, in the light of my recent, my current, feeling about this place centered about its great tree. It was, for one thing, apparently an unique formation in the topography of this peninsula. The circularity suggested an area set off from the rest, and by design—somebody's design. The "ring" idea next came uppermost in my mind. The ring plays a large part in the occult, the preternatural: the elves' ring; dancing rings (they were grassy places, too); the Norman cromlechs; Stonehenge; the Druidical rites; protective rings, beyond the perimeter of which the Powers of Evil, beleaguering, might not penetrate. . . .

I looked up from these thoughts again at Pelletier.

"Good God, Pelletier! Yes—do you imagine . . .?"

Pelletier waved one of his big, awkward-looking hands, those hands which so often skirted death, defeated death, at his operating table.

"It's significant," he muttered, and nodded his head several times. Then: "That gust of wind, Canevin—remember? It was *that* which took Wilkes' coat up there, made him climb after it; and now—well, where is he?"

I shook my head slowly. There seemed no answer to Pelletier's question. Then:

"What is it, Pelletier?"

Pelletier replied, as was usual with him, only after some additional reflection and with a certain deliberateness. He was measuring every word, it seemed.

"Every indication, so far, points to—an air-elemental."

"An air-elemental?" The term, with whatever idea or spiritual entity, or vague, unusual superstition underlay its possible meaning, was familiar to me, but who—except Pelletier, whose range of knowledge I certainly had never plumbed—would think of such a thing in this connection?

"What is an air-elemental?" I asked him, hoping for some higher information.

PELLETIER waved his hand in a gesture common to him.

"It would be a little difficult to make it clear, right off the bat, so to speak, Canevin," said he, a heavy frown engendered by his own inability to express what might be in that strange, full mind of his, corrugating his broad forehead. "And even if I had it at my tongue's end," he continued, "it would take an unconscionable time." He paused and looked at me, smiling wryly.

"I'll tell you, Canevin, all about them, if we ever get the chance."

Then, as I nodded, necessarily acquiescing in this unsatisfactory explanation, he added:

"That is, what little, what very little, I, or, indeed, anybody, knows about them!"

And with that I had, perforce, to be satisfied.

It seemed to my taunted senses, attuned now to this suggested atmosphere of menace which I was beginning to sense all about us, that an intensified rustle came from the tree's leaves. An involuntary shudder ran over my body. From that moment, quite definitely, I felt it: the certain, unmistakable knowledge that we three stood alone, encircled, hemmed in, by something; something vast, powerful beyond all comprehension, like the incalculable power of a god, or a demigod; something elemental and, I felt, old with a hoary antiquity; something established here from beyond the ken of humanity; something utterly inhuman, overwhelmingly hostile, inimical, to us. I felt that we were on Its ground, and that It had, so far, merely shown us, contemptuously, the outer edge of Its malice and of Its power. It had, quietly, unobtrusively, taken Wilkes. Now, biding Its time, It was watching, as though amused; certain of Its malignant, Its overwhelming, power; watching us, waiting for Its own good time to close in on us. . . .

**I** STOOD up, to break the strain, and walked a few steps toward the edge of the tree's nearly circular shade. From there I looked down that gentle slope across the motionless short grass through the shimmering heat waves of that airless afternoon to the tree-horizon.

What was that? I shaded my hands and strained my vision through those pulsating heat waves which intervened; then, astonished, incredulous, I ran over to the plane and reached in over the side and brought out the high-powered Lomb-Zeiss

binoculars which Bishop Dunn at Belize had loaned me the evening before. I put them to my eyes without waiting to go back into the shade near Pelletier. I wanted to test, to verify, what I thought I had seen down there at the edge of the encircling forest; to assure myself at the same time that I was still sane.

There at the jungle's edge, clear and distinct now, as I focused those admirable binoculars, I saw, milling about, crowding upon each other, gesticulating wildly—shouting, too, soundlessly of course, at that distance from my ears—evidencing in short the very apogee of extreme agitation; swarming in their hundreds—their thousands, indeed—a countless horde of those dull-witted brown Indians, still named Mayas, some four hundred thousand of which constitute the native population of the Peninsula of Yucatan—Yucatan province, Campeche, and Quintana Roo.

All of them, apparently, were concentrated, pointing, gesticulating, upon the center of the great circle of grassland, upon the giant tree — upon us.

And, as I looked, shifting my glasses along great arcs and sections of the jungle-edged circle, fascinated by this wholly bizarre configuration, abruptly, with a kind of cold chill of conviction, I suddenly perceived that, despite their manifest agitation, which was positively violent, all those excited Indians were keeping themselves rigidly within the shelter of the woods. Not one stepped so much as his foot over that line which demarcated the forested perimeter of the circle, upon that short grass.

**I** LOWERED the glasses at last and walked back to Pelletier. He had not moved. He raised to me a very serious face as I approached.

"What did you see down there, Canevin?" He indicated the distant rim of trees.

He listened to my account as though preoccupied, nodding from time to time. He only became outwardly attentive when I mentioned how the Indians kept back to the line of trees. He allowed a brief, explosive "Ha!" to escape him when I got to that. When I had finished:

"Canevin," said he, gravely, "we are in a very tight place." He looked up at me still gravely, as though to ascertain whether or not I realized the situation he had in mind. I nodded, glanced at my watch.

"Yes," said I, "I realize that, of course. It is five minutes to three. Wilkes has been gone, up there, three quarters of an hour. That's one thing, explain it as you may. Neither of us can pilot a plane; and, even if we were able to do so, Pelletier, we couldn't, naturally, go back to Belize without Wilkes. We couldn't account for his disappearance: 'Yes, Mr. Commissioner, he went up a tree and never came down!' We should be taken for idiots, or murderers! Then there's that—er—horde of Indians, surrounding us. We are hemmed in, Pelletier; and there are, I'd say, thousands of them. The moment they make up their minds to rush us—well, we're finished, Pelletier," I ended these remarks and found myself glancing apprehensively toward the rim of jungle.

"Right enough, so far!" said Pelletier, grimly. "We're 'hemmed in,' as you put it, Canevin, only perhaps a little differently from the way you mean. Those Indians"—his long arm swept our horizon—"will never attack us. Put that quite out of your mind, my dear fellow. Except for the fact that there's probably only food enough left for one scant meal, you've summed up the—er—material difficulties. However—"

I interrupted.

"That mob, Pelletier, I tell you, there are thousands of them. Why should they surround us if—"

"They won't attack us. It isn't *us* they're surrounding, even though our being here, in a way, the occasion for their assembly down there. They aren't in any mood to attack anybody, Canevin—they're frightened."

"Frightened?" I barked out. "frightened! About what, for God's sake?" This idea seemed to me so utterly far-fetched, so intrinsically absurd, at first hearing—after all, it was I who had watched them through the binoculars, not Pelletier who sat here so calmly and assured me of what seemed a basic improbability. "It doesn't seem to make sense to me, Pelletier," I continued. "And besides, you spoke just now of the 'material' difficulties. What others are there?"

PELLETIER looked at me for quite a long time before answering, a period long enough for me to recapitulate those eerier matters which I had lost sight of in what seemed the imminent danger from those massed Indians. Then:

"Where do you imagine Wilkes is?" inquired Pelletier. "Can you—er—see him up there?" He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb, as artists and surgeons point.

"Good God, Pelletier, you don't mean . . .?"

"Take a good look up into the tree," said Pelletier, calmly. "Shout up to him; see if he answers now. You heard me do it. Wilkes isn't deaf!"

I stood and looked at my friend sitting there on the grass, his ungainly bulk sprawled awkwardly. I said nothing. I confess to a whole series of prickly small chills up and down my spine. At last I went over close to the enormous bole and looked up. I called: "Wilkes! Oh Wilkes!" at the top of my voice, several times. I desisted just in time, I think, to keep an hysterical note out of that stentorian shouting.

For no human voice had answered

from up there—only, as it seemed to me, a now clearly derisive rustle, a kind of thin cacophony, from those damnable fluttering leaves which moved without wind. Not a breath stirred anywhere. To that I can take oath. Yet, those leaves. . . .

**T**HE sweat induced by my slight exertions even in the tree's shade, ran cold off my forehead into my eyes; down my body inside my white drill clothes. I had seen no trace of Wilkes in the tree, and yet the tree's foliage for all its huge bulk was not so dense as to prevent seeing up into every part of it. Wilkes had been up there now for nearly an hour. It was as though he had disappeared from off the face of the earth. I knew now, clearly, what Pelletier had had in mind when he distinguished between our "material" and other difficulties. I walked slowly back to him.

Pelletier had a somber look on his face.

"Did you see him?" he asked. "Did he answer you?" But, it seemed, these were only rhetorical questions. Pelletier did not pause for any reply from me. Instead, he proceeded to ask more questions.

"Did you see any ants on the trunk? You were quite close to it." Then, not pausing: "Have you been troubled by any insects since we came down here, Canevin? Notice any at lunch, or when you took the lunch basket back to the plane?" Finally, with a sweeping, upward gesture: "Do you see any birds, Canevin?"

I shook my head in one composite reply to these questions. I had noticed no ants or any other insects. No bird was in flight. I could not recall, now that my attention had been drawn to the fact, seeing any living thing here besides ourselves. Pelletier broke in upon this momentary meditation:

"The place is tabu, Canevin, and not only to those Indians down there

in the trees—to everything living, man!—to the very birds, to the ground game, to the insects!" He lowered his voice suddenly to a deep significant resonance which was purely tragic.

"Canevin, this is a theater of very ancient Evil," said Dr. Pelletier, "and we have intruded upon it."

**A**FTER that blunt statement, coming as it did from a man like Dr. Pelletier, I felt, strange as it seems, better. That may appear the reverse of reason; yet, it is strictly, utterly true. For, after that, I knew where we stood. Those eery sensations which I have mentioned, and which I had well-nigh forgotten in the face of the supposed danger from that massed horde of semi-savages in the forest, crystallized now into the certainty that we stood confronted with some malign menace, not human, not of this world, something not to be gaged or measured by everyday standards of safety. And when I, Gerald Canevin, know where I stand in anything like a pinch, when I know to what I am opposed, when all doubt, in other words, is removed, I act!

But first I wanted to know rather more about what Pelletier had in that experienced head of his; Pelletier, who had looked all kinds of danger in the face in China, in Haiti, in this same Central American territory, in many other sections of the world.

"Tell me what you think it is, Pelletier," I said, quietly, and stood there waiting for him to begin. He did not keep me waiting.

"Before Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood, Canevin, and so set anatomy on the road to its present modern status, the older anatomists said that the human body contained four 'humours.' Do you remember that? They were called the Melancholic, the Sanguine, the Phlegmatic, and the Choleric Humours—imaginary fluids! These,

or the supposed combination of them, in various proportions, were supposed to determine the state and disposition of the medical patient. That was 'science'—in the days of Nicholas Culpepper, Canevin! Now, in the days of the Mayo Brothers, that sort of thing is merely archaic, historical, something to smile at! But, never forget, Canevin, it was modern science—once! And, notice how basically true it is! Even though there are no such definite fluids in the human body—speculative science it was, you know, not empirical, not based on observation like ours of to-day, not experimental—just notice how those four do actually correspond to the various human temperaments. We still say such-and-such a person is 'sanguine' or 'phlegmatic,' or even 'choleric'! We attribute a lot of temperament to-day to the ductless glands with their equally obscure fluids; and, Canevin, one is just about as close to the truth as the other!

**N**OW, an analogy! I reminded you of that old anatomy to compare it with something else. Long before modern natural science came into its own, the old-timers, Copernicus, Duns Scotus, Bacon, the scientists of their day, even Ptolemy, had their four elements: air, earth, water and fire. Those four are still elements, Canevin. The main difference between now and then is the so-called 'elemental' behind each of them—a thing with intelligence, Canevin, a kind of demigod. It goes back, that idea, to the Gnostics of the second and third centuries; and the Gnostics went back for the origins of such speculations to the once modern science of Alexandria; of Sumer and Accad; to Egypt, to Phrygia, to Pontus and Commagene! That gust of wind, Canevin—do you—"

"You think," I interrupted, "that an air-elemental is . . . ?"

"What more probable, Canevin? Or, what the ancients meant by an air-elemental, a directing intelligence, let us say. You wouldn't attribute all this, Wilkes' disappearance, all the rest of it, so far"—Pelletier indicated in one comprehensive gesture the tree, the circle of short grass, even the insectless ground and the birdless air—"to everyday, modern, material causes; to things that Millikan and the rest could classify and measure, and compute about—would you, Canevin?"

I shook my head.

"I'm going up that tree after Wilkes," I said, and dropped my drill coat on the grass beside Pelletier. I laid my own sun-helmet on the ground beside him. I tightened my belt a hole. Then I started for the tree. I expected some sort of protest or warning from Pelletier. He merely said:

"Wilkes got caught, somehow, up there, because he was taken off his guard, I should surmise. You know, more or less, what to expect!"

I did not know what to expect, but I was quite sure there would be something, up there. I was prepared. This was not the first time Gerald Canevin had been called upon to face the Powers of Darkness, the preternatural. I sent up a brief and fervent prayer to the Author of this universe, to Him Who made all things, "visible and invisible" as the Nicene Creed expresses it. He, Their Author, was more powerful than They. If He were on my side. . . .

I jumped for the limb up to which I had boosted Wilkes, caught it, got both hands around it, hauled myself up, and then, taking a deep breath, I started up among those still dryly rustling leaves in an atmosphere of deep and heavy shade where no breath of air moved. . . .

**I** PERCEIVE clearly enough that in case this account of what happened to Wilkes and Pelletier and

me ever has a reader other than myself—and, of course, Pelletier if he should care to peruse what I have set down here; Wilkes, poor fellow, crashed over the Andes, less than three months ago as I write this—I perceive that, although the foregoing portion of this narrative does not wholly transcend ordinary strangeness, yet, that the portion which is now to follow will necessarily appear implausible; will, in other words, strain severely that same hypothetical reader's credulity to the utmost.

For, what I found when I went up the tree after Wilkes—spiritually prepared, in a sense, but without any knowledge of what I might encounter—was—well, it is probable that some two millenia, two thousand years or thereabouts had rolled over the jungles since that background Power has been directly exercised. And yet, the memory of It had persisted without lapse among those semi-savage inhabitants such as howled and leaped in their agitation down there at the jungle's rim at that very moment; had so persisted for perhaps sixty generations.

I went up, I should estimate, about as far as the exact center of the great tree. Nothing whatever had happened so far. My mind, of course, was at least partly occupied by the purely physical affair of climbing. At about that point in my progress upward among the branches and leaves I paused and looked down. There stood Pelletier, looking up at me, a bulky, lonely figure. My heart went out to him. I could see him, oddly foreshortened, as I looked straight down; his contour somewhat obscured by the intervening foliage and branches. I waved, and called out to him, and Pelletier waved back to me reassuringly, saying nothing. I resumed my climb.

**I** HAD got myself perhaps some fifteen feet or more higher up the tree—I could see the blue vault above

as I looked straight up—when, quite as abruptly as that inexplicable wind-clap which had scattered our lunch, the entire top of the tree began suddenly, yet as though with a sentient deliberation, to constrict itself, to close in on me. The best description of the process I can give is to say that those upper branches, from about the tree's midst upward, suddenly squeezed themselves together. This movement coming up toward me from below, and catching up with me, and pressing me upon all sides, in a kind of vertical peristalsis, pushed me straight upward like a fragment of paste through a collapsible tube!

I slid along the cylinder formed by these upper branches as they yielded and turned themselves upward under the impact of some irresistible pressure. My pace upward under this mechanical compulsion was very rapidly accelerated, and, in much less time than is required to set it down, I flew straight up; almost literally burst out from among the slender topmost twigs and leaves as though propelled through the barrel of some monstrous air-gun; and, once clear of the tree's hindering foliage and twigs, a column of upward-rushing air supporting me, I shot straight up into the blue empyrean.

**I** COULD feel my senses slipping from my control as the mad pace increased! I closed my eyes against the quick nausea which ensued, and fell into a kind of blank apathy which lasted I know not how long, but out of which I was abruptly snatched with a jar which seemed to wrench every bone and muscle and nerve and sinew in my body.

Unaccountably, as my metabolism slowly readjusted itself, I felt firm support beneath me. I opened my eyes.

I found myself in a sitting position, the wrenching sensations of the

jar of landing rapidly dissipating themselves, no feeling of nausea, and, indeed, incongruous as such a word must sound under the circumstances being related, actually comfortable! Whatever substance supported me was comparatively soft and yielding, like thick turf, like a pneumatic cushion. Above me stretched a cloudless sky, the tropical sky of late afternoon, in these accustomed latitudes. Almost automatically I put down my hand to feel what I was resting upon. My eyes, as naturally, followed my hand's motion. My hand encountered something that felt like roughly corrugated rubber, my eyes envisaged a buff-colored ground-surface entirely devoid of vegetation, a surface which, as I turned my head about curiously, stretched away in every direction to an irregular horizon at an immense distance. This ground was not precisely level, as a lawn is level. Yet it showed neither sharp elevations nor any marked depressions. Quite nearby, on my right as I sat there taking in my novel surroundings, two shallow ravines of considerable breadth crossed each other. In one direction, about due south I estimated from the sun's position, three distant, vast, and rounded elevations or hummocks raised themselves against the horizon; and beyond them, dim in the far distance, there appeared to extend farther south vague heights upon four gradually rising plateaus, barely perceptible from where I sat. I was in the approximate center of an enormous plain the lowest point of which, the center of a saucerlike terrain, was my immediate environment; the reverse conformation, so to speak, of the great circle about the tree.

"Good God!" said a voice behind me. "It's Canevin!"

**I** TURNED sharply to the one direction my few seconds' scrutiny had failed to include. There, not

twenty feet away, sat Wilkes the pilot. He had found his jacket! He was wearing it, in fact. That, queerly enough, was my first mental reaction to having a companion in this weird world to which I had been transported. I noted at that moment, simultaneously with seeing Wilkes, that from somewhere far beneath the surface of the ground there came at regular intervals a kind of throbbing resonance as though from some colossal engine or machine. This pulsing, rhythmical beat was not audible. It came to me—and to Wilkes, as I checked the matter over with him later—through the sense of feeling alone. It continued, I may as well record here, through our entire stay in this world of increasing strangeness.

"I see you have recovered your coat," said I, as Wilkes rose and stepped toward me.

"No doubt about it!" returned Wilkes, and squared his angular shoulders as though to demonstrate how well the jacket fitted his slender figure.

"And what do you make of—this?" he asked, with a comprehensive gesture including the irregular, vegetationless, buff-colored terrain all about us.

"Are we in the so-called 'fourth dimension,' or what?"

"Later," said I, "if you don't mind, after I get a chance to think a bit. I've just been shot into this place, and I'm not quite oriented!" Then: "And how did you manage to get yourself up here? I suppose, of course, it's *up*!"

There is no occasion to repeat here Wilkes' account of his experience in the tree and later. It was identical with mine which I have already described. Of that fact I assured Wilkes as soon as he had ended describing it to me.

"This—er—ground is queer enough," remarked Wilkes. "Look at this!"

HE opened his clasp-knife, squatted down, jabbed the knife into the ground half an inch or so, and then cut a long gash in what he had referred to as the "ground." In all conscience it was utterly different from anything forming a surface or topsoil that I had ever encountered. Certainly it was not earth as we know it. Wilkes cut another parallel gash, close beside his first incision, drew the two together with his knife at the cut's end, and pried loose and then tore up a long narrow sliver. This, held by one thin end, hung from his hand much as a similarly shaped slice of fresh-cut kitchen linoleum might hang. It looked, indeed, much like linoleum, except that it was both more pliable and also translucent.

"I have another sliver in my pocket," said Wilkes, handing this fresh one to me. I took the thing and looked at it closely.

"May I see yours?" I asked Wilkes.

Wilkes fished his strip out of a pocket in that soiled silk jacket and handed it to me. He had it rolled up, and it did not unroll easily. I stretched it out between my hands, holding it by both ends. I compared the two specimens. His was considerably dryer than mine, much less pliable. I said nothing. I merely rolled up Wilkes' strip and handed it back to him.

"I've stuck right here," remarked Wilkes, "ever since I landed in this Godforsaken place, if it is a place, because, well, because there simply didn't seem to be anything else to do. The sun has been terrific. There's no shade of any kind, you see, not a single spot, as far as you can see; not any at all on the entire damned planet—or whatever it is we've struck! Now that you've 'joined up,' what say to a trek? I'd agree with anyone who insisted that anything at all beats standing here in one spot! How about it?"

"Right," I agreed. "Let's make it

either north or south—in the direction of those hummocks, or, up to the top of that plateau region to the south'ard."

"O. K. with me," agreed Wilkes. "Did you, by any blessed chance, bring any water along when you came barging through?"

I had no water, and Wilkes had been here more than an hour in that pitiless glare without any before my arrival. He shook his head ruefully.

"Barring a shower we'll have to grin and bear it, I imagine. Well, let's go. Is it north, or south? I don't care."

"South, then," said I, and we started.

OUR way took us directly across one of the intersecting depressions in the ground which I have mentioned. The walking was resilient, the ground's surface neither exactly soft nor precisely hard. It was, I remember thinking, very much like a very coarse crepe-rubber sole such as is used extensively on tennis and similar sports shoes. As we went down the gradual slope of that ravine the footing changed gradually, the color of underfoot being heightened by an increasingly reddish or pinkish tinge, and the surface becoming smoother as this coloration intensified itself. In places where the more general corrugations almost disappeared, it was so smooth as to shine in the sun's declining rays like something polished. In such stretches as we traversed it was entirely firm, however, and not in the least slippery, as it appeared to be to the eye.

A cool breeze began to blow from the south, in our faces as we walked. This, and a refreshing shower which overtook us about six o'clock, served to revive us just at a point in our journey when we had really begun to suffer from the well-nigh intolerable effects of the broiling sun overhead and the lack of drinking water.



The sun's decline put the finishing touch upon our comparative comfort. As for the actual walking, both of us were as tough as pine knots, both salted thoroughly to the tropics, both in the very pink of physical condition. Nevertheless, we felt very grateful for these several reliefs.

The sun went down, this being the month of February, just as we were near the top of the gentle slope which led out of the ravine's farther side. Two miles or so farther along as we continued to trek southward, the stars were out and we were able to keep our course by means of that occasional glance into the heavens which night travelers in the open spaces make automatically.

We pressed on and on, the resilient underfooting favoring our stride, the cool breeze, which grew gradually stronger as we walked into it, blowing refreshingly into our faces. This steady breeze was precisely like the evening trade wind as we know it who live in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean.

There was some little talk between us as we proceeded, steadily, due south in the direction of a rising, still distant, mounded tableland, from the summit of which—this had been my original idea in choosing this direction—I thought that we might be enabled to secure a general view of this strange, vegetationless land into which we two had been so singularly precipitated. The tableland, too, was considerably less distant from our starting point than those bolder hummocks to the north which I have mentioned.

From time to time, every couple of miles or so, we sat down and rested for a few minutes.

**A**T about four in the morning, when we had been walking for more than eleven hours by these easy stages, the ground before us began gradually to rise, and, under the now pouring moonlight, we were able to

see that a kind of cleft or valley, running almost exactly north and south, was opening out before us. Along the bottom of this, and up a very gradual rise, we mounted for the next two hours. We estimated that we had gone up several thousand feet from what I might call the mean level of our starting point. For this final stage of our journey, the walking conditions had been especially pleasant. Neither of us was particularly tired.

As we mounted the last of the acclivity, my mind was heavily occupied with Pelletier, left there alone under the tree, with the useless plane nearby and those swarming savages all about him in their great numbers. Also I thought, somewhat ruefully, of my abandoned dinner engagement in Belize. I wondered, in passing, if I should ever sit down to a dinner table again! It seemed, I must admit, rather unlikely just then. Quite likely they would send out some sort of rescue expedition after us; probably another plane following the route which we had placed on file at the airport.

Of such matters, I say, I was thinking, rather than what might be the result, if any, of our all night walk. Just then the abrupt, bright dawn of the tropics broke over at our left in the east. We looked ahead from the summit we had just gained in its blazing, clarifying effulgence, over the crown of the great ridge.

We looked out.

No human being save Wilkes and me, Gerald Canevin, has seen, in modern times at least, what we saw. And, so long as the earth's civilization and science endure, so long as there remains the procession of the equinoxes, so long, indeed, as the galaxy roars its invincible way through unsounded space toward imponderable Hercules, no man born of woman shall ever again see what opened there before our stultified senses, our dazzled eyes. . . .

**B**EFORE us the ground beyond the great ridge began to slope abruptly downward in one vast, regular curve. It pitched down beyond this parabola in an increasingly steep declivity, such as an ocean might form as it poured its incalculable volume over the edge of the imagined geoplanarian earth-edge of the ancients! Down, down, down to well-nigh the extreme range of our vision it cascaded, down through miles and miles of naked space to a sheer verticalness—a toboggan slide for Titans.

The surface of this downward-pitching slope, beginning some distance below the level upon which we stood there awestruck, was in one respect different from the land as we had so far seen it. For there, well down that awful slope, we could easily perceive the first vegetation, or what corresponded to vegetation, that we had observed. Down there and extending out of our range of vision for things of that size, there arose from the ground's surface, and growing thicker and more closely together as the eye followed them down, many great columnar structures, irregularly placed with relation to each other, yet of practically uniform height, thickness, and color. This last was a glossy, almost metallic, black. These things were branchless and showed no foliage of any kind. They were narrowed to points at their tops, and these tapering upper portions waved in the strong breeze which blew up from below precisely as the tops of trees moved under the impulse of an earthly breeze. I say "earthly" advisedly. I will proceed to indicate why!

**I**T was not, primarily, the inherent majesty of the unique topography which I am attempting to describe which rooted Wilkes and me, appalled, to that spot at the ridge's summit. No. It was the clear sight of our planet, earth, as though seen

from an airplane many miles high in the earth's atmosphere, which, in its unexpectedness, caused the sophisticated Wilkes to bury his face in his arms like a frightened child at its mother's lap, caused me to turn my head away. It was the first, demonstrative proof that we had been separated from earth; that we stood, indeed, "up," and with a vengeance, miles away from its friendly surface.

It was then, and not before, that the sense of our utter separation, our almost cosmic loneliness, came to us in an almost overwhelming surge of uncontrollable emotion. The morning sun shone clear and bright down there upon our earth, as it shone here where we were so strangely marooned. We saw just there, most prominently presented to our rapt gaze, the northeast section of South America, along the lower edge of our familiar Caribbean, the Guianas, Venezuela, the skirting islands, Margherita, Los Roques, Bonaire, and, a trifle less clear, the lower isles of my own Lesser Antilles: Trinidad, Barbados on the horizon's very edge, the little shadow I knew to be Tobago.

I shall not attempt further to tell here how that unexpected, yet confirmatory sight, shook the two of us; how small and unimportant it made us feel, how cut off from everything that formed our joint backgrounds. Yet, however detached we felt, however stultifying was this vision of earth down there, it was, literally, as nothing, even counting in our conviction of being mere animated, unimportant specks among the soulless particles of space—even that devastating certainty was as nothing to the climactic focus of what we were to behold.

I sat down beside Wilkes, and, speaking low to each other, we managed gradually to recover those shreds of our manhood which had partly escaped us, to get back some of that indomitable courage which sustains the sons of men and makes

us, when all is said and done, the ultimate masters of our destinies.

**W**HEN we were somewhat recovered—readjusted perhaps is the better word—we stood up and once more looked down over the edge of this alien world, down that soul-dizzying slope, our unaided eyes gradually accommodating themselves to seeing more and more clearly its distant reaches and the continentlike section which lay, dim and vague from distance, below it. We observed now what we had failed to perceive before, that the enormous area of that land-pitch was, in its form, roughly rounded, that it sloped to right and left, as well as directly away from us; that it was, in short, a tremendous, slanted column, like a vast circular bridge between the level upon which we then stood and that continentlike mass of territory down below there in the vague distance. As the sun rose higher and higher the fresh breeze died to a trickle of air, then ceased. Those cylindrical, black, treelike growths no longer waved their spikes. They stood now like rigid metallic columns at variant, irregular angles. In the increasing light the real character of what I had mentally named the Continent below became more nearly apparent. It was changing out of its remote vagueness, taking form. I think it dawned upon me before Wilkes had succeeded in placing what was slowly emerging, mentally. For, just before I turned my head away at the impact of the shock which that dawning realization brought to my mind and senses, the last thing I observed clearly was Wilkes, rigid, gazing below there, staring down that frightful declivity, a mounting horror spreading over the set face above the square-cut jaw. . . .

**R**EALIZATION of the rewards of this world as dross had come, two millenia ago, to Him Who

stood beside the Tempter, upon the pinnacles of the Temple, viewing the kingdoms of the world. In some such fashion—if I may so describe the process without any intentional irreverence—there came to me the blasting conviction which then overtook me, forced itself into my protesting mentality, turned all my ideas upside-down.

For it was not a continent that we had been gazing down upon. It was no continent. It was not land—ground. *It was a face*—a face of such colossal majesty, emerging there, taking form in the rays of the revealing sunlight, as utterly to stagger mind and senses attuned to earthly things, adjusted for a lifetime to earthly proportions; a face ageless in its serene, calm, inhumaneness; its conviction of immeasurable power; its ab-human inscrutability.

I reeled away, my face turned from this incredible catastrophe of thought; and, as I sank down upon the ground, my back turned toward the marge of this declivity, I knew that I had dared to look straight into the countenance of a Great Power, such as the ancients had known. And I realized, suddenly, sick at heart, that this presence, too, was looking out of eyes like level, elliptical seas, up into my eyes, deep into my very inmost soul.

But this conviction, so monstrous, so devastating, so incredible, was not all! Along with it there went the heart-shaking realization that what we had visualized as that great slope was the columnar, incredible arm of that cosmic Colossus—that our night-long trek had been made across a portion of the palm of his uplifted hand!

**O**VERHEAD the cloudless sky began to glow a coppery brown. An ominous, wedge-shaped tinge spread fast, gathering clouds together out of nowhere as it sped into the north. And now the sun-drenched

air seemed heavy, of a sudden difficult to breathe under that pitiless, oppressive sun which glared out of the bland, cerulean<sup>n</sup> corner of the sky in which it burned. A menacing sultriness filled the atmosphere, pressed down upon us like a relentless hand. A hand! I shuddered involuntarily, and turned to Wilkes and spoke, my hand on his shoulder. It was a matter of seconds before the stark horror died out of his eyes. He interrupted my almost whispered words:

"Did you see It, Canevin?"

I nodded.

"I think we'll have to get back from the edge," I repeated my warning he had failed to hear, "down into that—ravine—again. There's the making of a typhoon up topside, I'm afraid."

Wilkes shot a quick, weatherwise glance aloft.

"Right-o," said he, and we started together toward that slight shelter of the shallow valley up which we had toiled as dawn was breaking.

But the wind-storm from out of the north broke upon us long before we had gained this questionable refuge. A blasting hurricane smote down upon us out of that coppery, distorted sky. We had not a chance. The first blast picked us up as though we had been specks of flotsam lint, carried us straight to the brink, and over, and down; and then, side by side, so long as we retained our senses under the stress of that terrific friction, we were hurled at a dizzyingly increasing rate down that titanic toboggan slide as its sheer vertical pitch fell away under our spinning bodies, always faster and faster, with the roar of ten Niagaras rending the very welkin above—down, down, down into the quick oblivion which seemed to shut out all life and all understanding and all persisting hope in one final, mercifully quick-ended horror of ultimate destruction.

Somehow, I carried with me into

that disintegration of the senses and ultimate coma, the thought of Pelletier.

**I**N order to achieve in this strange narrative which I am setting down as best I can, some sense of order and a reasonable brevity, I have, from time to time, summarized my account. I have, for example, mentioned once that enginelike beat, that regular pulsation to be felt here. I have said, to avoid reference to it, that it continued throughout our sojourn in the "place" which I have described. That is what I mean by summarizing. I have, indeed, omitted much, very much, which, now that I am writing at leisure, I feel would burden my account with needless detail, unnecessary recording of my emotional reaction to what was happening. In this category lies all that long conversation between Wilkes and me, as we strode along, side by side, on that long night walk.

But, of all such matters, the most prominent to me was the preoccupation—a natural one, I believe—with that good friend whom I had left looking up into the tree which looked like an English ash, as I climbed away from him into what neither of us could possibly visualize or anticipate, away, as it transpired, from our very planet earth, and into a setting, a set of conditions, quite utterly diverse from anything the mind of modern man could possibly conceive or invent.

This preoccupation<sup>n</sup> of mine with Pelletier had been virtually continuous. I had never had him wholly out of my mind. He had uttered, it will be remembered, no protest at my leaving him down there alone. That, at the time, had surprised me considerably. But on reflection I came to see that such an attitude on his part was entirely natural. It was part of that tremendous fortitude of his, almost fatalism, which was an integral part of his character. I have known

few men better balanced than that ungainly, big-hearted naval surgeon friend of mine. Pelletier was the man I should choose, beyond all others, to have beside me in a pinch.

**A**ND here we were, Wilkes and I, in a situation which I have endeavored to make as clear as possible, perhaps as tight a pinch as any human beings have ever been in, and the efficient and reliable Pelletier not only miles away from us, as we would think of the separation in earthly terms, but, actually, as our sight down that slope had devastatingly revealed, as effectively cut off from us as though we two human atoms had been standing on the planet Jupiter! There had been no moment, I testify truly, since I had been drawn into that tree-vortex and hurled regardless into this monstrous environment, when I had not wanted that tried and true friend beside me.

For, in that same desire to keep this narrative free from the extraneous, to avoid labored repetitions, I see that I have said nothing, so far at least, of what I must name the atmosphere of terror, the sense of malign pressure against my mind, and against Wilkes', which had been literally continuous; which by now, under the successive impacts of shock to which both of us had been subjected, had soared hauntingly to the status of a sustained horror, a sense of helplessness well-nigh intolerable, as it became borne in upon us what we had to face.

We were like a pair of sparrows in a great, incalculable grip.

Against that dread Power there seemed to be no possible defense. We were, and increasingly realizing the fact, completely, hopelessly, Its prey. Whenever It decided to close in upon us, It would strike—at intruders, as the canny Pelletier, sensing our status on Its ground, had phrased the matter. It had us, and we knew it! And there was nothing we could

do, men of action though both of us were; nothing, that is, that any man of whatever degree of fortitude could do. Therein lay the oppressive horror of the situation.

**W**HEN I opened my eyes my first impression was a mental one; to wit, that an enormous period of time had elapsed since last I had looked upon the world and its sky above it. This curious delusion, I have since learned, is due to the degree of unconsciousness which has been sustained. The impression, I will note in passing, shortly wore off. My second, immediately subsequent, impression was a physical one. I ached in every bone, muscle, tendon and sinew of a body which all my life I have kept in the highest possible degree of physical fitness. I felt sorely bruised. Every inch of me protested as I attempted to move, holding me back. And, immediately after this realization, that old pre-occupation with Pelletier reestablished itself in my mind and became abruptly paramount. I could, so to speak, think of nothing, just then, but Pelletier.

Into this cogitation there broke a suppressed groan. With a wrenching effort, I rolled over, and there, behind me, lay Wilkes. We were, it seemed, still together! Whatever the strange Power might be planning and executing upon us, was upon us both. Very slowly and carefully, Wilkes sat up, and, with a rueful glance over at me, began laboriously to feel about over his body.

"I'm merely one enormous bruise," said Wilkes, "and I'm a bit surprised that either of us is—"

"Alive at all!" I finished for him, and we nodded, rather dully, at each other.

"Yes, after that last dash they gave us," added Wilkes. Then, slowly: "What do you suppose it's all about, Canevin? Who, what is it? Is it—er—Allah—or what?"

"I'm none too agile myself," I said, after a pause spent going over various muscles and joints. "I'm intact, it seems, and I've got to agree with you, old man! I don't in the least understand why we're not in small fragments, 'little heaps of huddled pulp,' as I once heard it put! However, if It can use a typhoon to move us about, of course It can temper the typhoon, land us gently, keep us off the ground—undoubtedly It did, for some reason of Its own! However, the main point is that we're still here—but where *are* we now?"

It was not Wilkes who answered. The answer came—I am recording precisely what happened, exaggerating nothing, omitting nothing salient from this unprecedented adventure—the reply came to me mentally, as though by some unanticipated telepathy, quite clearly enunciated, registering itself unmistakably in my inner-consciousness.

"*Sit tight!*" it said. "I'm with you here on this end of things."

And the "voice" which recorded itself in my brain, a calm, efficient kind of voice, a voice which reached out its intense helpfulness and sympathy to us, waifs of some inchoate void, a voice replete with reassurance, with steady confidence, a voice which healed the raw wounds of the beleaguered soul—was the voice of Pelletier.

**P**ELLETIER standing by! I cannot hope to reproduce and set down here the immeasurable comfort of it.

I stood up, Wilkes rising groaningly at the same time, a laborious, painful process, and, reeling on my two feet as I struggled for and finally established my normal balance, looked about me.

We stood, to my mounting surprise, on a stone-flagged pavement. About us rose inner walls of smoothed stone. We were in a room about sixteen by twenty feet in size,

lighted by an open doorway and by six windows symmetrically placed along the side walls, and unglazed. The light which flooded the room through these vents was plainly that of late afternoon. Simultaneously we stepped over to the wide-open doorway and looked out.

Before us waved the dignified foliage of a mahogany grove, thickly interspersed with ceiba trees, its near edge gracious with the brave show of flowering shrubs in full blossom—small white flowers which smelled like the Cape Jessamine. I had only just taken in these features when I felt Wilkes' grip on my arm from where he stood, just behind me and a little to one side. His voice was little more than a whisper:

"We're— Oh, God!— Canevin! Look, Canevin, look! We're back on earth!" His whispered words broke in a succession of hysterical dry sobs, and, as I laid my arm about the poor fellow's heaving shoulders, I felt the unchecked tears running down my own face.

**W**E stepped out side by side after a minute or two, and stood there, once more on true earth, in the pleasant silence of late afternoon and with the fragrance of those flowering shrubs pouring itself over everything. It was a delicate aroma, grateful and refreshing. We said nothing. We spent this quiet interval in some sort of silent thanksgiving.

And, curiously, Wilkes' oddly phrased question came forcibly into my mind: "Is it Allah—or what?" I remembered, standing there in that pleasant, remote garden with its white flowers, an evening spent over a pair of pipes in the austere study of an old friend, Professor Harvey Vanderbogart, a brilliant young Orientalist, since dead. Vanderbogart, I remembered very clearly, had been speaking of one of the Moslem theologians, Al Ghazzali. He had quoted

me a strange passage from the magnum opus of that medieval Saracen, a treatise well known to scholars as "The Precious Pearl." I could even call back into my mind with the smell of the tobacco and the breeze blowing Vanderbogart's dull reddish window curtains, the resonance of his serious, declaiming voice:

" . . . the soul of man passeth out of his body, and this soul is of the shape and size of a bee. . . . The Lord Allah holdeth this soul of man between His thumb and finger, and Allah bringeth it close before His eyes, and Allah holdeth it at the length of His arm, and Allah saith: 'Some are in the Garden—and I care not; and some are in the Fire—and I care not. . . .!'"

Poor Vanderbogart had been dead many years, a most worthy and lovable fellow and a fine scholar. May he rest in peace! Doubtless he is reaping his reward of a blameless life, in the Garden.

And here, somewhere on earth, which was, for the time being, quite enough for us to know, stood Wilkes and I, also in a garden, tremulously grateful to be alive, and on our Mother Earth, glad indeed of this respite as it seemed to us; free, for the time being, of the malevolent caprice of that Power from Whose baleful control, we, poor fools, supposed that we might have been, as it were carelessly, released.

Our momentary illusion of security was strangely shattered.

**W**ITHOUT any preliminary warning of any kind, those great trees before us on the other edge of the row of flowering bushes made deep obeisance all together in their deeply rooted rows, in our direction; as a great wind tore rudely through them, hurling us backward like chips of cork before a hurricane, whipping us savagely with the strong twigs of the uprooted shrubs pelting us, ironically, with a myriad de-

tached blossoms. This fearsome surge of living air smote us back through the wide doorway and landed us in the middle of that compact stone room, and died as abruptly, leaving us, almost literally breathless, and reeling after our dislocated balance.

There was, it occurred to me fragmentarily and with a poignant acuteness, a disastrous certainty brooking no mental denial, none of the benign carelessness of Allah about this Adversary of ours! His was, plainly enough, an active maleficence. He had no intention of allowing us quietly, unobtrusively, to slip away. If we had been landed once more on earth, it was in no sense a release—no more than the cat releases the mouse save to add some infinitesimal mental torture to that pitiful little creature's dash for freedom, ending in the thrust of those ruthless retractile claws.

Brief respites, the subsequent crushing of our very souls by that imponderable Force!

We pulled ourselves together, Wilkes and I, there in that austere little stone room, and, in the breathless calm which had followed that astounding clap of air-force, we found ourselves racked to a very high degree of nervous tension. We stood there, and pumped laboriously the dead, heavy air into our laboring lungs in great gasping breaths. It was as though a vacuum had, for long moments, replaced the warm fresh air of a tropical midafternoon. The stone room's floor was thickly sewn with those delicate white blooms, their odor now no longer refreshing; rather an overpowering additional element now, in the sultry burning air.

Then the center of the rearmost end wall began to move, revealing another doorway the size of that which led outside into the little garden now denuded of its blooms. As the first heavy, grating crunching

ushered this new fact into our keyed-up joint consciousness, we turned sharply toward that wall, now parting, moving back as though on itself.

**WE** looked through, into what seemed an endless, dim-lit vaulted arena of some forgotten worship, into the lofty nave of a titanic cathedral, through dim, dust-laden distances along a level floor of stone to where at an immense distance shimmered such an altar as the Titans might have erected to Jupiter, an altar of shining white stone and flanked by a chiseled figure of a young man, kneeling on one knee, and holding poised on that knee a vast cornucopialike jar, for all the world, as I envisaged it, like a statue of zodiacal Aquarius.

Greatly intrigued, Wilkes and I walked through the doorway out of our stone anteroom, into the colossal structure which towered far, far above into dimness, and straight across the stone-flagged nave toward this unexpected and alluring shrine; glowing up ahead there in all the comeliness of its ancient chaste beauty.

That the architecture here, including the elaborate ornamentation, was that of those same early Mayas concerning whom Pelletier had discoursed so learnedly, there could be no possible question. Here, plainly, was a very ancient and thoroughly authentic survival, intact, of the notable building propensity of that early people, The First Mayas of the High Culture, the founders of the race and its various empires in these Western-world settlements, the predecessors of the present surviving and degenerate inhabitants. Here, about us, remained the work of that cryptic civilization which had so unaccountably disappeared off this planet's face, leaving their enduring stone monuments, their veritable handiwork, developed, sophisticated, with its strange wealth of ornamen-

tation behind them as an insoluble riddle for the archeologists.

**T**HAT this stupendous structure was a survival from a hoary antiquity there was all about us abundant and convincing evidence. I knew enough of the general subject to be acutely aware of that, that this represented the building principles of the earliest period—the high point, as I understood the matter, of the most notable of the successive Maya civilizations. That the building had stood empty and unused for some incalculable period in time was equally evidenced by various facts. One of these, unmistakable, was the thick blanket of fine dust which lay, literally inches thick, over everything; dust through which we were obliged to plod as though over the trackless surface of some roofed and ceiled Sahara; dust which rose in choking clouds behind and about us as we pressed forward toward that distant altar and its glorious statue.

That figure of the youth with his votive jar towered up ahead of us there, white, glistening, beautiful—and the dust of uncounted centuries which lay inches thick upon its many upper, bearing, surfaces such as offered support to its impalpability, caused the heroic figure to stand out in a deeply enhanced and accentuated perspective, lending to it strange highlights in shining contrast to the very dust's thick, quasi-shadows; a veritable perfection of shading such as no sculptor of this world could hope to rival.

We walked, necessarily rather slowly, on and forward toward the altar and statue, their beauty and symmetry becoming more and more clearly apparent as our progress brought them closer and closer within the middle range of our vision.

**N**ATURALLY enough, I had pondered deeply upon the whole affair in which we were in-



volved, in those intervals—such as our long night walk—as had been afforded us between the various actual “attacks” of the Power that held us in its grip. I had, of course, put two and two together again and again in the unceasing human mental process of effort to make problematical two-and-two yield the satisfying four of a solution.

This process, had, of course, included the consideration of many matters, such as the possible connection between the existence of the Great Power and that same ancient Maya civilization; the basic facts, the original reasons back of the terror of those massed aborigines swarming in their forest cover all about the tree-circle; the placing in their appropriate categories of the phenomena of the Great Body; that mechanical regular pulsation which could only be the throbbing of Its circulatory fluids—Ichor was the classical term, I remembered, for the blood of a god; the “ravines” which crossed each other like shallow valleys and which were the “lines” upon that primordial palm; the hirsute growth adorning that titanic forearm which had glistened like metallic tree-boles as the morning sun shone down that slope, and which moved their tapering tops in the breeze from the cosmic nostrils.

All such as these, and various other details, I had, I say, attempted mentally to resolve, to adjust to their right and logical places and settings; to work, that is, mentally, into some coherent unity, literal or cosmic.

The process had included the element of worship. The gods and demigods of deep antiquity had had their worshipers, their devotees diabolic or human, and this as an integral part, an essential, of their now only vaguely comprehended existence; since day and night struggled for primordial precedence in the dim gestation of time.

THAT those prehistoric, highly civilized Maya forebears might have been worshipers of this particular Power (which, as we had had forced upon our attention, had somehow localized Its last stand here in these modern times—that Great Circle; the tree in its center as Its bridge to and from this world of ours) was a possibility which had long since occurred to me. That such a possibility might have some bearing upon that scientific puzzle which centered about their remote and simultaneous disappearance, had, I am sure, also occurred to me at that time. To that problem, which had barely come under my mental scrutiny because it was not central in terms of our predicament, I had, I am equally sure, given no particular thought.

That there could, in the nature of the case, be any evidence—“documentary” or merely archeological—had not entered my mind. I did wonder about it now; however, as we two plodded forward through those choking dust clouds, slowly yet surely onward toward what seemed to have been a major shrine of such forgotten worship, if, indeed, what I suspected had ever had its place upon this planet.

For one thing, the worshipers themselves would by now have been dust these twenty centuries; perhaps, indeed, the once-animated basis of this very powder which swirled and eddied about us two, up from underfoot as we pushed forward laboriously toward the shrine. There, in its forgotten heyday, that worship had sent swirling and eddying upward in active spirals incense compounded of the native tree-gums; the balsams and *olibana*, the styrax and powdered sweet-leaves of the envioning forests; incense bearing upward in its votive clouds the aspirations of an antiquity as remote as that of the Roman Augurs, and to a deity fiercer, more inscrutable, than Olympian Jove.

**I**T would, indeed, have been a relief to us to see some worshipers now, human beings, even though, devoted as they might be to their deity in Whose hostile power we were held, such personages should prove correspondingly hostile to us. This unrelenting, unrelieved god-and-victim situation was a truly desperate one. Within its terms—as I have elsewhere tried to make clear—we felt ourselves helpless. There was nothing to strike against! A man, however resolute, cannot, in the very nature of things, contend with a Power of this kind! Useless mere courage, fortitude. Even the possession of a body stalwart, inured by exercise and constant usage against conflict and the deadly fatigue of intensive competitive effort, is no match for hurricanes—powerless against a Force which could be mistaken for a major geographical division of land!

Despite the fact that we had gone without rest or sleep, to say nothing of food and water for a much longer period that was our common custom; apart, too, from the fact that these sound bodies of ours were just then rather severely strained and racked from the cosmic manhandling to which we had been subjected; leaving wholly out of consideration the stresses which had worn thin our nervous resistance—taking into consideration all these factors which told against us, I know that both of us would have welcomed any contact, even though it should involve conflict of the most drastic kind, with human beings, people like ourselves. They might be, for all of us, out of any age, past or present; of any degree of rudeness, of any lack of civilization, in any numbers—just so that they be human.

We did not know then—certainly I did not, and Wilkes was saying nothing—what lay in wait for us, just around the corner of time, so to speak!

**W**E had by now traversed about half of the distance between the anteroom and the altar. Behind us, a heavy, weaving, tenuous cloud of the fine dust we had disturbed hung like a gray, nebulous curtain between us and the towering rearward end wall of that enormous fane. Ahead now the altar glowed, jewel-like, in the slanting rays of a declining sun, rays which appeared to fall through some high opening as yet invisible to us. The genuflecting figure I have named Aquarius gleamed, too, gloriously, in its refined, heroic contours—a thing of such pure beauty as to cause the beholder to catch his breath.

About us all things were utterly silent, a dead stillness, like the settled, lifeless quiet of some abandoned tomb. Even our own footfalls, muffled in the thick dust of the marching centuries, registered no audible sound.

And then, with the rude abruptness which seemed to characterize every manifestation of that anachronistic divinity, that survival out of an unfriendly past, there came without any warning the deep, soul-stirring, contrapuntal beat of a vast gong. This tremendous note poured itself into this dead world, this arid arena of a forgotten worship; the sudden, pulsing atmosphere of renewal, of life itself.

We stopped there in our tracks and the fine dust rose all about us like gray cumulus. We looked, we listened, and all about us the quickening air became alive. Then the vibrating, metallic clangor reverberated afresh and the atmosphere was electrified into pulsing animation; an unmistakable, palpable sense of fervid, hastening activity. We stood there, in that altered environment, tense, strained, every nerve and every faculty aroused as though by an unmistakable abrupt challenge. The altar seemed to coruscate in this new atmosphere. The zodiacal figure

of Aquarius gleamed afresh in the sun's slanting rays with a poignant, unearthly beauty.

The slow, shattering sub-bass of the gong reverberated a third time, its mighty, overtonic echoes charging the revived air with a challenging summons; and, before these had wholly died away and silence above the dust clouds established itself, out from some point beside and beyond the altar there emerged a slow-moving procession of men in long, dignified garments, in hierarchical vesture, walking gravely, two and two.

**WE** watched breathlessly. Here, at long last, was the fulfilment of that half-formulated wish. Human beings! Here were worshippers: tall, stalwart men; great, bearded men, warriors in seeming; bronzed, great-thewed hierophants, bearing strange instruments, the paraphernalia of some remote ritual—wands and metal cressets; chained thuribles, naviculae, long cornucopiæ, like that upon the flexed knee of Aquarius; harsh-sounding systra, tinkling triangles, netted rattles strung with small, sweet-chiming bells; salsalim, castanets, clanging cymbals; great rams' horns banded with plates of shining fresh gold; enormous, fanlike implements of a substance like elephants' hide; a gilt canopy, swaying on ebony poles, ponderous, its fringes powdered with jewels, sheltering a votive bullock, its wide horns buried beneath looped garlands. This procession moved gravely toward the altar, an endless stream of grave, bearded men, until, as we watched, stultified, wondering, the space about it became finally filled, and the slow-moving, endless-seeming throng, women and girls among the men now, turned toward us, pouring deliberately into the forefront of the nave.

It was, after this change in the course of the procession's objective, only a matter of seconds before we

were seen. There was no possibility of retreat, nothing whatever behind which we might have concealed ourselves. We could, of course, have lain down, burrowing in the dust, and so, perhaps, have delayed the instant of discovery. But that did not occur to either of us. Such a course would, too, have been quite futile. Enormous as was this vast fane—built, it appeared, to accommodate worshippers in their thousands—there were here, thronging in endlessly, more than enough to fill it to suffocation.

**T**HERE was, once we were observed, not so much as an instant's hesitation, a moment's respite for us. Between the instant when the foremost of that great throng perceived us, strangers, outlanders, and the instantaneous corporate cry of rage which rose from a thousand throats, there was not time for us to clasp hands in a futile gesture of farewell. They rushed us without any other preliminary than that roar of fierce, primitive anger. The dust under that mass movement of sandaled feet rose in an opaque cloud which obscured the altar. Out of that thick, mephitic cloud they came at us, brandishing thick, metallic, macelike clubs, great bronze swords, obvious, menacing, in that dust-dim air, the rapidly-failing light of the sun—deadly blades, thirsting for our blood.

"Back to back, as soon as they surround us," I hurled in Wilkes' ear, but I had not completed that brief counsel of despair when Wilkes, who produced from somewhere a small, flat automatic pistol, had abruptly dropped in his tracks a huge bearded warrior, who, by reason of a greatly superior fleetness of foot, had by far outdistanced the others. This giant fell within fifteen feet of us. The nearest of the others, also bounding along well in advance of the pack, was perhaps thirty feet distant. I had time to plunge forward and seize

out of a great hairy fist the enormous bronze sword of this our first casualty. With this it was my plan to rush back to where Wilkes stood, sighting calmly along his pistol barrel, as I glimpsed him, and make together some sort of stand.

The second runner was nearly on top of me, however, before I could straighten up and try to fell him with this untried weapon. Wilkes shot him through the middle precisely as he was about to bring down his macelike weapon across my skull. I secured the mace before any of the others out of that frenzied horde was within striking distance, and leaped back through the now boiling dust clouds to Wilkes' side. This was a trifle better, though obviously hopeless against those odds. I straightened myself, caught my balance, turned to face the rush beside Wilkes.

**"GOOD** for five more, anyhow!" said Wilkes calmly, firing past me twice in quick succession. I was turned about and again facing the oncoming rush in time to see two more of them sinking down. I thrust choice of the two primitive weapons I had secured toward Wilkes. He snatched the mace in his left hand, fired his remaining three shots, hurled the pistol into the thick of the vanguard; and then, shifting the mace to his right hand while I made my huge sword sing through the dust, we faced the attack.

We possessed jointly the single advantage of comparative lightness. Our massed opponents were uniformly men of literally huge stature, heroic-looking fellows, stalwart, bulky, deadly serious in this business of killing!

Unquestionably, as I think back over that conflict, too much emphasis cannot be placed upon this single advantage of lightness, mobility, to which I have just alluded. Otherwise, had we not been able to move

about very much more rapidly than our opponents, that fight would have been finished, with our offhand slaughter, in a matter of seconds! The odds were—"overwhelming" is not the word. "Ridiculous" comes nearer to it. Probably a thousand of the enormous warriors were using their utmost endeavor to close in upon and slaughter two men. But they necessarily got inextricably tangled up together for that very reason. If they had delegated two or three of their number to attend to Wilkes and me while the others merely stood by, there can be no question but what they would have accomplished their end, and in a very brief period of time.

The bulk, and the consequent relative awkwardness of the individual warriors, too, counted powerfully in our favor. We were, thus, both jointly infinitely more mobile than the huddled phalanx which we confronted, and individually as well when compared, man for man, to even the lightest of our opponents when considered singly. They got into each others' way through the sheer directness of their massed attack, and of this circumstance which counted so heavily in our favor we took the fullest advantage. The great warriors, too, appeared to pay no attention either to their own dead, which began to pile up after a few moments of that intensive affray, and these, as they increased, served to protect us and to cause them, intent only on reaching us, to stumble broadcast. They seemed to know nothing of defensive fighting.

**WE** plunged, both of us, into that fight, berserk, with no other idea but that this was the inevitable, the predestined end; no other idea than that we were going out like men—and with as much company as possible for whatever Stygian process might await us beyond the doors of that imminent death.

It was like a preface to Valhalla, that fight! In that remote edge of my brain which people call "the back of the mind," I remember the thought cropping up that such combat as this was an affair of utter futility! We had no shadow of misunderstanding with these towering, swarming legionaries out of some unguessed backwater of antiquity. They, certainly, apart from their primitive urges, had no reason for attacking us. Yet, I confess, I went into that shambles with a sense of relief, with a quite definite satisfaction, a gusto! These great, truculent, brown, bearded creatures were subjects of, part and parcel with, that hostile demigod, that basic anachronism, Who was persecuting us. Striking at them, His Myrmidons, meant blows at Him—shrewd blows they were. . . .

**W**E struck out, Wilkes and I. I found my great awkward-looking weapon surprisingly well-balanced and keen. It was only after I had sheared through that first torso, clear through the big neck muscles and ribs of my first actual opponent, that I realized what a sword could be! I set my teeth. Vague, hereditary instincts burgeoned in my blood-quickenened mentality. I went half mad with the urge to slay. I exulted as my great sword found its mark, struck home again and yet again. Half-articulate cries burst through my compressed lips; terrible thoughts, a fearful, supporting self-confidence boiled in my mind as I fought, and thrust, and swung; vague instincts freshly quickened into seething life and power; the inheritance from countless Nordic forebears, men who were men indeed, heroes of song and saga, men of my clan who had fought their relentless way to chieftainship, men who fought with claymores.

There came over me a terrible swift surge of security, of certainty, of appalling confidence. I was more

than a man. I, too, was a god, empowered with the achievements of those old Canevins who had feared neither man nor devil in the ancient eras of the clan's glory in the field of red battle—a sense of strange happiness, of fulfilment, of some deep destiny coming into its own like the surging up of a great tide. This, I suppose, is what people name the blood-lust. I do not know. I only know that I settled down to fighting, my brain alert, my arm wielding the sword tirelessly, my feet and legs balancing me for the great shearing strokes with which I cleared space after recurrent space about me and caused the mounded dead to make a bulwark between me and those indefatigable huge brutes who pressed on and on, filling up the ranks of their cloven, sinking colleagues.

**H**EREDITY laid its heavy hand upon me as I slew right and left and always before me. It was like some destiny, I say, fulfilling itself. Strange cries, deep, primitive slogans burst from my lips. I pressed upon those before me—we were, of course, surrounded—and, feeling the comradeship of Wilkes at my back, as he swung and lashed out with that metal club taking his toll of brains and crackling skulls, I surged into a song, a vast war shout, rushing upon the ever-renewed front of my enemies, flailing the great sword through yielding flesh and resistant bone and sinew, forward, ever forward into a very fulfilment and epitome of slaughter. From time to time one or another would reach, and wound me, but the blood of the ancient fighting clan of Canevin heeded not.

My bronze sword drank deep as it sheared insatiable through tissue and tendon. Before me, an oriflamme, flared a blood-red mist in that dank shambles where blood mingled with paralyzing dust clouds. It was basic; hand to hand; pure conflict. My soul exulted and sang as I ploughed for-

ward into the thick of it, Wilkes' staccato "Ha!" as his metal club went home, punctuating the rhythm of my terrible strokes against that herded phalanx. I struck and struck, and the sword drank and drank.

I strode among heaped bodies now, seeking foot leverage, a greater purchase for my blows. Against these heart-lifting odds, heedless of death, feeling none of the gashes and bruises I received, I strove, in a still-mounting fury of utter destruction. I drove them before me in scores, in hundreds. . . .

Then, insistent, paralyzing, came the last stroke, the shattering reverberation of the great gong.

**W**ITH that compelling stroke, like the call of Fate, the conflict died all about me. The tense, striving fury dropped away from the distorted faces before me. Their weapons fell. I heard Wilkes' quick "Ha!" as his last blow went home on a crumpling skull, and then my sword hung idle all at once in my scarlet hand; the pressure of the circle about us relaxed, fell away to nothing. I breathed again without those choking gasps through air fouled with the fetor of dust and blood—old dust, newly-shed blood. We stood together, still back to back, our strained hearts pumping wildly, our red vision clearing. We stood near the very rearmost wall now, such had been the pressure into the nave.

We turned, as though by an agreement, and looked into each other's eyes. Then, as a surge of chanted song far up by the altar inaugurated this worship which was beginning, which had taken from us the attention of that mad horde, we slipped quietly out through the anteroom, and into the garden now tremulous with the verge of dusk upon it, side by side, on the short grass, we lay down upon our faces, and relaxed our sorely taxed bodies, turned, and

spoke quietly to each other, and gazed up at the friendly stars, and closed our eyes, and fell at once into the quick deep sleep of complete and utter exhaustion.

**I**T was Wilkes who shook me awake. It was pitch dark, or nearly so, the moon being at the moment obscured under clouds. A light, refreshing rain was falling, and my soaking wetness from head to foot evidenced a heavier shower through which both of us had slept. My wounds and bruises from that terrific mêlée ached and burned and throbbed. Yet I had lost little blood, it appeared, and when I stood up and had moved about somewhat, my usual agility seemed quite fully restored. The phosphorus-painted dial of my wrist-watch—which had survived that shambles intact—showed that it was half past four in the morning.

"I've been scouting around," explained Wilkes. "It isn't so bad in this light after you've got used to it a bit. I've discovered a sapodilla tree. That's why I awakened you, Canevin—thought you could do with a bit to eat, what?"

He held out four of the round, dull-brown fruits which look like Irish potatoes. I took them eagerly, the first food in many hours. I do not recall a more satisfactory meal at any time in my life.

Greatly refreshed, I washed my hands in the rain and wiped them clean on the short wet grass. Wilkes was speaking again:

"Those people, Canevin! There are no such people in the world, today—except here, I believe. What do you think? That is, if you've had time to think after that. Good God, man, were you a gladiator in some past existence! But, to get back to those people in there. It seems to me that—well, either those are the old-time Mayas, surviving just in this spot, wherever it may be, or

else—do you suppose He could—er—make them immortal, something of the sort, what? Sounds ridiculous. I grant you that, of course, but then, this whole affair is. . . .” He paused, leaving me to fill in the adjective. I stepped on something hard. I stooped down, picked up the enormous sword which I had carried out here to the garden when we had left the temple last night. I balanced it in my hand. I looked at Wilkes in the still dim light.

“IT’S really, in a sense, the greatest puzzle of all,” I said reflectively. “You’re right, of course. No question about it, man! Those people were—well, anything but what I’d call contemporaries of ours. I’d almost be inclined to say that the immortality alternative gets my vote.”

“Let’s go back and take a look for ourselves,” said Wilkes. “We don’t seem, somehow, to have very much choice, this trip. Now seems to be one of the slack moments. Let’s go back inside there, get up behind that altar and statue, and see what’s there, in that place they all marched out from, what? Everything seems quieted down now inside; has been for hours on end, I’d say. We weren’t molested while we slept through all that rain.”

I nodded. A man can only die once, and the Power could, certainly, do as it wished with us. The rain ended, as tropical showers end, abruptly. The sweet odor of some flowering shrub poured itself out. The clouds passed from before the moon.

“Right,” said I. “Let’s get going.” And, without another word, we entered the stone anteroom, walked across it to where the doorway had opened into the temple, and—stopped there. The door was shut now. It was not, in the dim moonlight which filtered through the openings, even perceptible now.

There was simply nothing to be seen there, not so much as a chink in the solid masonry of the wall, to indicate that there was a door.

“We’ll have to work around to it from the outside,” said Wilkes, after we had stood awhile in baffled silence. “There must be a way.”

I laughed. “They say that ‘where there’s a will there’s a way,’” I quoted. “Well, let’s try it, outside,” answered Wilkes; and we walked out into the garden again.

THERE was no particular difficulty about finding that “way.” We simply walked around the end of the small structure I have called the anteroom and followed along the almost endlessly high, blank stone-mason work of the temple’s outside sheathing. The walking was not difficult, the growth being chiefly low shrubs. At last we came to the end of the temple wall, and turned the sharp corner it made at the beginning of a slight slope which ran down very gradually in the same direction in which we had been walking.

To our considerable surprise, for we had thought of nothing like this, there stretched away from us, farther than we could see in the moonlight broken by small, drifting clouds of the cirrus variety, a succession of other buildings, all of them obviously of that same early-civilization period of the first Maya empire, rounded structures for the most part, carrying the typical stone arrangement and ornamentation. Enormous as was the great temple, the area occupied by these massed and crowded buildings, close-standing, majestic in their heavy, solid grandeur, was far greater. The nearest, less than half the height of the towering temple side walls, was joined onto the temple itself, and stretched away virtually out of our sight. We stood and looked up at this.

"Undoubtedly," I agreed, standing beside him and looking up at the solid masonry, its massive lines somewhat broken, dignified and beautiful in the fickle, transient moonlight.

Not a sound, not a whisper, even from a night insect, broke the deathly stillness. I remembered the Great Circle.

"It's His territory, right enough," I murmured; and Wilkes nodded.

"Closed for the season!" he said lightly, and lit a cigarette.

I sat down beside Wilkes and looked for my cigarette case. I had left it in the pocket of my drill jacket when I took it off and laid it on the ground beside Pelletier before going up the tree. Curiously, in all this time that had elapsed I had not thought of smoking. Wilkes handed me his case, and we sat there side by side saying nothing. A glance down at the heavy sword which I had laid across my knees reminded me of our current mission.

"We'll have to go all the way to the end of this masonry-work at least," I said, "before we can get into the inclosure!"

Wilkes tossed away the stub of his cigarette, stood up, and stretched his arms.

"All right," said he, "let's do it."

**I**T took us a quarter of an hour of steady walking before we came to a corner. We turned this, walked past that enormous building's end, and emerged in a kind of open space much like the quadrangle of a modern university, only many times larger in area, surrounded by more buildings dim in the present light, one side bounded by the edge of the great structure we had been skirting. The moonlight shone somewhat brighter on this side, against that long plain wall of masonry.

Suddenly Wilkes caught me by

the arm. He uttered a typically British expletive.

"My hat!" said Wilkes, "Look, Canevin! There isn't a window in the place!"

We stood looking up at the building.

"Curious," commented Wilkes. "Other old Maya architecture has windows—that little anteroom effect we called in at before going into the temple has windows, both sides. Why not this?"

"Perhaps it's a kind of storehouse," I suggested. "If so, it wouldn't need windows."

"I doubt that—sort of instinct, perhaps," returned Wilkes. "All along I've had the idea that the—er—congregation came out of this into the temple. It's attached—we saw that outside there, built right onto it; we had to walk around it on just that account."

"If you're right," I said, reflecting, "if there are people in there—well, then they don't need windows—light."

"If so, why?" threw out Wilkes; and I had no answer.

We stood staring up at the blank, unornamental, solid wall.

"Curious!" vouchsafed Wilkes again. "Curious, no end!" Then: "Might bear out my idea, rather—you remember, Canevin? That 'immortality' idea I mean. If He has them—er—preserved, so to speak, ready to be revived, started going when He wants them, or *needs* them, what? As you remarked, they weren't exactly 'contemporaries' of ours! He's been going at this whole affair His own way, all through; not the way we human beings would go at it. If you ask me, He—er—needed them to scrag us in there, in the temple I mean. They tried, you know! Failed, rather! We're still on deck, Canevin! And, back of that—why, for the sake of argument, did He set us down here, on earth once more, but not at the



same old stand, not where we parked the old bus, in that circle of grass, under that tree? Perhaps it's a small matter but—well, why, Canevin? Why here, I mean to say, rather than there? It's a point to consider at any rate. Looks to me, if you ask me, as though He were trying, in His own peculiar way, to do us in, and had, so far, failed."

**I** PONDERED over this long speech of Wilkes', the longest I had heard him make. He was, like many engineering fellows, inclined to be monosyllabic rather than garrulous. It was, I thought, a curious piece of reasoning. Yet, anything coming from this stanch comrade in a pinch such as he had proved himself to be, was worth consideration. It might be what he called "instinct," or indeed, anything. It might be the truth.

I was very far from realizing at that moment—and so, too, I think, was Wilkes himself, despite this curiously suggestive set of ideas—that within a very short time this utterly strange adventure upon which we were embarked was to give us its final, and, thoughtfully considered, perhaps its most poignant, surprise. Even warned as I should have been by Wilkes' strange surmise, I was quite unprepared for what we found inside.

We proceeded slowly along what I have called the inner wall of the vast structure which joined the temple at its farther end. We walked for minute after minute along beside it, always glancing up at it, constantly on the lookout for an entrance. The walls remained entirely blank, without either apertures or ornamentation. The huge building might, to all appearances, have been some prehistoric warehouse or granary.

At last we came to its end, the end structurally joined onto the temple's rearmost wall. We walked

directly up to this point, where the two structures made a sharp corner.

There was no entrance except, presumably, through the temple, from the inside, there behind the altar. We had had half an hour's walk around these massive survivals of ancient architecture for nothing. It was five three by my watch in the moon's clear light. The clouds had retreated toward the horizon by now, as we stood there at that corner, baffled.

We turned, rather wearily now, away at right angles from our course just finished, and plodded along the grassy ground under the towering rear wall of the temple.

And, halfway along it, we came to an opening, an arched doorway without a door. We stopped, point-blank, and looked at each other.

"Shall we...?" whispered Wilkes.

**I** NODDED, and stepped through, the great sword, which I had been carrying like a musket over my shoulder, now gripped, business-fashion, in my right hand.

We stepped through into an ambulatory, a semicircular passage-way behind the altar. We turned to our left, in the direction of the temple's corner against which was built the building we had been encircling, walking once more through heaped dust such as had clogged the nave, our footfalls soundless in an equally soundless environment.

Emerging from that semicircular course at the altar's side, we were able to see from this coign of vantage the overhead opening through which the rays of the late-afternoon sun had streamed down the day before. This was a wide space left vacant in the roofing, far above, overhung by what seemed another roof-structure twenty or thirty feet higher up, an arrangement plainly designed to keep out the rain while letting in the rays of the declining sun.

Now, in the moonlight of pre-dawn, both altar and statue took on an unearthly beauty. We stood rapt, looking along the altar directly toward the face of the statue.

This time it was I who jogged Wilkes' elbow.

"It's a quarter past five," I warned him. "If we're going to get a look at those people, we'd better do it now, before daylight. We haven't very long. And if they're—well, regular people, ordinary human beings, a segregated nation and *not*—er—'embalmed,' or whatever it is that you had in mind, we'd best take a quick glance and get away before they are awake!"

**WE** turned away from those shimmering, pale glories which were the altar and the statue, the one jeweled, the other shining, resplendent, toward the predicated passageway that must lead out of the temple to where its erstwhile worshippers took their repose.

We could have told where it began if we had been blind men, by the feel of the heavily-trodden dust under our feet, dust not heaped and soft as we had experienced it—dust matted into the consistency of felt by the pressure of ten thousand feet.

Along that carpet over the stone flooring of a wide passageway we walked, warily now, not knowing what we might confront, toward a high, wide archway which marked the entrance proper into the windowless barrack or storehouse we had so lately scrutinized.

Here the moonlight shone scantily. We could not see very far before us, but we could see far enough to show us what kind of place it was into whose purlieus we had penetrated. We paused, just beyond the archway, paused and looked. . . .

There, in that storehouse laid out before us as far as the dim moonlight permitted our vision to

reach, straight before us until their regular ranks were no longer visible except to the agitated eye of the mind, lay endless, regularly spaced rows of bodies, endless rows, rank upon serried rank; still, motionless, mummylike, in the ineffable calm of latency; life suspended; life merged into one vast, incalculable coma. This was a storehouse indeed, in very fact: the last abiding place of those old Mayas of the first civilization, that classical puzzle of the archeologists—a puzzle no longer to Wilkes and me of all modern men; a civilization, a nation, in bond to the Power that still held us in an ironical, unrelenting, grasp—to that One Whom these very ancients worshiped and propitiated, the Prince of the Powers of the Air. . . .

**WITHOUT** a word we hastened out of that grim house of a living death and back into the temple, and, with no more than a glance toward the altar and statue, hurried silently back through the ambulatory and out through the doorless archway again into the breaking dawn of another day, under the fading stars of a new morning.

And, as we emerged, toward us, diagonally across what I have called the "quadrangle," in regular formation, disciplined, there marched unfaltering, resolute, a vast horde of tall, brown men, led by two figures who stepped gravely in their van, ahead of those serried thousands. He on the left was a tall, brown man of majestic carriage, bearing in his hand a small burning torch, young, yet of a commanding dignity as one used to rule. Upon the right marched beside him a heavy, lumbering figure, who walked wearily, yet not without a certain heavy dignity of his own, a figure of a certain familiarity—the figure of Pelletier!

My immediate instinct was to cry out in sudden relief, to rush incontinently forward. I felt suddenly as though my heart would burst Pelletier, of all the men this old planet could possibly produce, here! Pelletier, the most welcome sight. . . .

I could not have done so, however, even though I had actually yielded to that impulse I have named. For Pelletier was calling out to me, in a curious kind of voice, I noted at once, with some puzzlement—in a kind of rude, improvised chant.

"Steady, Canevin, steady does it, as the British Navy says! Walk toward us, both of you, side by side; stand up straight; make it as dignified as you know how—slow; like two big guns conferring a favor on the populace. Pay no attention to anybody but me. Stop in front of me. We'll bow to each other; not too low. Then, when *He* bows, put your hands on his head—like a blessing, do you understand? On this big fellow beside me, I mean. Don't botch it now, either of you. It's important. . . . Good! That's the ticket! Keep it up now; carry the whole works through just the way I'm telling you."

**W**E carried out these amazing instructions to the letter. They were, of course, apart from the general idea of making an impression on Pelletier's inexplicable following, quite unintelligible to us. But, we went through with them precisely according to these weird, chanted instructions—like the directions of some madman, a paranoiac for choice! "Delusions of grandeur!" The old phrase came inevitably into my mind. Even the young chieftain did his part, kneeling with gravity before us as soon as we had finished our salutation to Pelletier, and he had majestically returned it.

Immediately after these ceremonial performances which were received in a solemn silence by the army—for the orderly ranks were numerous enough to deserve such a distinctive title—Pelletier drew us aside and spoke with haste tempering his gravity.

"I'll explain all this later. Tell me, first, how long have you been in this place?"

We told him we had spent the night here and started to outline our adventures, but Pelletier cut in.

"Another time," he said curtly. "This is vital, pressing. Is there anything here—I don't know, precisely, how to make clear exactly what I mean; you'll have to use your wits; I haven't the time to hold a long palaver now, and we mustn't waste a minute—anything, I mean, that would correspond to that tree you fellows went up; something, in other words, that would serve—er—Him as a bridge, a means of access to the earth? I don't know how to make it any clearer. Maybe you catch what I mean."

"There's a temple back of us," said Wilkes, "with an altar—"

"And a statue," I finished for him, "a magnificent thing, heroic in size; looks for all the world like the figure of Aquarius in the signs of the zodiac. Possibly—"

"Take us straight to it," commanded Pelletier, and turned and spoke rapidly to the brown chieftain in sonorous Spanish. He told him to detach one hundred or more of his most reliable warriors and follow us without the least delay, and to this task the young leader forthwith addressed himself. Within two minutes, so unquestioned appeared to be his authority, this picked company was following us at the double back to the temple entrance, back along the curving ambulatory, back to the vicinity of the altar and statue.

WE paused at the point where these first became visible, and Pelletier looked at the statue for a long instant.

"The perfect focus!" he muttered, and turned and addressed the chieftain once more.

"Advance with us in close order," he commanded, "to the figure of the man holding the vessel. Draw up the men beside it, on this side, and when I give you the signal, push it over on its side!"

This order, immediately passed on to the Indians, was set in motion without delay, the stalwart fellows crowding toward the statue eagerly.

We were almost beside the statue when the sudden roar of the great gong, almost beside us, shattered the quiet air. I winced, and so did Wilkes, and the Indians stopped in their tracks. Automatically I gripped the hilt of my bronze sword as I felt Wilkes' steadying hand close on my shoulder.

Then Pelletier raised his great booming voice and began to sing in Spanish, something about "the conquering fire"! He almost literally pushed that group of Indians toward their appointed task. Not without a certain hesitation, a reluctance, I thought, they lined up beside the statue obediently, yet with rolled eyes and fearful glances in all directions, indicating that panic lay only a little way below their corporate surface of strict obedience. Then, at Pelletier's spoken signal, the massed group heaved, all together. The great statue moved, gratingly, on its solid foundation.

"Again!" cried Pelletier, and hurled his own weight and bulk into the balance.

The statue swayed this time, hung balanced precariously, then toppled over on its farther side in a shattering crash which detached the cornucopia and the beautifully

modeled arms and hands which held it, at the very instant of the gong's second, deep, reverberant note.

PELLETIER surveyed the damage he had wrought; turned with the rest of us toward the entering procession that came marching in from that arched opening, precisely as we had seen them enter at yesterday's fall of dusk. It was now, however, the fresh, clear light of early morning, and in this better illumination I confess that I gasped at what I had not observed the day before.

Upon the garments, yes, upon the very jutting, powerful features of the members of that hierarchical company gravely advancing now toward us, upon their hair and their beards, even their shaggy eyebrows, hung the clotted dust of the centuries!

But, Wilkes and I did not hesitate over this strange sight. We knew why He had summoned once again these Myrmidons of His from their sleep-like-death in those storerooms of His, those slave pens.

"Out, for God's sake, out, as quick as you can get them going!" I cried out to Pelletier. "There are thousands of them!" And he, not hesitating now that he had accomplished what he had come here to do, over any idea of conflict against the overwhelming odds which I had indicated, passed swiftly to his Indians the word of command and retreat.

But even this immediate response of his to my warning was not swift enough. We had been observed, and already as he shouted to the chieftain, that corporate roar of rage and fury was rising, multiplying itself, as more and more voices joined in upon its fearsome volume. Already the foremost hierophants of this now-deseccrated shrine were parting their ranks to let through and at us

the massed warriors who pressed eagerly to the attack.

**I** WAS deadly weary. Yet, something of that old fighting blood call of the Canevins, some atavistic battle lust derived from those ancient fighting forebears of mine, nerved me of a sudden. Those ancestors of mine had shirked no conflict, if tradition spoke truly down the ages. I swung up the great bronze sword, a strange, vague, yet unmistakable call from dim departed ages of red battle stirring my blood to fire. With a shout on my lips I stepped out before that company of ours, prepared to meet the oncoming rush, if need be, alone.

But I was frustrated in this mad instinctive gesture—frustrated, I say, and in the strangest manner imaginable. For I was not the only one who stepped out into the open space between our group and the rush of oncoming fighting men of a revived antiquity. No. Beside me, towering tall, slender, commanding, pressed the noble figure of that young chieftain, unarmed, his long arms held straight up before him, the palms of his hands held forward in an immemorial gesture of authority.

Then from his lips there burst a veritable torrent of some strange, sonorous speech, at the sound of which the oncoming fighting men stopped dead.

I paused, amazed at this wholly unexpected occurrence. I lowered my sword automatically as I saw the menacing weapons brandished by the others likewise lowered.

On and on went that authoritative speech, until of a sudden it stopped as abruptly as it had been begun, and the young chieftain lowered his hands, folded his arms, and stood facing the now silent throng of brown, learded warriors and the priests of their strange cult behind them, all of them equally motionless before him, their massed attention

directed to him alone, standing there like a group carved out of stone.

And then, out of the midst of them, came one great bearded giant. This man, evidently their leader, walked straight toward us where we stood grouped behind the orator, paused before him, and then this statuesque warrior flung down his bronze sword, clanging, and prostrated himself. The young chieftain took two grave steps forward, and placed his sandaled foot upon the prostrate figure's neck. Inspired, I stepped over to him and placed my own great bronze sword in his hand.

**O**F how we traveled back to the Great Circle through a mahogany forest interspersed with ceiba, Otaheite, and Guinea-tamarind trees, I shall say but little. We traversed levels and dips and toiled up slopes and skirted marshlands. We traveled faint trails which had to be negotiated single file. We passed through clearings recently cut free of the clinging bush and trailing liana vines. Occasionally small, tapirlike quadrupeds started up almost under our feet, disturbed at their early-morning browsing in that thick jungle. We stepped along now and again through stretches fragrant with the odors of frangipani blooms, and the rich, attarlike sweetness of the flowering vanilla orchid.

And at last we came to the edge of the Great Circle once more, at a quarter before nine o'clock by my faithful wrist-watch which had not missed a tick throughout all these alarms and excursions. Here Pelletier paused, and in a brief, emphatic speech, in Spanish, took leave of and dismissed his army, which melted away, after profound salaams in our direction, into the deeper forests forming the hinterlands of that horizon of jungle. Forty or more hostages, brought with us from the company of those Ancient Ones who had accepted the overlordship of that

remarkable young chief, departed with them. They were seen no more by us.

I was far too weary—and poor Wilkes was literally tottering in his tracks—to listen very closely to what Pelletier said to the Indians. As soon as the last of them had disappeared out of our sight, the three of us started across the stretch of short grass, up the slight slope toward the center where our plane still rested on the ground. Pelletier forged ahead to get his first-aid satchel for our wounds.

The great tree was gone!

**I**T was nearly ten o'clock when at last we sank down in the grateful shade of the plane's broad wings, and the last thing that I remember before falling into the sleep from which I was awakened an hour and a half later, was Pelletier holding to my mouth one of our canteens, and feeling the comfort to my parched throat of the stale, tepid water it contained.

It was the roar of the rescuing plane which awakened me, at eleven thirty.

We reached Belize a few minutes before two. I had slept part of the way in the air, which is no mean feat considering the thunderous roar of the engine. I stumbled up to my bedroom in the hotel, and did not move until seven the following morning.

When I did awaken, raw with weariness, Pelletier was standing beside my bed.

"I thought I'd better tell you as soon as possible," said he genially, "that I did all the necessary talking to that rescue party. You and Wilkes had been scouting around, making discoveries, and had got yourselves pretty well worn in the process. They swallowed that easily enough. It was ordinary engine trouble that dished us, out there where they found us. We were out of gas, too. There was the empty tank to prove it. I'll tell you later where that gasoline went

to. I'm responsible for that. You'd better stick to the same simple yarn, too. I've already told Wilkes."

I nodded, and fell asleep again, after drinking without question the glassful of stuff Pelletier handed me. I do not even remember the taste, and I have no idea what the concoction was. But just before noon, when I awakened again, I was myself once more. I got up, bathed thoroughly, and gave myself a very much-needed shave. After lunch I called on the Bishop of British Honduras, and returned to him the binoculars he had considerably loaned me with the thanks of the party.

**O**N the following morning Pelletier and I made our farewells to the splendid Wilkes, and to our other Belize friends and acquaintances. We had secured passage in a fruiter clearing that noon for Kingston, the first leg of our journey home to St. Thomas.

About four P. M. that afternoon Pelletier, whom I had not seen since luncheon on board, lumbered along the deck and stopped at my chair.

"Would you like to hear my end of it all now—or would it do better later?" he inquired. He grinned down at me.

"Later—in St. Thomas preferably, if it's all the same to you, Pelletier," I answered him. "I'd rather get my mind clean off it all and keep it off for the present. Later, by all means, with the home things, the home atmosphere all about me, if you don't mind. Just now I'd rather do nothing and think nothing, and hear nothing beyond ice water, and eating fruit, and sleeping!"

"I don't blame you," threw back Pelletier as he shuffled ponderously away, the smoke from his big black cigar trailing behind him. We were making ten knots or so, with the wind abaft us, a following wind. I had spoken truly to Pelletier. I did not feel just then, nor indeed, for

some time later, that I could easily bear more than casual reference to that experience, all of which, it will be remembered, had been crowded into less than two twenty-four-hour days.

**I** DRANK ice water. I ate fruit. I slept. And by easy stages, as we had gone to the coast of Central America, we came back again to the settled peace and comfort of the Lesser Antilles; to the kindly sophistication which is the lovely little city of St. Thomas; to the quiet efficiency of my good servants in my house on Denmark Hill. Only then, it seemed to me, could I quite bear to open my mind again to those affairs in the deep jungle of Quintana Roo, where He had established his "foci" as from time immemorial; where that had happened, with me as active participant, which the structure of our modern minds bears ill in reminiscence. . . .

For it is not always good for a man to see the things that had fallen to Wilkes and myself to see; to have to do what we had done. There were times, even after I had got back and was settled into my accustomed routines, in St. Thomas, when I would lie awake in bed, with the scent of the tuberose and of Cape Jessamine pouring in through my windows, and fail of ready sleep, and wonder what really had happened out there; whether or not certain aspects of that adventure were not basically incredible; whether, perhaps, my imagination had not tricked me—in other words, whether or not the whole madhouse affair had actually occurred in very truth; and if I, Gerald Canevin, occasional weaver of tales based upon the somewhat strange affairs of these islands of the Lesser Antilles, might not have suffered some eldritch change.

At such times, I found, it was salutary to change over my attention, when this proved possible, to some-

thing else, something as radically different as possible.

I played a good deal of contract bridge, I remember, during that interval of doubt and some distress mentally. I accepted more invitations than was usual with me. I wanted, in general, to be with people, sane, everyday ordinary people, my neighbors and friends, as much as possible. I took off some weight, I remember.

**I**T was not, I think, until Pelletier had related to me his account of how he had spent the period beginning with my disappearance up the tree—it had been removed, I remembered, on my arrival back at the Great Circle, and I had not asked Pelletier what had become of it—until he had marched across that "quadrangle" at the head of his army, that the whole affair, somehow, resolved itself, and ceased troubling me.

"I'll try to tell you my end of it," said Pelletier. He was in a characteristic attitude, sprawled out over the full length of my Chinese rattan lounge-chair on my cool west gallery, a silver swizzel-jug, freshly concocted by my house man, Stephen Penn, placed between us beside two tall greenish glasses, the ice-beads all over the outside of it; cigarettes going; myself, just after having done the honors, in another chair; both of us in fresh, white drill, cool and comfortable.

"I had very little to go on," continued Pelletier, after a healthy sip out of his long, green glass and an accompanying slight grunt of creature satisfaction, "as you may imagine, Canevin, very little indeed. And yet, it all straightened out, cleared itself up in a kind of natural way. It was, I suppose, partly instinct, a kind of sixth sense if you like. For I had no more idea than you or Wilkes that we were running into a—well, a survival, when I looked down out of the plane and first saw that Circle stick-

ing up to the eye out of that jungle like, like a sore thumb!"

"THE first definite indication, the first clue, was of course that original crack of wind 'out of the corner of hell,' as Wilkes put it. Wind is air, and my mind, naturally enough, stuck to that. It was not especially brilliant to deduce an air-elemental, or, at least to have that in my mind all the way through the various happenings; before you started up the tree I mean: that wind out of nowhere; the disappearance of Wilkes; the absence of animal and insect life; those Indians getting around us. It all fitted together, somehow, under the circumstances, and after what both of us have seen of the present-day survival of magic—two thirds of the world's population believing in it, practising it: Lord, look at Haiti—well, I thought, if it *were* something supernatural, something not quite of this world, why, then, Canevin, the logic of it all pointed toward the one possibly surviving elemental rather than in some other direction.

"For—don't you see?—man has ousted those others, by his own control of the three other elements, earth, fire, water! The whole land-surface of this planet, practically, has been subjected to human use—agriculture, mines, cities built on it—and water the same. We have dominated the element of water, reduced to its allotted sphere in this man-ruled world—ships, submarines, steam—Lord, there's no end to our use of water! Fire, too, Canevin. We have it—er—harnessed, working for us, in every ship's engine room, every dynamo and factory, in every blast-furnace, cook-stove, campfire, automobile.

"And in all this civilization-long process, the one single element that has remained unsubdued, untamed, is air. We are a long way from what people smugly call 'the conquest of

air,' Canevin, a mighty long way, even though we have started in on that, too. Even fire is controllable. Fires do not start by themselves. There is no such thing as 'spontaneous combustion'! But who, Canevin, can control the winds of heaven?

"MAYBE there's more in what I've just said than appears on the surface. Take astrology for example. Modern science laughs at astrology, puts it in the same category as those Bodily Humours, the Melancholic, and the rest of them! Astronomers nowadays, scientists busy measuring light-years, the chemistry of Antares, whether or not there is barium on Mars, the probable weight of Eros, or the 'new' one, Pluto—those fellows tell us the old beliefs about the stars are so much junk. Why? Well, because, they say, the old ideas of things like zodiacal groups and so forth are 'unscientific,' formulated on the basis of how the stars look from the earth's surface, merely! Artificial, unscientific! The stars must be looked at mathematically, they tell us, not as they appear from your gallery at night.

"But, Canevin, which of these modern sharps has told us where one *should* stand, to view the heavens? And—speaking pragmatically; that's a good scientific word!—which of them has done more than figure out weights, distances—what of them, dry approximations of alleged facts, Canevin?—a lot of formulas like the inside of an algebra book. Which of them, the modern scientific astronomers, from my good old Professor Pickering at Harvard down—for he was the king-pin of them all—has given humanity one single, practical, useful fact, out of all their up-to-the-minute modern science? Answer: not one, Canevin!

"And here's the red meat in that coconut—think of this, Canevin, in the light of relativity, or the Quan-



tum Theory if you like; that's 'modern' and 'scientific' enough, God knows: the astrological approach is the normal approach, Canevin, *for people living on this planet*. We have to view the heavens from here, because that's where Almighty God Who made us and them put us. That's the only viewpoint we have, Canevin, and—it works; it possesses the—er—pragmatic sanction of common-sense!

“WELL, now, to get down to the brass tacks of this thing, the thing we've been through together, I mean: what is it, as we human beings, constrained to live on earth and meet earth conditions know it, that upsets our schemes, plans and calculations as we deal with the three elements that we *have* brought under control, subdued? It's air, Canevin.

“It's air and air alone that sends hurricanes into these latitudes and knocks out the work and hopes of decades of effort; takes crops, animals, buildings. It's air that just this season smashed things to pieces right nearby here, in Nicaragua; knocked old Santo Domingo City into a cocked hat. Plants can't grow, leaf-plants especially, without air. Without air fire itself refuses to burn. That's the principle of all the workable fire extinguishers. Without air man and the animals can't breathe, and die like fish out of water, painfully. Without air—but what's the use of carrying it further, Canevin?

“I had, of course, that first day and night, alone, to think in. All that, and a lot more besides, went into those cogitations of mine under that tree in the Great Circle both before and after I was there all by myself; mostly after, when I had nothing else to do but think. You see? It wasn't so very hard to figure out, after all.

“But figuring it out was less than half the battle. I was appalled, Canevin, there with my merely human

brain figuring out the possible combinations, at what He could do, if He happened to take it into His head. His head! Why, He could merely draw away the breathable air from around us three intruders, and we'd flop over and pass out then and there. He could blast us into matchwood with a hurricane at any moment. He could—well, there's no use going over all the things I figured that He could do. The ways of the gods and demigods have never been the ways of men, Canevin. All literature affirms that. Well, He didn't do any of those things. He was going at it His way. How to circumvent Him, in time! *That* was the real problem.

“I had, theoretically at least, all three of the other elements to use against Him, the same as every man has—such as a dugout of earth, out there in Kansas, against a tornado of wind; a log fire, to get over the effects of a New England blizzard. I put my mind on it, Canevin, and decided to use Fire—to *burn down the tree!* I did it, toward dusk of the second day.

“I SOAKED it, all over the trunk and lower part, and as far up as I could reach and throw, with the gasoline from the plane's tanks. I used it all. I was counting, you see, on the rescue plane following our route the next morning when we hadn't shown up in Belize; but, if I couldn't get you and Wilkes back I was pretty thoroughly dished anyhow, and so, of course, were you two fellows.

“I lighted it and ran, Canevin, ran out of the shade—there wouldn't be any left in a short time anyhow—and over to the plane and sat down under the farther wing where I could get a good look through the binoculars at those savages down yonder. I wanted to see how the idea of my fighting one element with another would strike them.

“It struck them right enough!

"There had been plenty of gasoline. The fire roared up the dry tree. It was blazing in every twig, it seemed, inside two minutes after I had set it going. Talk of a study in primitive fear! Psychology! I had it right there, all around me. The only kick I had coming was that I couldn't watch it all at once. It was like trying to take in a forty-ring circus with one pair of eyes!

"They liked it, Canevin! That much was clear enough anyhow.

"It was a medium-sized limb, burned halfway through, which broke off and fell between me and the main blaze, that suddenly gave me the big idea. So far I hadn't planned beyond destroying the tree, His bridge between the earth and wherever He was. But then it suddenly flashed through my mind that here was a chance to enlist those aborigines, while they were all together, and in the mood, so to speak. I went over and picked up that blazing limb. It made a magnificent torch, and, holding it up above my head where it blazed as I walked in the falling dusk, I proceeded, slow and dignified, down toward the place at the jungle's rim where they seemed to be most thickly congregated.

"I HAD the wit to sing, Canevin! Never knew I could sing, did you? I did then, all the way, the best stab I could make at a kind of paean of victory. Do you get the idea? I walked along steadily, roaring out at the top of my voice. There weren't any particular words—only a lot of volume to it!

"It occurred to me halfway down that out of those thousands some certainly would know some Spanish. The idea took hold of me, and by the time I had got near enough to make them understand I had some sentences framed up that would turn them inside-out if it got across to their primitive minds! I stopped, and raised the torch up high over my

head, and called it out like old Cortez ordering a charge!

"For a few instants right afterwards I waited to see the effect, if any. They seemed to be milling around more or less in groups and bunches. That, I figured, would be the fellows who understood Spanish telling the others! Then—then it worked, Canevin! They prostrated themselves, in rows, in battalions, in tribes! And every one of them, I was careful to notice, still kept within the safe shelter of the woods. I had, you see, told them who I was, Canevin! I was the Lord of the Fire, that was all, the Great Friend of mankind, the Lord, the Destroyer, the Big Buckaroo and High Cockalorum of all the Elements, and pretty much everything else besides. Spanish lends itself, somehow, to those broad, general statements!

"And then, once again, I had an inspiration. I gathered myself together after that first blast that I had turned loose on them, and let go another! This time I informed them that I was destroying my enemy the Ruler of the Air, who was their enemy as well—I gathered that, of course, from their fear of the Circle—Who had been having His own way with them for a couple of thousand years or thereabouts; that they could see for themselves that I was right here on the tabu-place the Circle, and unharmed; and then I called for volunteers to come out of the woods and *stand beside me in the Circle!*

"CANEVIN, there was a silence that you could have cut with a knife. It lasted and lasted, and lasted! I began to get afraid that perhaps I had gone too far, in some unrealizable way—with savages, you know: not a single, solitary sound, not a whisper, from that mob weighed down with sixty generations of fear.

Then—to a rising murmur which grew into a solid roar of astonish-

ment—one of them, an upstanding young man with an intelligent face, stepped out toward me. I suppose that fellow and his descendants will have epic songs sung about them for the next sixty generations, nights of the full moon.

"I had had the general idea, you see, of getting this mob convinced: the new harmlessness of the ancient tabu-ground for conclusive evidence; and then enlisting them. Precisely what I was going to do with them, what to set them at doing, wasn't so clear as the general idea of getting them back of me.

"And right then, when it was working, everything coming my way, I very nearly dropped my authoritative torch, my symbol of the fire-power! I went cold, Canevin, from head to foot; positively sick, with plain, shaking, shivering fear! Did they all suddenly start after me with their throw-sticks and blow-guns? Did an unexpected hurricane tear down on me? No. Nothing like that. I had merely thought, quite suddenly, out of nowhere, of something! The air was as calm around me as ever. Not an Indian made a hostile gesture. It was an idea that had occurred to me—fool, idiot, moron!

"It had just struck me, amidships, that in destroying the tree, His bridge to earth, I might have cut you and Wilkes off forever from getting back! That was what made the quick, cold sweat run down into my eyes; that was what sent waves of nausea over me.

**I** STOOD there and sweated and trembled from head to foot. It was only by sheer will power that I kept the torch up in the air, a proper front before those still thousands. My mind reeled with the trouble of it. And then, after a sudden silence, they started yelling themselves blue once more, with enthusiasm over that champion of champions who had dared to step out on the forbidden

ground; to enter the Circle for the first time in history—their history.

"That paladin was close to me now, coming on steadily, confidently, quite nearby. My eyes went around to him. He was a fine, clean-cut-looking person. He stopped, and raised his hands over his head, and made me a kind of salaam.

"The whole yowling mob quieted down again at that—wanted to see what I'd do to him, I suppose.

"I stepped over to him and handed him the torch. He took it, and looked me in the eye. He was some fellow, that young Indian!

"I spoke to him, in Spanish:

"'Exalted Servant of the Fire, indicate to me now the direction of the other forbidden place, where He of the Wind places his foot upon the earth.' Every chance the three of us had in the world was staked on that question, Canevin; on the idea that lay behind it; on the possibility that there was more than one bridge-place like this Great Circle where we stood. It was, of course, merely a piece of guesswork.

"And, Canevin, he raised his other arm, the one that was not holding the torch, and pointed and answered:

"Straight to the south, Lord of Fire!"

**C**ANEVIN, I could have kissed that Indian! Another chance! I went up to him and hugged him like a bear. I don't know what he thought of that. I didn't give him time to think, to make up his mind. I held him off at arms' length as though he had been my favorite brother-in-law that I hadn't seen for a couple of years! I said to him: 'Speak, heroic Servant of the Fire—name your reward!'

"He never hesitated an instant. He knew what he wanted, that fellow—saw this was his big chance. He breathed hard. I could see his big chest go in and out. He'll go a long way, believe me, Canevin!

"The lordship over—these!" he said, with a little gasp, and pointed with the torch, around the circle. I raised both my hands over my head and called out:

"Hearken, men of this nation! Behold your overlord who with his descendants shall rule over all your nations and tribes and peoples to the end of time. Down—and salute your lord!" A little later, when they got it, as they dropped in rows on their faces, Canevin, I turned to that fellow holding the torch, and said:

"Call them together; make them sit in a circle around us here. Then the first thing you are to do is to pick out the men you want to help you govern them. After that, tell them they are to listen to me!"

"He looked me in the eye again, and nodded. Oh, he was an intelligent one, that fellow! To make a long story short, he did just that; and you can picture us there in the moonlight, for the moon had a chance to get going long before the Indians were arranged the way I had said, the new king bossing them all as though he had never done anything else, with me standing there in the center and haranguing them—I'd had plenty of time, you see, to get that speech together—and, as I palavered, the interpreters relayed it to the rest.

"The upshot of it all was that we started off for the place, the other place where He could 'put his foot upon the earth' as I had said, the place where we found you. It took us all night, even with that willing mob swinging their machetes."

**I** THANKED Pelletier for his story. He had already heard the outline of mine, such as I have recounted here somewhat more fully. I let his account sink in, and then, as I have said, I was able to be myself again. Perhaps Pelletier's very commonplace sanity, the matter-of-factness of his account, may have had

something to do with this desirable effect. I do not know, but I am glad to be able to record the fact.

"There is one thing not quite clear in my mind," said I, after Pelletier had finished.

"Yes?" said Pelletier, encouragingly.

"That figure in the temple—Aquarius," I explained. "Just how did you happen to fasten on that? I understand, of course, why you destroyed it. It was, like the tree, one of His 'foci,' a 'bridge' to earth. By wiping those out, as I understand the matter, you broke what I might call his earth-power; you cut off his points of access. It's mysterious enough, yet clear in a way. But how did you know that *that* was the focal point, so to speak? Why the statue? Why not, for example, the altar?"

Pelletier nodded, considering my questions. Then he smiled whimsically.

"That's because you do not know your astrology, Canevin!" he said, propping his bulk up on one arm, for emphasis, and looking straight at me. He grinned broadly, like a mischievous boy. Then:

"You remember—I touched on that—how important it is, or should be, as an element in a modern education! Aquarius would fool you; would puzzle anybody, I'll grant you—anybody, that is, who doesn't know his astrology! You'd think from his name that he was allied with the element of water, wouldn't you, Canevin? The name practically says so: 'Aquarius'—water-bearer. You'd think so, unless, as I say, you knew your astrology!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "It's too much for me, Pelletier. You'll have to tell me, I'm afraid." It was plain that Pelletier held some joker up his sleeve.

**D**ID you ever see a picture of Aquarius, Canevin, in which—stop and think a moment—he is not

represented as *pouring water out* of that vessel of his? Aquarius is not the personage who *represents* water, Canevin. Quite the contrary, in fact. He's the fellow who is getting rid of the water to make way for the air. Aquarius, in spite of his name, is the zodiacal symbol for *air*, not water, as you'd imagine if you didn't know your astrology, Canevin! He is represented always as *pouring out water*, getting rid of it! Aquarius is *not* the protagonist of water. He is the precursor, the forerunner of air!" As he said this, Dr. Pelletier waved one of his big, awkward-looking hands—sure sign of something on his mind. I laughed. I admitted freely that my education had been neglected.

"And what next?" I asked, smiling at my big friend. He laughed that big contagious laugh of his.

"Canevin," said he, wagging his head at me, "I'm wondering which of the big archeologists, or maybe some rank outsider, who will go to the top on it, and get D.Sc.'s all the way from Harvard to the University of Upsala—which of 'em will be the first to 'discover' that the first Maya civilization is *not* defunct; knock the very best modern archeological science endwise all over again, the way it's constantly being done in every 'scientific' field, from Darwin to Kirsopp Lake! An 'epoch-making discovery!'"

Then, musing, seriously, yet with a twinkle in his kindly brown eyes:

"I have great hopes of the leadership they're going to get; that they're getting, right now, Canevin. That was some up-and-coming boy, some fellow, that new king in Quintana Roo, the one I appointed, the new ruler of the jungle! Did you see him, Canevin, standing there, telling them what was what?"

"Do you know, I never even found out his name! He's one of the very few, by the way—told me about it on the trek back to the Circle—who had learned the old language. It's come

down, you know, through the priests, here and there, intact, just as they used to speak it a couple of thousand years ago. Well, you heard him use it! Quite a group, I believe, keep it up, in and around Chichen-Itza particularly. He told them, he said, how fire had prevailed over their traditional air—Aquarius lying there, toppled off his pedestal, to prove it!"

I was glad I had given the young chieftain my bronze sword. Perhaps its possession will help him in establishing his authority over those Old Ones. That giant from whose hand I originally snatched it there in the temple may very well have been their head man. He was big enough, and fast enough on his feet; had the primitive leadership qualities, in all conscience. He had been mightily impressive as he came bounding ahead of his followers, charging upon us through the clouds of dust.

I HAVE kept the sliver Wilkes, poor fellow, cut from the palm of the great Hand. I discovered it, rolled up and quite hardened and stiff, in the pocket of my trousers there in the hotel in Belize when I was changing to fresh clothes.

I keep it in a drawer of my bureau, in my bedroom. Nobody sees it there; nobody asks what it is.

"Yes—a sliver cut from the superficial scarf-skin of one of the ancient classical demigods! Yes—interesting, isn't it!"

I'd rather not have to describe that sliver. Probably my hearers would say nothing much. People are courteous, especially here in St. Thomas where there is a tradition to that effect. But they could hardly visualize, as I still do—yet, fortunately, at decreasing intervals—that cosmic Entity of the high atmosphere, presiding over His element of air; menacing, colossal; His vast heart beating on eternally as, stupendous, incredible, He towers there inscrutable among the unchanging stars.



*Their black faces were expressionless.*

# The House in the Magnolias

By August W. Derleth and Mark Schorer

**I**F you had seen the magnolias, you would understand without further explanation from me why I went back to the house. My friends in New Orleans realized that it was just such a place as an artist like myself would light upon for his subject. Their objections to my going there were not based on notions that the house and its surroundings were not fit subjects for some really excellent landscape paintings. No, they agreed

with me there. Where they disagreed. . . . But I had better fill in the background for you before I get too far ahead in my story.

I had been in New Orleans a month, and still had found no subject in that old city that really satisfied me. But, motoring one day out into the country with Sherman Jordan, a young poet with whom I was living during my stay in the city, we found ourselves about four miles out of New Or-

“. . . And the curious detail that the graves had been half dug by bare fingers. . . .”

leans, driving along a little-used road over which the willows leaned low. The road broadened unexpectedly, and the willows gave way to a row of sycamores, and then, in the evening dusk, I saw the house in the magnolias for the first time.

It was not far from the road, and yet not too close. A great veranda with tall pillars stretched its length in front. The house itself was of white wood, built in the typical rambling Southern plantation style. Vines covered great portions of its sides, and the whole building was literally buried in magnolias—magnolias such as I have never seen before, in every shade and hue. They were fully opened, and even from the road I could see the heavy waxen artificiality of those nearest.

"There's my picture!" I exclaimed eagerly. "Stop the car, old man."

But Sherman Jordan showed no inclination to stop. He glanced quickly at his watch and said by way of explanation: "It's almost six; we've got to get back for our dinner engagement." He drove on without a second glance at the house.

I was disappointed. "It would have taken only a minute," I reproached him.

I must have looked glum, for just as we were driving into New Orleans, he turned and said: "I'm sorry; I didn't think it was so important." I felt suddenly, inexplicably, that he was not sorry, that he had gone past the house deliberately.

I said: "Oh, it doesn't make any difference. I can come out to-morrow."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Do you really think it would be such a good picture?"

"I do," I said, and at the same instant I thought that he didn't want me to paint that house. "Will you

drive me out to-morrow morning?" I added.

"I can't," he said shortly. "I've promised Stan Leslie I'd go boating with him. But you can have the car, if you really insist on painting that house."

I said nothing.

As we left the car he turned and said almost sharply: "Still, I think you might find better subjects if you tried."

A cutting reply about my wasted month in New Orleans was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it back. I could not understand my friend's utter lack of enthusiasm. I could not check it up to an inartistic eye, for I knew Sherman Jordan could be depended on for good taste. As I went upstairs to dress, there remained in my mind the picture of that lovely old house, surrounded by rich magnolias, marked off by the swaying sycamore trees.

**M**Y eagerness had not abated when I stepped from Jordan's car next morning, opened the gate, and went up the path under the sycamores to the house in the magnolias. As I mounted the steps, walked across the veranda, and lifted the knocker on the closed door, I thought of painting a close-up of magnolias. I was turning this idea over in my mind when the door opened suddenly, noiselessly. An old woman stood there, apparently a Negress, dressed plainly in starched white. Her face held me. It was peculiarly ashy—really gray—unhealthy. I thought: "The woman is ill." Her eyes stared at me; they were like deep black pools, bottomless, inscrutable, and yet at the same time oddly dull. I felt momentarily uncomfortable.

"Is the master in?" I asked.

The woman did not answer, though she continued to stare at me. For a moment I thought that perhaps she was deaf. I spoke

loudly, and very distinctly, repeating: "Is your master in? May I see your master?"

A faint shadow fell across the floor of the hall behind the servant, and in an instant, a second woman appeared. "What is it?" she asked sharply, in a deep, velvety voice. The woman was so astonishingly attractive that for a moment I could not speak for admiration. She was almost as tall as I was, and very shapely. Her hair was black and drawn back loosely from her face. Her complexion was swarthy, almost olive, with a high color in cheeks and lips. In her ears were golden rings. Her eyes, which were black, shone from deep surrounding shadows. She wore a purple dress that fell almost to the floor. Her face as she looked at me was imperious; behind her dark eyes were smoldering fires.

She waved the servant aside and turned to me, repeating her question: "What is it, please?"

With my eyes on her face, I said: "I am John Stuard. I paint. Yesterday, driving past your place here, I was so attracted by the house that I felt I must come and ask your permission to use it as a subject for a landscape."

"Will you come in?" she asked, less sharply.

She stepped to one side. I muttered my thanks and went past her into the hall. Behind me I could feel the woman's alert eyes boring into me. I turned, and she gestured for me to precede her into a drawing room leading off the hall. I went ahead. In the drawing room we sat down.

"**Y**OU are from New Orleans?" she asked. She leaned a little forward, her somber eyes taking in my face. She was sitting in shadow, and I directly in the light from the half-opened window.

"No," I replied. "I live in Chi-

cago. I am only visiting in New Orleans."

She looked at me a moment before replying. "Perhaps it can be arranged for you to paint the house. It will not take long? How many days, please?"

"A week, perhaps ten days. It is quite difficult."

She appeared suddenly annoyed. She was just about to say something when some distant sound caught her ear, and she jerked her head up, looking intently into a corner of the ceiling, as if listening. I heard nothing. Presently she turned again. "I thought it might be for only a day or two," she said, biting her lower lip.

I began to explain when I heard the old servant shuffle toward the door that led out to the veranda. The woman before me looked up quickly. Then she called out in a low persuasive voice: "Go back to the kitchen, Matilda."

Looking through the open drawing room doors, I saw the servant stop in her traces, turn automatically, and shuffle past the door down the hall, walking listlessly, stiffly.

"Is the woman ill?" I asked solicitously.

"*Non, non,*" she said quickly. Then she said abruptly: "You do not know my name; I am Rosamunda Marsina."

Belatedly, I said: "I am glad to know you. You live here alone?"

There was a pause before she answered me. "The servant," she said, smiling lightly. She looked a little troubled. I felt that I should not have asked.

To cover my embarrassment, I said: "You have a nice plantation."

She shook her head quickly. "It is not mine. It belongs to Miss Abby, my Aunt Abby. She is a Haitian."

"Oh, I see," I said, smiling; "she lives in Haiti."



"No, she does not live in Haiti. She did live there. She came from there some years ago."

I nodded, but I did not quite understand. Looking about me, I could see that everything was scrupulously clean and well taken care of, and this was certainly a large house for a single servant to keep so well. I had seen at a glance at Miss Marsina's hands that she had no share in the labors of the household.

**M**ISS MARSINA bent forward again. "Tell me, say, I give you permission to paint the house—you would stay—in the city?"

My eyes dropped confusedly before hers, and at her question my face fell, for my disappointment was evident to her. I had hoped she would ask me to live in the house for the time that I painted it. Once more I started an explanation to Rosamunda Marsina, suggesting that I might find some place in the neighborhood where I could get a room for that time, but throughout my explanation, I openly, shamelessly hinted at an invitation from her to stay here.

My speech seemed to have its effect. "Perhaps I could give you a room for that time," she said reluctantly.

I accepted her invitation at once. She fidgeted a little nervously, and asked: "When do you wish to begin painting?"

"I should like to start the sketching to-morrow. The painting I shall have to do mostly late in the afternoon. I want to get the half-light in which I first saw the house—"

She interrupted me abruptly. "There will be some conditions to staying here—a request I must make of you, perhaps two." I nodded. "I am not a very sociable creature," she went on. "I do not like many people about. I must ask you not to bring any friends out with you, even for short visits. And

I would rather, too, that you didn't mention your work out here unless necessary—it might reach the ears of Aunt Abby; perhaps she would not like it."

I saw nothing strange in her request, nothing strange in this mysteriously beautiful woman. "I shouldn't think of bringing anyone, Miss Marsina," I said. "I feel I am presuming as it is."

She stopped me with a quick, abrupt "Non," and a slightly upraised hand. Then she smiled. "I shall expect you to-morrow then."

Both of us got up and walked to the door. I said, "Good-by," almost automatically. Then I started walking down the path, away from the house, feeling Rosamunda Marsina's eyes on me. Suddenly I heard running footsteps, light footsteps, and turned to meet Miss Marsina.

"One thing more, Mr. Stuard," she said hurriedly, talking in a low voice as if afraid of being overheard. "To-morrow—is it necessary for you to bring your car? Cars disturb me." She looked pathetically at me.

"I shall not bring the car," I said.

She nodded, quickly, shortly, and ran back into the house without pausing. Looking back from the road, I saw her standing at the open window of the drawing room, watching me.

**I** FOUND Rosamunda Marsina waiting for me next morning. She seemed a little agitated; I wondered whether anything had gone wrong.

"Shall I bring in the equipment and my easel?" I asked.

"Matilda can bring it to your room," she said. "Come with me. I am going to put you on the ground floor."

She turned and led the way into the house and down the hall. Opening a door not far beyond the drawing room, she stretched out her arm

and indicated the charming old chamber which I was to occupy, a room with great heavy mahogany bureau and four-poster, with a desk, and windows opening directly on the garden at the side of the house.

"It's lovely," I murmured.

She looked at me with her dark eyes, not as sharp to-day as they had been the day before. They were limpid and soft, tender, I thought. Then abruptly I caught a flash of something I was not meant to see; it was present only for a moment, and her eyes veiled it again—unmistakable fear!

She could not have known that I had seen, for she said: "You must not venture off the grounds, and not behind the house. And you will not go to any of the other floors?"

I said; "No, certainly not."

Matilda shuffled into the room, and without a word or a glance at us, put the equipment down near the bed. She departed with the same dragging footsteps.

"A curious woman," I said.

Rosamunda Marsina laughed a little uncertainly. "Yes; she is very old. She came here with my aunt."

"Oh," I said. "Your aunt is *here*, then?"

**S**HE looked at me, shot a quick startled glance at me. "Didn't I tell you?" she asked. "I thought I told you yesterday—yes, she is here. That is why I have made so many requests of you; it is because I don't want her to know you are here." Her voice betrayed her agitation, though her face remained immobile.

"She can hardly help seeing me some time, I'm afraid."

"*Non, non*—not if you do as I say." Once again fear crept into her eyes. She spoke quickly in a low voice. "She is a near-invalid. She has a club foot, and never leaves the back rooms of the second floor because it is so difficult for

her to move." Rosamunda Marsina's hand was trembling. I took it in my own.

"If she would object to my being here, perhaps I had better go to one of your neighbors," I volunteered.

She closed her eyes for a moment; then flashed them open and looked at me calmly, saying impetuously: "I want you to stay. My aunt must not matter—even though she does. You must stay now; I want you to stay. She is not really my aunt, I don't think. She brought me from Haiti when I was just a little girl. I cannot remember anything. She is much darker than I am; she is not a Creole."

Again I had an uncomfortable feeling that something was wrong in the house, and for a moment I had the impression that Rosamunda Marsina was begging me to stay. "Thank you," I said; "I'll stay."

She smiled at me with her lovely dark lips and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

**T**HAT night the first strange thing happened. Rosamunda Marsina's suggestive attitude, the vague fear that haunted her eyes, the sudden inexplicable agitation of her voice—these things had prepared me. Perhaps if I had gone to sleep at once, I would have known nothing. As I lay there, half asleep, I heard a distinct sound of someone walking on the floor above me, in some room farther back than my own. I thought of Miss Marsina's Aunt Abby at once, but recollected that the woman was a cripple and a near-invalid, and would not be likely to be up and about, especially not at this hour. Yet the footsteps were slow and dragging, and were accompanied by the sound of a cane tapping slowly at regular intervals against the floor. I sat up in bed to listen. Listening, I could tell that it was only one foot that dragged. Abruptly, the footsteps stopped.

Miss Abby had gotten out of her bed somehow, and had walked perhaps to the wall of the room from the bed. I heard guttural sounds suddenly, and then the dragging footsteps retreating. The woman talking to herself, I thought.

Then, above the dragging footsteps, I heard a disturbing shuffling which seemed to come from somewhere below, followed by sounds as of doors closing somewhere. In a moment, all was quiet again; but only for a moment—for suddenly there came a thin, reed-like wail of terror, followed at once by a shrill scream. I sat up abruptly. A window went up with a bang, and a harsh, guttural voice sounded from above. The voice from above had a magic effect, for silence, broken only by the sudden shuffling of feet, fell immediately.

I had got out of bed, and made my way to the door leading into the hall. I had seen on my first visit that the house lacked artificial light, and had brought an electric candle along. This I took up as I went toward the door. I had it in my hand as I opened the door. The first thing its light found was the white face of Rosamunda Marsina.

**S**OMEONE called. . . . I thought," I stammered.

She was agitated; even the comparatively dim illumination from the electric candle revealed her emotion. "*Non, non* — there was nothing," she said quickly. "You are mistaken, Mr. Stuard." Then, noticing the amazement which must have shown on my face, she added, uncertainly: "Perhaps the servants called out—but it is nothing; nothing is wrong."

As she said this, she gestured with her hands. She was wearing a long black gown with wide sleeves. As she raised her hands, the sleeves fell back along her arms. I think I must have started at what

I saw there—at any rate, Rosamunda Marsina dropped her arms at once, shot a sharp glance at me through half-closed eyes, and walked swiftly away, saying, "Good night, Mr. Stuard." For on the white of her arms, I saw the distinct impressions of two large hands—hands which must have grasped her most cruelly, and only a short while before! Then, so suddenly as to leave me gasping, it came to me that Rosamunda Marsina had been waiting for me in the hall, waiting to see what I would do—and, I felt sure, sending me back into my room against her will!

I slept comparatively little that night.

**I**N the morning I wanted to say something to my hostess, but I had hardly come from my room before she herself spoke. She came to me at the breakfast table, and said: "You must have had a powerful dream last night, Mr. Stuard. There was nothing wrong as you thought—nor did the servants call out!"

At once I understood that she was not talking for me. Her face was white and strained, her voice unnaturally loud. As quickly, I answered in an equally raised voice. "I'm sorry. I should have warned you that I am often troubled by bad dreams."

Miss Marsina lost her tensivity at once. She shot me a grateful glance, and left the room immediately. But I sat in silence, waiting for a sound I felt must come. I had not long to wait—a few moments passed—then, from upstairs, came the soft sound of a door closing. Someone had been listening, waiting to hear what Rosamunda Marsina would say to me, what I would answer!

From that moment I knew that I would get no more painting done until I knew what mystery surrounded the house and Miss Marsina.

I sketched my landscape that morning, and my hostess stood watching me. I liked her lovely dark face peering over my shoulder as I worked, but both of us were a little uneasy, and I could not do my best work. There was about her an air of restraint which interposed itself mysteriously the moment she tried to enjoy herself. She seemed a little frightened, too, and more than once I caught her eyes straying furtively to the second-floor windows.

The second night in the house was a hot, sultry night; a storm was brooding low on the horizon when I went to bed, but it must have passed over, for when I woke up somewhere between one and two in the morning, the moon was shining. I could not rest, and got out of bed. For a few moments I stood at the window, drinking in the sweet smell of the magnolias. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, I bent and crawled through the open window. I dropped to the ground silently and began to walk toward the rear of the house unconsciously, forgetting my promise to Miss Marsina. I remembered it suddenly, and stopped. Then I heard a slight sound above me. I stepped quickly into the shadow of a bush, just at the corner of the house, where I could see both the side and rear of the house.

Then I looked up. There at the window of the corner room I saw a bloodless face pressed against the glass; it was a dark, ugly face, and the moonlight struck it full.

**I**T was withdrawn as I looked, but not before I had got an impression of malefic power. Could it have been the face of Aunt Abby? According to what Rosamunda Marsina had said, that would be her room. And what was she looking at? Over the bushes behind the house, beyond the trees—it would

be something in the fields. I turned. Should I risk trying to see, risk her spotting me as I went along the lane?

Keeping to the shadows, I moved along under the low-hanging trees, looking toward the fields. Then suddenly I saw what Miss Abby must have seen. There were men in the fields, a number of them. I pressed myself against the trunk of a giant sycamore and watched them. They were Negroes, and they were working in the fields. Moreover, they were probably under orders, Miss Abby's orders. I understood abruptly that her watching them was to see that they did their work. But Negroes that worked at night!

Back in my room once more, I was still more thoroughly mystified. Did they work every night? It was true that I had seen no workers anywhere on the plantation during the day just passed, but then, I had not left the front of the house, and from there little of the plantation could be seen. I thought that next day surely I would mention this to Rosamunda Marsina, and the incidents of the night before, too.

Then I thought of something else. All the while that I had stood watching the Negroes, no word had passed among them. That was surely the height of the unusual.

But on the second day, I found that I had to go into New Orleans for some painting materials I had not supposed I would need, and for some clothes, also, and thus lost the opportunity to speak to Rosamunda Marsina before evening.

**I**N the city, I went immediately to Sherman Jordan's apartment. Despite the fact that I had promised Rosamunda Marsina that I would say as little about my stay with her as possible, I told my friend of my whereabouts.

"I knew pretty well you were out there," he said. His voice was not

particularly cordial. I said nothing. "I daresay you are completely entranced by the beautiful Creole who lives there?"

"How did you know?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, giving me a queer look. "There are stories about," he said.

"About Miss Marsina?" I felt suddenly angry.

"Not especially. Just stories about that place. Nothing definite. If you haven't noticed anything, perhaps it's just idle gossip." But Jordan's attitude showed that he did not believe the stories about the house in the magnolias to be just "idle gossip."

And I *had* noticed something, but instantly I resolved to say nothing to Jordan. "What stories?" I asked.

He did not appear to have heard my question. "They're from Haiti, aren't they?"

I nodded. "Yes. The old woman is a Haitian. The girl is not." Was he getting at something?

"Haiti — a strange, fascinating place." He stood looking out of the window. He turned suddenly. "I'd like to beg you to drop that work out there, John, but I know it wouldn't be of much use asking that, now you've started. There's something not right about that place, because strange stories don't grow out of thin air."

"If there's anything wrong out there, I'm going to find out."

He shrugged his shoulders. His smile was not convincing. "Of course," he said. Then: "You know, there's an old proverb in Creole patois—'*Quand to mange avec diab' tenin to cuillere longue.*'"

"I don't understand Creole patois," I said, somewhat irritated.

"Literally, it is: 'When you sup with the devil, be sure you have a long spoon.'"

"I don't follow you," I said.

He smiled again. "Oh, it's just another warning."

I had no desire to listen longer to anything so indefinite and vague; so I changed the subject. I don't think anything he could have told me would have influenced me; I would have gone back to that house and Rosamunda Marsina no matter what was lurking there. But I expected nothing so strange, so horrible, as that which I did discover.

I RETURNED to the house that evening, and again put off saying anything to Rosamunda. But she herself afforded me an unlooked for opening before I went to bed that night. She had come down from upstairs, and I could see at once that there was something she wanted to tell me.

"I think it's only fair to tell you," she said, "that your door will be locked to-night, after you have gone to bed."

"Why?" I asked, trying not to betray my astonishment.

"It is because it is not desirable that you walk around at night."

This hurt me a little, suggesting as it did that perhaps I might make use of the darkness to spy out the house. I said: "Rosamunda, there are stories about this house, aren't there?"

I was sorry at once, for she looked suddenly very frightened. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I have heard things in New Orleans," I said slowly.

She mastered herself a little, asking: "What?"

"Oh, nothing definite," I replied. "Some people think that there is something wrong out here."

"Something wrong? What?"

"I don't know."

"Have you seen anything wrong?"

"No. . . ." I hesitated, and she caught my dubious tone.

"Do you suspect anything?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

She looked at me a little coldly.

Already I was beginning to repent my having spoken to her about the house. Also, she had suspected at once that I had broken my promise to her and had talked about the house. I had not foreseen that, and cursed myself for a fool. I had succeeded only in creating an atmosphere of tension.

**T**HAT night I was awakened by a sharp cry of terror, which was cut off abruptly even before I was fully awake. I was out of bed instantly, standing in the middle of the room, listening. Once I fancied I heard the sound of Rosamunda's voice, a low, earnest sound, as if she were pleading with someone. Then, silence. How long I waited, I do not know. At last I took up my electric candle and made for the door. Then I remembered that it would be locked—as Rosamunda had told me. Yet I reached out and turned the knob, and the door was not locked!

I looked cautiously out into the hall. But I had time to see only one thing: a bloodless face, convulsed with hatred, staring into mine—the same face I had seen against the window of the second floor—and above it, a heavy cane upraised. Then the cane descended, catching me a glancing blow on the side of the head. I went down like a log.

How long I lay there I do not know; it could not have been long, for it was still dark when I came to—and found Rosamunda's frightened eyes watching my face anxiously, felt her delicate fingers on my forehead. I struggled to sit up, but she held me quiet.

"Be still," she murmured. Then she asked quickly: "You are not badly hurt?"

"No," I whispered. "It was just enough to put me out."

"Oh, it was my fault. If I had locked the door it would not have happened."

"Nonsense," I said quickly. "If I hadn't been so curious . . . if I hadn't heard your voice. . . ."

"I am glad you thought of me, John." It was the first time she had used my Christian name, and I felt more pleasure than I cared to admit. But before I could express my sentiment, she said swiftly: "In the morning you must go."

"What? Go away—and not come back?"

She nodded. "If you do not go away, both of us will suffer. I should not have let you come, let you stay."

Boldly I said: "I'm not going until I can take you with me."

She looked closely at me; then bent quickly and kissed me. For a moment I held her in my arms; then she pushed me gently away. "Listen," she said. "In the morning you must go with your baggage. Go anywhere—back to New Orleans. But at sundown, come back to me. You must not be seen by Aunt Abby. I will wait for you in the magnolias just below the veranda."

I stood up, steadying myself against the door-frame. "I'll come back, Rosamunda," I said.

She nodded and fled down the hall. I went back into my room and packed my things.

**I**N the morning I departed ostentatiously, making it certain that the older woman, Abby, had seen me go. But in the evening I was back. I never left the vicinity, and was within sight of the house all day. How could I leave there—when Rosamunda might be in danger? I approached the house that evening effectively screened by low trees and the magnolias.

Rosamunda was standing before the veranda, almost hidden in the bushes. She was agitated, standing there twisting her handkerchief in her hands. She ran forward a little

as I came up. "Now I must tell you," she breathed. "I must tell someone—you. You must help me." She was obviously distraught.

I said: "I'll do anything I can for you, Rosamunda."

She began to talk now, rapidly. "We came from Haiti, John. That is a strange island, an island of weird, curious things. Sometimes it is called the magic island. And it is. Do you believe in magic things?"

I did have a knowledge of magic beliefs, some old legends I had picked up in the Indian country, and quite a collection of tales I had heard from levee Negroes. I nodded, saying: "I know very little of it, but I think it can be."

"You have never been to Haiti?"

"No," I replied.

She paused, turned and looked a little fearfully at the house; then spoke again. "There are many strange beliefs in Haiti," she said, talking slowly, yet betraying an eagerness to finish. Then she looked deep into my eyes and asked: "Do you know what a zombi is?"

I had heard weird half-hinted stories of animated cadavers seen in Haiti, whispered tales of age-old Negro magic used to raise the dead of the black island. Vaguely, I knew what she meant. Yet I said: "No."

"It is a dead man," she went on hurriedly, "a dead man who has been brought out of his grave and made to live again and to work!"

"But such a thing cannot be," I protested, suddenly horrified at an idea that began to form in my mind, a terrible suggestion which I sought to banish quickly from me. It would not go. I listened for Rosamunda's hushed and tense voice.

"Believe me, John Stuard—they do exist!"

"No, no," I said.

She stopped me abruptly. "You are making it hard for me."

"I'm sorry, I said. "I will believe you." But inwardly I protested; surely such a thing could not be! Yet I could not banish from my mind the memory of strangely silent figures working the fields at night.

**R**OSAMUNDA spoke swiftly, her words coming in an agonized rush. "That woman—Abby—she knows how to raise these people from their graves. When we came to New Orleans, we came alone. Just the two of us. She was in a hurry to get out of Haiti; I now think she was wanted in Port au Prince. I do not know. I was only a little girl, but I can remember these things. Every year they come more and more distinctly to me. Soon after we were here, the slaves came."

I cut in: "What slaves?"

"They are in the cellars—many of them. All Negroes. We keep them in the cellars all day; only at night Abby sends them out to work. I have been so afraid you might find them, for you heard them screaming — and you might have seen them in the fields at night."

"But surely you don't mean—you can't mean. . . ."

"I do. *They are dead!*"

"But, Rosamunda . . . !"

"Please, let me tell you what I know." I nodded, and she went on. "I was quite old when Matilda came. She was the last of them. All along up to her, the slaves came, one after the other. I never saw them come. One day they were just here; that is all. But many nights Abby was gone—and soon after, slaves would come. Abby always took care of them herself, making sweet bread and water for them. They ate nothing more. After Matilda came, something happened. Aunt Abby hurt herself, and couldn't leave the house. She wouldn't have a doctor, and since

then she could leave her room only with great difficulty. She had a speaking tube put into her rooms; it ran down into the cellars, so that she could direct the men—those poor dead men—into the fields. They were taught to come back as soon as light showed in the eastern sky. Only Abby could direct them, but I could tell Matilda what to do. Over Matilda Abby had no power—it often happens that way.

"After she came, there were no more slaves. I was quite grown then, and I came on a newspaper one day that told of a series of grave robberings that had been climaxed by the recent snatching of the body of a colored woman, Matilda Martin. That was right after Matilda came. Since then, I have known. At first it was horrible for me to live here, but there was no place for me to go. I have been living with these dead men and Abby, John, and I cannot go on—and I cannot leave these poor dead ones behind me. I want to go away with you, but they must be sent back to the graves from which she took them!"

**L**OOKING at her frightened yet determined face, I knew that she would go away with me. I did not want the house, nor the magnolias; I wanted Rosamunda Marsina. "There is a way, then, to send them back?" I asked, still only half believing her shocking story.

She nodded eagerly. "They must be given salt—any food with salt—and they will know they are dead, and will find their way back to their graves."

"And Miss Abby?" I said.

She looked at me. "She is too strong; we can do nothing if she knows."

"What shall we do?" I asked.

Rosamunda's eyes went suddenly cold. She said: "Matilda can be directed to Abby. Only I can direct

her. Matilda hates Abby as I do. Abby is a fiend—she has robbed these dead of their peace. If I go from here, she must not be able to follow—else she will hound us until we are dead, and after that. . . . I don't want to think what might happen then."

An idea came to me, and at first I wanted to brush it aside. But it was persistent—and it was a way out. "Rosamunda," I said, "send Matilda up to Abby."

Rosamunda looked at me. She nodded. "I was thinking that way," she said. "But it must be before she has the salt, because once she has tasted salt there is nothing left for her but to find her grave."

Then she shot a frightened glance at the windows of the second floor. She clutched my arm. "Quick," she murmured. "They will be coming from the cellars soon. We must be ready for them. They never refuse food, never. I have made some little pistachio candies, with salt. We must give the candies to them."

She led the way, almost running into the house. I came silently after her. Below me I could hear the shuffling of many feet, and above, the dragging footsteps of Miss Abby, moving away from her speaking tube. Rosamunda snatched up the little plate of candy and preceded me to the back door.

Then suddenly the cellar doors opened, and a file of staring men shuffled slowly out, looking neither to right nor to left, seeing us, yet not seeing us. Rosamunda stepped boldly forward, holding out the plate. The foremost of them took a piece of the salted candy, and went on, munching it. Their black faces were expressionless. When the Negroes had all taken of the candy, Rosamunda turned to reenter the house. "Come quickly," she said. "Soon they will know." I hesitated, and saw—and my doubts were swept away, leaving my mind in chaos.



THE little group had stopped abruptly, huddled together. Then, one by one, they began to wail terribly into the night, and even as I watched, they began to move off, hurriedly now, running across the fields toward their distant graves, a line of terrible, tragic figures against the sky.

I felt Rosamunda shuddering against me, and slipped my arm gently around her. "Listen!" she said, her voice trembling. Above us I could hear suddenly the angry snarling voice of Miss Abby. At the same time the sound of wood beating wood came to us: Abby was pounding the walls with her cane.

Matilda stood in the kitchen, and Rosamunda went up to her at once, addressing her in a soft, persuasive voice. "Above there is Abby, Matilda. Long ago she took you away from where you were—took you to be her slave. You have not liked her, Matilda, you have hated her. Go up to her now. She is yours. When you come down, there will be candy on the table for you."

Matilda nodded slowly; then she turned and began to shuffle heavily into the hall toward the stairs. Upstairs, silence had fallen.

Both of us ran from the kitchen, snatching up two small carpet-bags which Rosamunda had put into the corridor, and which she pointed out to me as we went. We jumped from the veranda and ran down the path. Behind us rose suddenly into the night the shrill screaming of a woman in deadly terror. It was shut off abruptly, horribly. Rosamunda was shuddering. We turned to run. We had gone only a little way down the deserted road when we heard the nearby sound of a woman wailing. That was Matilda. Rosamunda hesitated, I with her, pressed close in the shadow of an overhanging sycamore. We looked back. A shadowy figure was running across the fields; in the house a

lamp was burning low in the kitchen. And yet, was it a lamp? The light suddenly flared up. I turned Rosamunda about before she had time to see what I had seen. Matilda had turned over the lamp. The house was burning.

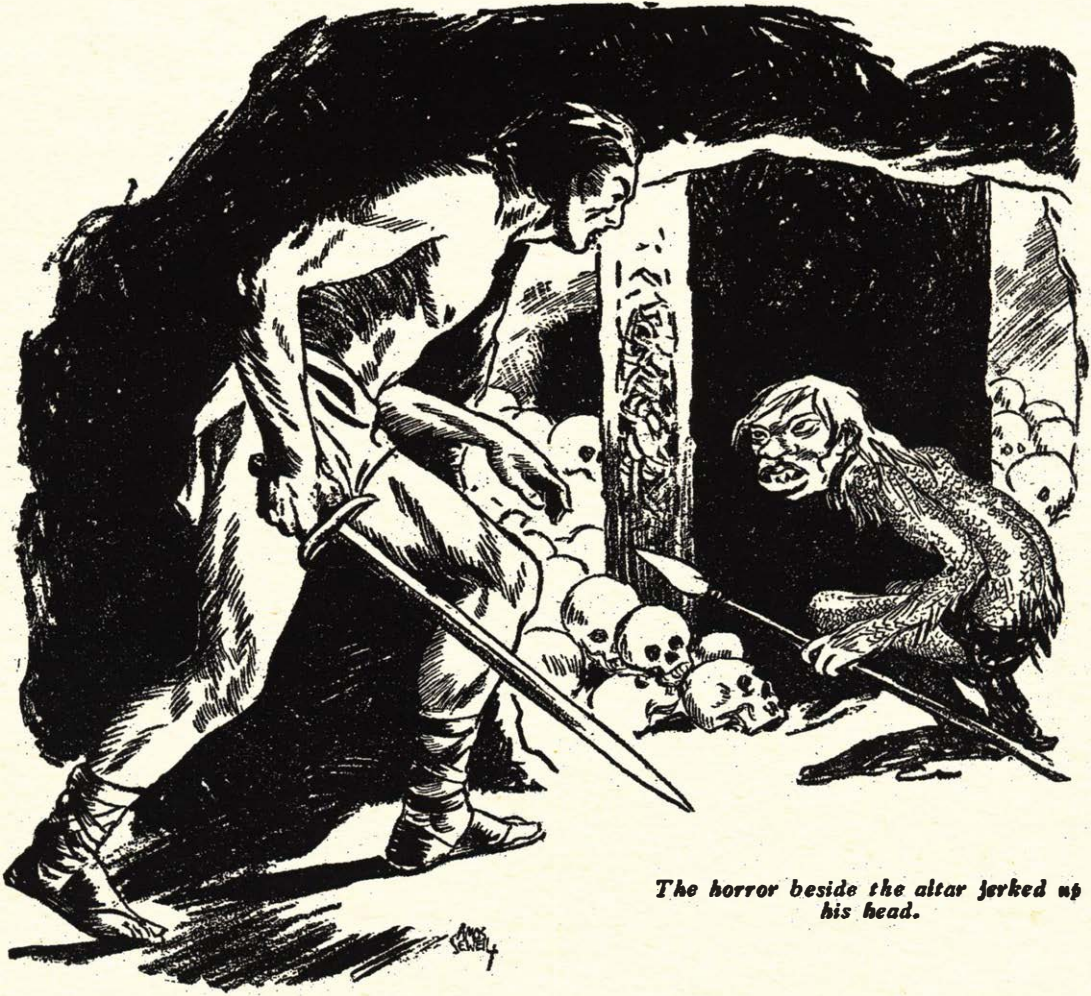
Rosamunda was whimpering a little, the strain beginning to tell. "We'll have to go away. When they find Abby dead, they'll want me."

I said, "Yes, Rosamunda," but I knew we would not have to go away, unless that fire did not burn. We hurried on to New Orleans, and went to Jordan's apartment.

NEXT day it was discovered that the house in the magnolias had burned to the ground, Miss Abby with it. The Creole woman, Rosamunda Marsina, had spent the night with her fiancé in the apartment of Sherman Jordan—so said the papers. Jordan had seen to that. Rosamunda and I were married soon after and went out to rebuild that house.

Since then, I have tried often to dismiss the events of that horrible night as a chaotic dream, a thing half imagined, half real. But certain things forbade any such interpretation, no matter how much I longed to believe that both Rosamunda and I had been deceived by too vivid belief in Haitian legends.

There were especially those other things in the papers that day—the day the burning of the house was chronicled—things I kept carefully from Rosamunda's eyes. They were isolated stories of new graveyard outrages—that is what the papers called them, but I know better—*the finding of putrefied remains in the half-opened graves of Negroes whose bodies had been stolen long years ago—and the curious detail that the graves had been half dug by bare fingers, as if dead hands were seeking the empty coffins below!*



*The horror beside the altar jerked up his head.*

# People of the Dark

By Robert E. Howard

**I** CAME to Dagon's Cave to kill Richard Brent. I went down the dusky avenues made by the towering trees, and my mood well-matched the primitive grimness of the scene. The approach to Dagon's Cave is always dark, for the mighty branches and thick leaves shut out the sun, and now the somberness of my own

soul made the shadows seem more ominous and gloomy than was natural.

Not far away I heard the slow wash of the waves against the tall cliffs, but the sea itself was out of sight, masked by the dense oak forest. The darkness and the stark gloom of my surroundings gripped my shadowed soul as I

Out of the past, in Dagon's Cave,  
there is Conan of the reavers.

passed beneath the ancient branches—as I came out into a narrow glade and saw the mouth of the ancient cavern before me. I paused, scanning the cavern's exterior and the dim reaches of the silent oaks.

The man I hated had not come before me! I was in time to carry out my grim intent. For a moment my resolution faltered, then like a wave there surged over me the fragrance of Eleanor Bland, a vision of wavy golden hair and deep gray eyes, changing and mystic as the sea. I clenched my hands until the knuckles showed white, and instinctively touched the wicked snub-nosed revolver whose weight sagged my coat pocket.

But for Richard Brent, I felt certain I had already won this woman, desire for whom made my waking hours a torment and my sleep a torture. Whom did she love? She would not say; I did not believe she knew. Let one of us go away, I thought, and she would turn to the other. And I was going to simplify matters for her—and for myself. By chance I had overheard my blond English rival remark that he intended coming to lonely Dagon's Cave on an idle exploring outing—alone.

I am not by nature criminal. I was born and raised in a hard country, and have lived most of my life on the raw edges of the world, where a man took what he wanted, if he could, and mercy was a virtue little known. But it was a torment that racked me day and night that sent me out to take the life of Richard Brent. I have lived hard, and violently, perhaps. When love overtook me, it also was fierce and violent. Perhaps I was not wholly sane, what with my love for Eleanor Bland and my hatred for Richard Brent. Under any other circumstances, I would have been glad to call him friend—a fine, rangy, upstanding young fellow, clear-eyed

and strong. But he stood in the way of my desire and he must die.

I STEPPED into the dimness of the cavern and halted. I had never before visited Dagon's Cave, yet a vague sense of misplaced familiarity troubled me as I gazed on the high arching roof, the even stone walls and the dusty floor. I shrugged my shoulders, unable to place the elusive feeling; doubtless it was evoked by a similarity to caverns in the mountain country of the American Southwest where I was born and spent my childhood.

And yet I knew that I had never seen a cave like this one, whose regular aspect gave rise to myths that it was not a natural cavern, but had been hewn from the solid rock ages ago by the tiny hands of the mysterious Little People, the prehistoric beings of British legend. The whole countryside thereabouts was a haunt for ancient folk lore.

The country folk were predominantly Celtic; here the Saxon invaders had never prevailed, and the legends reached back, in that long settled countryside, further than anywhere else in England—back beyond the coming of the Saxons, aye, and incredibly beyond that distant age, beyond the coming of the Romans, to those unbelievably ancient days when the native Britons warred with black-haired Irish pirates.

The Little People, of course, had their part in the lore. Legend said that this cavern was one of their last strongholds against the conquering Celts, and hinted at lost tunnels, long fallen in or blocked up, connecting the cave with a network of subterranean corridors which honeycombed the hills. With these chance meditations vying idly in my mind with grimmer speculations, I passed through the outer chamber of the cavern and entered a narrow tunnel, which, I knew by

former descriptions, connected with a larger room.

It was dark in the tunnel, but not too dark for me to make out the vague, half-defaced outlines of mysterious etchings on the stone walls. I ventured to switch on my electric torch and examine them more closely. Even in their dimness I was repelled by their abnormal and revolting character. Surely no men cast in human mold as we know it, scratched those grotesque obscenities.

The Little People—I wondered if those anthropologists were correct in their theory of a squat Mongoloid aboriginal race, so low in the scale of evolution as to be scarcely human, yet possessing a distinct, though repulsive culture of their own. They had vanished before the invading races, theory said, forming the base of all Aryan legends of trolls, elves, dwarfs and witches. Living in caves from the start, these aborigines had retreated farther and farther into the caverns of the hills, before the conquerors, vanishing at last entirely, though folk-lore fancy pictures their descendants still dwelling in the lost chasms far beneath the hills, loathsome survivals of an outworn age.

I snapped off the torch and passed through the tunnel, to come out into a sort of doorway which seemed entirely too symmetrical to have been the work of nature. I was looking into a vast dim cavern, at a somewhat lower level than the outer chamber, and again I shuddered with a strange alien sense of familiarity. A short flight of steps led down from the tunnel to the floor of the cavern—tiny steps, too small for normal human feet, carved into the solid stone. Their edges were greatly worn away, as if by ages of use. I started the descent—my foot slipped suddenly. I instinctively knew what was coming—it was all in part with that strange

feeling of familiarity—but I could not catch myself. I fell headlong down the steps and struck the stone floor with a crash that blotted out my senses. . . .

**S**LOWLY consciousness returned to me, with a throbbing of my head and a sensation of bewilderment. I lifted a hand to my head and found it caked with blood. I had received a blow, or had taken a fall, but so completely had my wits been knocked out of me that my mind was an absolute blank. Where I was, who I was, I did not know. I looked about, blinking in the dim light, and saw that I was in a wide, dusty cavern. I stood at the foot of a short flight of steps which led upward into some kind of tunnel. I ran my hand dazedly through my square-cut black mane, and my eyes wandered over my massive naked limbs and powerful torso. I was clad, I noticed absently, in a sort of loin cloth, from the girdle of which swung an empty scabbard, and leathern sandals were on my feet.

Then I saw an object lying at my feet, and stooped and took it up. It was a heavy iron sword, whose broad blade was darkly stained. My fingers fitted instinctively about its hilt with the familiarity of long usage. Then suddenly I remembered and laughed to think that a fall on his head should render me, Conan of the reavers so completely daft. Aye, it all came back to me now. It had been a raid on the Britons, on whose coasts we continually swooped with torch and sword, from the island called Eireann. That day we of the black-haired Gael had swept suddenly down on a coastal village in our long, low ships and in the hurricane of battle which followed, the Britons had at last given up the stubborn contest and retreated, warriors, women and bairns, into the deep shadows of the

oak forests, whither we seldom dared follow.

But I had followed, for there was a girl of my foes whom I desired with a burning passion, a lithe, slim young creature with wavy golden hair and deep gray eyes, changing and mystic as the sea. Her name was Tamera—well I knew it, for there was trade between the races as well as war, and I had been in the villages of the Britons as a peaceful visitor, in times of rare truce.

**I** SAW her white half-clad body flickering among the trees as she ran with the swiftness of a doe, and I followed, panting with fierce eagerness. Under the dark shadows of the gnarled oaks she fled, with me in close pursuit, while far away behind us died out the shouts of slaughter and the clashing of swords. Then we ran in silence, save for her quick labored panting, and I was so close behind her as we emerged into a narrow glade before a somber-mouthed cavern, that I caught her flying golden tresses with one mighty hand. She sank down with a despairing wail, and even so, a shout echoed her cry and I wheeled quickly to face a rangy young Briton who sprang from among the trees, the light of desperation in his eyes.

"Vertorix!" the girl wailed, her voice breaking in a sob, and fiercer rage welled up in me, for I knew the lad was her lover.

"Run for the forest, Tamera!" he shouted, and leaped at me as a panther leaps, his bronze ax whirling like a flashing wheel about his head. And then sounded the clangor of strife and the hard-drawn panting of combat.

The Briton was as tall as I, but he was lithe where I was massive. The advantage of sheer muscular power was mine, and soon he was on the defensive, striving des-

perately to parry my heavy strokes with his ax. Hammering on his guard like a smith on an anvil, I pressed him relentlessly, driving him irresistibly before me. His chest heaved, his breath came in labored gasps, his blood dripped from scalp, chest and thigh where my whistling blade had cut the skin, and all but gone home. As I redoubled my strokes and he bent and swayed beneath them like a sapling in a storm, I heard the girl cry: "Vertorix! Vertorix! The cave! Into the cave!"

I saw his face pale with a fear greater than that induced by my hacking sword.

"Not there!" he gasped. "Better a clean death! In Il-marenin's name, girl, run into the forest and save yourself!"

"I will not leave you!" she cried. "The cave! It is our one chance!"

I saw her flash past us like a flying wisp of white and vanish in the cavern, and with a despairing cry, the youth launched a wild desperate stroke that nigh cleft my skull. As I staggered beneath the blow I had barely parried, he sprang away, leaped into the cavern after the girl and vanished in the gloom.

**W**ITH a maddened yell that invoked all my grim Gaelic gods, I sprang recklessly after them, not reckoning if the Briton lurked beside the entrance to brain me as I rushed in. But a quick glance showed the chamber empty and a wisp of white disappearing through a dark doorway in the back wall.

I raced across the cavern and came to a sudden halt as an ax licked out of the gloom of the entrance and whistled perilously close to my black-maned head. I gave back suddenly. Now the advantage was with Vertorix, who stood in the narrow mouth of the corridor

where I could hardly come at him without exposing myself to the devastating stroke of his ax.

I was near frothing with fury and the sight of a slim white form among the deep shadows behind the warrior drove me into a frenzy. I attacked savagely but warily, thrusting venomously at my foe, and drawing back from his strokes. I wished to draw him out into a wide lunge, avoid it and run him through before he could recover his balance. In the open I could have beat him down by sheer power and heavy blows, but here I could only use the point and that at a disadvantage; I always preferred the edge. But I was stubborn; if I could not come at him with a finishing stroke, neither could he or the girl escape me while I kept him hemmed in the tunnel.

It must have been the realization of this fact that prompted the girl's action, for she said something to Vertorix about looking for a way leading out, and though he cried out fiercely forbidding her to venture away into the darkness, she turned and ran swiftly down the tunnel to vanish in the dimness. My wrath rose appallingly and I nearly got my head split in my eagerness to bring down my foe before she found a means for their escape.

Then the cavern echoed with a terrible scream and Vertorix cried out like a man death-stricken, his face ashy in the gloom. He whirled, as if he had forgotten me and my sword, and raced down the tunnel like a madman, shrieking Tamera's name. From far away, as if from the bowels of the earth, I seemed to hear her answering cry, mingled with a strange sibilant clamor that electrified me with nameless but instinctive horror. Then silence fell, broken only by Vertorix's frenzied cries, receding farther and farther into the earth.

RECOVERING myself I sprang into the tunnel and raced after the Briton as recklessly as he had run after the girl. And to give me my due, red-handed reaver though I was, cutting down my rival from behind was less in my mind than discovering what dread thing had Tamera in its clutches.

As I ran along I noted absently that the sides of the tunnel were scrawled with monstrous pictures, and realized suddenly and creepily that this must be the dread Cavern of the Children of the Night, tales of which had crossed the narrow sea to resound horrifically in the ears of the Gaels. Terror of me must have ridden Tamera hard to have driven her into the cavern shunned by her people, where it was said, lurked the survivals of that grisly race which inhabited the land before the coming of the Picts and Britons, and which had fled before them into the unknown caverns of the hills.

Ahead of me the tunnel opened into a wide chamber, and I saw the white form of Vertorix glimmer momentarily in the semidarkness and vanish in what appeared to be the entrance of a corridor opposite the mouth of the tunnel I had just traversed. Instantly there sounded a short, fierce shout and the crash of a hard-driven blow, mixed with the hysterical screams of a girl and a medley of serpentlike hissing that made my hair bristle. And at that instant I shot out of the tunnel, running at full speed, and realized too late the floor of the cavern lay several feet below the level of the tunnel. My flying feet missed the tiny steps and I crashed terrifically on the solid stone floor.

NOW as I stood in the semi-darkness, rubbing my aching head, all this came back to me, and I stared fearsomely across the vast chamber at that black cryptic cor-

ridor into which Tamera and her lover had disappeared, and over which silence lay like a pall. Gripping my sword, I warily crossed the great still cavern and peered into the corridor. Only a denser darkness met my eyes. I entered, striving to pierce the gloom, and as my foot slipped on a wide wet smear on the stone floor, the raw acrid scent of fresh-spilled blood met my nostrils. Someone or something had died there, either the young Briton or his unknown attacker.

I stood there uncertainly, all the supernatural fears that are the heritage of the Gael rising in my primitive soul. I could turn and stride out of these accursed mazes, into the clear sunlight and down to the clean blue sea where my comrades, no doubt, impatiently awaited me after the routing of the Britons. Why should I risk my life among these grisly rat dens? I was eaten with curiosity to know what manner of beings haunted the cavern, and who were called the Children of the Night by the Britons, but in it was my love for the yellow-haired girl which drove me down that dark tunnel—and love her I did, in my way, and would have been kind to her, had I carried her away to my island haunt.

I walked softly along the corridor, blade ready. What sort of creatures the Children of the Night were, I had no idea, but the tales of the Britons had lent them a distinctly inhuman nature.

The darkness closed around me as I advanced, until I was moving in utter blackness. My groping left hand encountered a strangely carven doorway, and at that instant something hissed like a viper beside me and slashed fiercely at my thigh. I struck back savagely and felt my blind stroke crunch home, and something fell at my feet and died. What thing I had slain in the

dark I could not know, but it must have been at least partly human because the shallow gash in my thigh had been made with a blade of some sort, and not by fangs or talons. And I sweated with horror, for the gods know, the hissing voice of the Thing had resembled no human tongue I had ever heard.

And now in the darkness ahead of me I heard the sound repeated, mingled with horrible slitherings, as if numbers of reptilian creatures were approaching. I stepped quickly into the entrance my groping hand had discovered and came near repeating my headlong fall, for instead of letting into another level corridor, the entrance gave onto a flight of dwarfish steps on which I floundered wildly.

Recovering my balance I went on cautiously, groping along the sides of the shaft for support. I seemed to be descending into the very bowels of the earth, but I dared not turn back. Suddenly, far below me, I glimpsed a faint eery light. I went on, perforce, and came to a spot where the shaft opened into another great vaulted chamber; and I shrank back, aghast.

**I**N the center of the chamber stood a grim, black altar; it had been rubbed all over with a sort of phosphorous, so that it glowed dully, lending a semi-illumination to the shadowy cavern. Towering behind it on a pedestal of human skulls, lay a cryptic black object, carven with mysterious hieroglyphics. The Black Stone! The ancient, ancient Stone before which, the Britons said, the Children of the Night bowed in gruesome worship, and whose origin was lost in the black mists of a hideously distant past. Once, legend said, it had stood in that grim circle of monoliths called Stonehenge, before its votaries had been driven like chaff before the bows of the Picts.

But I gave it but a passing, shuddering glance. Two figures lay, bound with rawhide thongs, on the glowing black altar. One was Tamera; the other was Vertorix, blood-stained and disheveled. His bronze ax, crusted with clotted blood, lay near the altar. And before the glowing stone squatted Horror.

Though I had never seen one of those ghoulish aborigines, I knew this thing for what it was, and shuddered. It was a man of a sort, but so low in the stage of life that its distorted humanness was more horrible than its bestiality.

Erect, it could not have been five feet in height. Its body was scrawny and deformed, its head disproportionately large. Lank snaky hair fell over a square inhuman face with flabby writhing lips that bared yellow fangs, flat spreading nostrils and great yellow slant eyes. I knew the creature must be able to see in the dark as well as a cat. Centuries of skulking in dim caverns had lent the race terrible and inhuman attributes. But the most repellent feature was its skin: scaly, yellow and mottled, like the hide of a serpent. A loin-clout made of a real snake's skin girt its lean loins, and its taloned hands gripped a short stone-tipped spear and a sinister-looking mallet of polished flint.

**S**O intently was it gloating over its captives, it evidently had not heard my stealthy descent. As I hesitated in the shadows of the shaft, far above me I heard a soft sinister rustling that chilled the blood in my veins. The Children were creeping down the shaft behind me, and I was trapped. I saw other entrances opening on the chamber, and I acted, realizing that an alliance with Vertorix was our only hope. Enemies though we were, we were men, cast in the same mold, trapped in the lair of

these indescribable monstrosities.

As I stepped from the shaft, the horror beside the altar jerked up his head and glared full at me. And as he sprang up, I leaped and he crumpled, blood spurting, as my heavy sword split his reptilian heart. But even as he died, he gave tongue in an abhorrent shriek which was echoed far up the shaft. In desperate haste I cut Vertorix's bonds and dragged him to his feet. And I turned to Tamera, who in that dire extremity did not shrink from me, but looked up at me with pleading, terror-dilated eyes. Vertorix wasted no time in words, realizing chance had made allies of us. He snatched up his ax as I freed the girl.

"We can't go up the shaft," he explained swiftly; "we'll have the whole pack upon us quickly. They caught Tamera as she sought for an exit, and overpowered me by sheer numbers when I followed. They dragged us hither and all but that carrion scattered—bearing word of the sacrifice through all their burrows, I doubt not. Il-marenin alone knows how many of my people, stolen in the night, have died on that altar. We must take our chance in one of these tunnels—all lead to hell! Follow me!"

**S**EIZING Tamera's hand he ran fleetly into the nearest tunnel and I followed. A glance back into the chamber before a turn in the corridor blotted it from view showed a revolting horde streaming out of the shaft. The tunnel slanted steeply upward, and suddenly ahead of us we saw a bar of gray light. But the next instant our cries of hope changed to curses of bitter disappointment. There was daylight, aye, drifting in through a cleft in the vaulted roof, but far, far above our reach. Behind us the pack gave tongue exultingly. And I halted.



"Save yourselves if you can," I growled. "Here I make my stand. They can see in the dark and I cannot. Here at least I can see them. Go!"

But Vertorix halted also. "Little use to be hunted like rats to our doom. There is no escape. Let us meet our fate like men."

Tamera cried out, wringing her hands, but she clung to her lover.

"Stand behind me with the girl," I grunted. "When I fall, dash out her brains with your ax lest they take her alive again. Then sell your own life as high as you may, for there is none to avenge us."

His keen eyes met mine squarely.

"We worship different gods, reaver," he said, "but all gods love brave men. Mayhap we shall meet again, beyond the Dark."

"Hail and farewell, Briton!" I growled, and our right hands gripped like steel.

"Hail and farewell, Gael!"

**A**ND I wheeled as a hideous horde swept up the tunnel and burst into the dim light, a flying nightmare of streaming snaky hair, foam-flecked lips and glaring eyes. Thundering my war-cry I sprang to meet them and my heavy sword sang and a head spun grinning from its shoulder on an arching fountain of blood. They came upon me like a wave and the fighting madness of my race was upon me. I fought as a maddened beast fights and at every stroke I clove through flesh and bone, and blood spattered in a crimson rain.

Then as they surged in and I went down beneath the sheer weight of their numbers, a fierce yell cut the din and Vertorix's ax sang above me, splattering blood and brains like water. The press slackened and I staggered up, trampling the writhing bodies beneath my feet.

"A stair behind us!" the Briton

was screaming. "Half hidden in an angle of the wall! It must lead to daylight! Up it, in the name of Il-marenin!"

So we fell back, fighting our way inch by inch. The vermin fought like blood-hungry devils, clambering over the bodies of the slain to screech and hack. Both of us were streaming blood at every step when we reached the mouth of the shaft, into which Tamera had preceded us.

Screaming like very fiends the Children surged in to drag us down. The shaft was not as light as had been the corridor, and it grew darker as we climbed, but our foes could only come at us from in front. By the gods, we slaughtered them till the stair was littered with mangled corpses and the Children frothed like mad wolves! Then suddenly they abandoned the fray and raced back down the steps.

"What portends this?" gasped Vertorix, shaking the bloody sweat from his eyes.

"Up the shaft, quick!" I panted. "They mean to mount some other stair and come at us from above!"

So we raced up those accursed steps, slipping and stumbling, and as we fled past a black tunnel that opened into the shaft, far down it we heard a frightful howling. An instant later we emerged from the shaft into a winding corridor, dimly illumined by a vague gray light filtering in from above, and somewhere in the bowels of the earth I seemed to hear the thunder of rushing water. We started down the corridor and as we did so, a heavy weight smashed on my shoulders, knocking me headlong, and a mallet crashed again and again on my head, sending dull red flashes of agony across my brain. With a volcanic wrench I dragged my attacker off and under me, and tore out his throat with my naked fingers. And his fangs met in my arm in his death-bite.

**R**EELING up, I saw that Tamera and Vertorix had passed out of sight. I had been somewhat behind them, and they had run on, knowing nothing of the fiend which had leaped on my shoulders. Doubtless they thought I was still close on their heels. A dozen steps I took, then halted. The corridor branched and I knew not which way my companions had taken. At blind venture I turned into the left-hand branch, and staggered on in the semidarkness. I was weak from fatigue and loss of blood, dizzy and sick from the blows I had received. Only the thought of Tamera kept me doggedly on my feet. Now distinctly I heard the sound of an unseen torrent.

That I was not far underground was evident by the dim light which filtered in from somewhere above, and I momentarily expected to come upon another stair. But when I did, I halted in black despair; instead of up, it led down. Somewhere far behind me I heard faintly the howls of the pack, and I went down, plunging into utter darkness. At last I struck a level and went along blindly. I had given up all hope of escape, and only hoped to find Tamera—if she and her lover had not found a way of escape—and die with her. The thunder of rushing water was above my head now, and the tunnel was slimy and dank. Drops of moisture fell on my head and I knew I was passing under the river.

Then I blundered again upon steps cut in the stone, and these led upward. I scrambled up as fast as my stiffening wounds would allow—and I had taken punishment enough to have killed an ordinary man. Up I went and up, and suddenly daylight burst on me through a cleft in the solid rock. I stepped into the blaze of the sun. I was standing on a ledge high above the rushing waters of a river which

raced at awesome speed between towering cliffs. The ledge on which I stood was close to the top of the cliff; safety was within arm's length. But I hesitated and such was my love for the golden-haired girl that I was ready to retrace my steps through those black tunnels on the mad hope of finding her. Then I started.

**A**CROSS the river I saw another cleft in the cliff-wall which fronted me, with a ledge similar to that on which I stood, but longer. In olden times, I doubt not, some sort of primitive bridge connected the two ledges—possibly before the tunnel was dug beneath the river-bed. Now as I watched, two figures emerged upon that other ledge—one gashed, dust-stained, limping, gripping a bloodstained ax; the other slim, white and girlish.

Vertorix and Tamera! They had taken the other branch of the corridor at the fork and had evidently followed the windows of the tunnel to emerge as I had done, except that I had taken the left turn and passed clear under the river. And now I saw that they were in a trap. On that side the cliffs rose half a hundred feet higher than on my side of the river, and so sheer a spider could scarce have scaled them. There were only two ways of escape from the ledge: back through the fiend-haunted tunnels, or straight down to the river which raved far beneath.

I saw Vertorix look up the sheer cliffs and then down, and shake his head in despair. Tamara put her arms about his neck, and though I could not hear their voices for the rush of the river, I saw them smile, and then they went together to the edge of the ledge. And out of the cleft swarmed a loathsome mob, as foul reptiles writhe up out of the darkness, and they stood blinking in the sunlight like the

night-things they were. I gripped my sword-hilt in the agony of my helplessness until the blood trickled from under my finger-nails. Why had not the pack followed me instead of my companions?

The Children hesitated an instant as the two Britons faced them, then with a laugh Vertorix hurled his ax far out into the rushing river, and turning, caught Tamera in a last embrace. Together they sprang far out, and still locked in each other's arms, hurtled downward, struck the madly foaming water that seemed to leap up to meet them, and vanished. And the wild river swept on like a blind, insensate monster, thundering along the echoing cliffs.

A moment I stood frozen, then like a man in a dream I turned, caught the edge of the cliff above me and wearily drew myself up and over, and stood on my feet above the cliffs, hearing like a dim dream the roar of the river far beneath.

**I** REELED up, dazedly clutching my throbbing head, on which dried blood was clotted. I glared wildly about me. I had clambered the cliffs—no, by the thunder of Crom, I was still in the cavern! I reached for my sword—

The mists faded and I stared about dizzily, orienting myself with space and time. I stood at the foot of the steps down which I had fallen. I who had been Conan the reaver, was John O'Brien. Was all that grotesque interlude a dream? Could a mere dream appear so vivid? Even in dreams, we often know we are dreaming, but Conan the reaver had no cognizance of any other existence. More, he remembered his own past life as a living man remembers, though in the waking mind of John O'Brien, that memory faded into dust and mist. But the adventures of Conan

in the Cavern of the Children stood clear-etched in the mind of John O'Brien.

I glanced across the dim chamber toward the entrance of the tunnel into which Vertorix had followed the girl. But I looked in vain, seeing only the bare blank wall of the cavern. I crossed the chamber, switched on my electric torch—miraculously unbroken in my fall—and felt along the wall.

Ha! I started, as from an electric shock! Exactly where the entrance should have been, my fingers detected a difference in material, a section which was rougher than the rest of the wall. I was convinced that it was of comparatively modern workmanship; the tunnel had been walled up.

I thrust against it, exerting all my strength, and it seemed to me that the section was about to give. I drew back, and taking a deep breath, launched my full weight against it, backed by all the power of my giant muscles. The brittle, decaying wall gave way with a shattering crash and I catapulted through in a shower of stones and falling masonry.

I scrambled up, a sharp cry escaping me. I stood in a tunnel, and I could not mistake the feeling of similarity this time. Here Vertorix had first fallen foul of the Children, as they dragged Tamera away, and here where I now stood the floor had been a-wash with blood.

I walked down the corridor like a man in a trance. Soon I should come to the doorway on the left—aye, there it was, the strangely carved portal, at the mouth of which I had slain the unseen being which reared up in the dark beside me. I shivered momentarily. Could it be possible that remnants of that foul race still lurked hideously in these remote caverns?

I TURNED into the doorway and my light shone down a long, slanting shaft, with tiny steps cut into the solid stone. Down these had Conan the reaver gone groping and down them went I, John O'Brien, with memories of that other life filling my brain with vague phantasms. No light glimmered ahead of me but I came into the great dim chamber I had known of yore, and I shuddered as I saw the grim black altar etched in the gleam of my torch. Now no bound figures writhed there, no crouching horror gloated before it. Nor did the pyramid of skulls support the Black Stone before which unknown races had bowed before Egypt was born out of time's dawn. Only a littered heap of dust lay strewn where the skulls had upheld the hellish thing. No, that had been no dream: I was John O'Brien, but I had been Conan of the reavers in that other life, and that grim interlude a brief episode of reality which I had relived.

I entered the tunnel down which we had fled, shining a beam of light ahead, and saw the bar of gray light drifting down from above—just as in that other, lost age. Here the Briton and I, Conan, had turned at bay. I turned my eyes from the ancient cleft high up in the vaulted roof, and looked for the stair. There it was, half concealed by an angle in the wall.

I mounted, remembering how hardly Vertorix and I had gone up so many ages before, with the horde hissing and frothing at our heels. I found myself tense with dread as I approached the dark, gaping entrance through which the pack had sought to cut us off. I had snapped off the light when I came into the dim-lit corridor below, and now I glanced into the well of blackness which opened on the stair. And with a cry I started back, nearly losing my footing on the worn

steps. Sweating in the semidarkness I switched on the light and directed its beam into the cryptic opening, revolver in hand.

I saw only the bare rounded sides of a small shaftlike tunnel and I laughed nervously. My imagination was running riot; I could have sworn that hideous yellow eyes glared terribly at me from the darkness, and that a crawling something had scuttered away down the tunnel. I was foolish to let these imaginings upset me. The Children had long vanished from these caverns; a nameless and abhorrent race closer to the serpent than the man, they had centuries ago faded back into the oblivion from which they had crawled in the black dawn ages of the earth.

I CAME out of the shaft into the winding corridor, which, as I remembered of old, was lighter. Here from the shadows a lurking thing had leaped on my back while my companions ran on, unknowing. What a brute of a man Conan had been, to keep going after receiving such savage wounds! Aye, in that age all men were iron.

I came to the place where the tunnel forked and as before I took the left-hand branch and came to the shaft that led down. Down this I went, listening for the roar of the river, but not hearing it. Again the darkness shut in about the shaft, so I was forced to have recourse to my electric torch again, lest I lose my footing and plunge to my death. Oh, I, John O'Brien, am not nearly so sure-footed as was I, Conan the reaver; no, nor as tigerishly powerful and quick, either.

I soon struck the dank lower level and felt again the dampness that denoted my position under the river-bed, but still I could not hear the rush of the water. And indeed I knew that whatever mighty river

had rushed roaring to the sea in those ancient times, there was no such body of water among the hills today. I halted, flashing my light about. I was in a vast tunnel, not very high of roof, but broad. Other smaller tunnels branched off from it and I wondered at the network which apparently honeycombed the hills.

I cannot describe the grim, gloomy effect of those dark, low-roofed corridors far below the earth. Over all hung an overpowering sense of unspeakable antiquity. Why had the little people carved out these mysterious crypts, and in which black age? Were these caverns their last refuge from the on-rushing tides of humanity, or their castles since time immemorial? I shook my head in bewilderment; the bestiality of the Children I had seen, yet somehow they had been able to carve these tunnels and chambers that might balk modern engineers. Even supposing they had but completed a task begun by nature, still it was a stupendous work for a race of dwarfish aborigines.

**T**HEN I realized with a start that I was spending more time in these gloomy tunnels than I cared for, and began to hunt for the steps by which Conan had ascended. I found them and, following them up, breathed again deeply in relief as the sudden glow of daylight filled the shaft. I came out upon the ledge, now worn away until it was little more than a bump on the face of the cliff. And I saw the great river, which had roared like a prisoned monster between the sheer walls of its narrow canyon, had dwindled away with the passing eons until it was no more than a tiny stream, far beneath me, trickling soundlessly among the stones on its way to the sea.

Aye, the surface of the earth changes; the rivers swell or shrink,

the mountains heave and topple, the lakes dry up, the continents alter; but under the earth the work of lost, mysterious hands slumbers untouched by the sweep of Time. Their work, aye, but what of the hands that reared that work? Did they, too, lurk beneath the bosoms of the hills?

How long I stood there, lost in dim speculations, I do not know, but suddenly, glancing across at the other ledge, crumbling and weathered, I shrank back into the entrance behind me. Two figures came out upon the ledge and I gasped to see that they were Richard Brent and Eleanor Bland. Now I remembered why I had come to the cavern and my hand instinctively sought the revolver in my pocket. They did not see me. But I could see them, and hear them plainly, too, since no roaring river now thundered between the ledges.

"By gad, Eleanor," Brent was saying, "I'm glad you decided to come with me. Who would have guessed there was anything to those old tales about hidden tunnels leading from the cavern? I wonder how that section of wall came to collapse? I thought I heard a crash just as we entered the outer cave. Do you suppose some beggar was in the cavern ahead of us, and broke it in?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I remember—oh, I don't know. It almost seems as if I'd been here before, or dreamed I had. I seem to faintly remember, like a far-off nightmare, running, running, running endlessly through these dark corridors with hideous creatures on my heels. . . ."

"Was I there?" jokingly asked Brent.

"Yes, and John, too," she answered. "But you were not Richard Brent, and John was not John O'Brien. No, and I was not Eleanor Bland, either. Oh, it's so dim and

far-off I can't describe it at all. It's hazy and misty and terrible."

"I understand, a little," he said unexpectedly. "Ever since we came to the place where the wall had fallen and revealed the old tunnel, I've had a sense of familiarity with the place. There was horror and danger and battle—and love, too."

**H**E stepped nearer the edge to look down in the gorge, and Eleanor cried out sharply and suddenly, seizing him in a convulsive grasp.

"Don't, Richard, don't! Hold me, oh, hold me tight!"

He caught her in his arms. "Why, Eleanor, dear, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," she faltered, but she clung closer to him and I saw she was trembling. "Just a strange feeling—rushing dizziness and fright, just as if I were falling from a great height. Don't go near the edge, Dick; it scares me."

"I won't, dear," he answered, drawing her closer to him, and continuing hesitantly: "Eleanor, there's something I've wanted to ask you for a long time—well, I haven't the knack of putting things in an elegant way. I love you, Eleanor; always have. You know that. But if you don't love me, I'll take myself off and won't annoy you any more. Only please tell me one way or another, for I can't stand it any longer. Is it I or the American?"

"You, Dick," she answered, hiding her face on his shoulder. "It's always been you, though I didn't know it. I think a great deal of John O'Brien. I didn't know which of you I really loved. But to-day as we came through those terrible tunnels and climbed those fearful stairs, and just now, when I thought for some strange reason we were falling from the ledge, I realized it was you I loved—that I always loved you, through more lives than this one. Always!"

Their lips met and I saw her golden head cradled on his shoulder. My lips were dry, my heart cold, yet my soul was at peace. They belonged to each other. Eons ago they lived and loved, and because of that love they suffered and died. And I, Conan, had driven them to that doom.

I saw them turn toward the cleft, their arms about each other, then I heard Tamera—I mean Eleanor—shriek, I saw them both recoil. And out of the cleft a horror came writhing, a loathsome, brain-shattering thing that blinked in the clear sunlight. Aye, I knew it of old—vestige of a forgotten age, it came writhing its horrid shape up out of the darkness of the Earth and the lost past to claim its own.

**W**HAT three thousand years of retrogression can do to a race hideous in the beginning, I saw, and shuddered. And instinctively I knew that in all the world it was the only one of its kind, a monster that had lived on. God alone knows how many centuries, wallowing in the slime of its dank subterranean lairs. Before the Children had vanished, the race must have lost all human semblance, living as they did, the life of the reptile. This thing was more like a giant serpent than anything else, but it had aborted legs and snaky arms with hooked talons. It crawled on its belly, writhing back mottled lips to bare needlelike fangs, which I felt must drip with venom. It hissed as it reared up its ghastly head on a horribly long neck, while its yellow slanted eyes glittered with all the horror that is spawned in the black lairs under the earth.

I knew those eyes had blazed at me from the dark tunnel opening on the stair. For some reason the creature had fled from me, possibly because it feared my light, and it stood to reason that it was the only

one remaining in the caverns, else I had been set upon in the darkness. But for it, the tunnels could be traversed in safety.

Now the reptilian thing writhed toward the humans trapped on the ledge. Brent had thrust Eleanor behind him and stood, face ashy, to guard her as best he could. And I gave thanks silently that I, John O'Brien, could pay the debt I, Conan the reaver, owed these lovers since long ago.

The monster reared up and Brent, with cold courage, sprang to meet it with his naked hands. Taking quick aim, I fired once. The shot echoed like the crack of doom between the towering cliffs, and the Horror, with a hideously human scream, staggered wildly, swayed and pitched headlong, knotting and writhing like a wounded python, to tumble from the sloping ledge and fall plummetlike to the rocks far below.

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## The Departing Soul

**A**LL over the world, in scores of countries, the belief has been held that the soul takes its departure from a dying body in the form of a wisp of smoke or fog. It is so described in the Iliad; after the spirit of Patrocius has visited Achilles in his dream, it takes its departure by entering the ground as smoke. In the far north, long years later, it is recorded that the soul of Beowulf the Goth "curled to the clouds," imaging the smoke which was curling up from his pyre. Jacob Boehme, the celebrated mystic, observed: "Seeing that man is so very earthly . . . he always supposeth that the soul—at the deceasing of the body—goeth only out at the mouth, and he understandeth nothing concerning its deep essences above the elements. When he seeth a blue vapor go forth out of the mouth of a dying man, then he supposeth that is the soul."

The same conception is still extensively believed over Europe, and the Russian peasant has often seen ghostly smoke hovering above graves. The Kaffirs hold that at death man leaves after him a sort of smoke, "very like the shadow which his living body will always cast before it." The hero in the Arabian romance of Yokdnan, who seeks the source of life and thought, discovers in one of the cavities of the heart a bluish vapor—the living soul. Among primitive races the original idea of the human soul seems to have been that of vaporous materiality, an idea which still holds a large place in certain philosophies, and which in one shape or another is always in ghost stories.

The supposed escape of the soul from the mouth at death gave rise to the idea that the vital principle might be transferred from one person to another. Among the Seminoles of Florida, when a woman died in childbirth, the infant was held over her face to receive her parting spirit. Algonquin women, desirous of becoming mothers, used to flock to the bed of those about to die, in the hope that they might

receive the last breath as it passed from the body. To this day the Tyrolese peasant believes that a good man's soul issues from his mouth at death in the form of a little white cloud.

In order that the soul may not be checked in its onward course after leaving the body, it has in many countries been the practice among rural folk to unfasten locks or bolts, and to open doors. This is not uncommon in France, Spain, Germany, and England. The same idea is behind the Chinese custom of making a hole in the roof when death is near. The North American Indian of former days would beat the sides of a wigwam containing a dying man, to drive the soul out through the top.

There is a widespread notion that the spirit will linger in the body of a child a long time when the parent refuses to leave the bedside. In Denmark one must not weep over the dying, especially not allow tears to fall on them, for it will hinder their resting peacefully in the grave. In some parts of Holland, when a child is at the point of death, it is customary to shade it with curtains from the sight of its parents, it being thought that the soul will be detained in the body so long as a compassionate eye is fixed upon it.

The presence of pigeon or game feathers is sometimes said to be a hindrance to the escape of the soul; and occasionally, to hasten its departure, peasants have lain a dying man on the floor. A Sussex nurse once told the wife of a clergyman that "never did she see anyone die so hard as Master Short; and at last she thought . . . that there must be game feathers in the bed. So she tried to pull the mattress from under him; but he was a heavy man, and she could not manage it alone, and there was no one with him but herself, and so she got a rope and tied it round him, and pulled him right off the bed, and he went off in a minute quite comfortable, just like a lamb."



*Before the fireplace a coffin was standing.*

# The Emergency Call

By Marion Brandon

**A**S the old white elm-shaded house came into view at the turn of the road, I found myself trembling.

"That's it, Tom," I said.

"There's no doctor's sign on it," Tom remarked as he brought the car to a halt at the picket gate. "Sure it's the right one?"

"Quite sure," I answered as well as my quivering lips would let me.

For Tom's first thought in planning our wedding-anniversary trip had been a visit to this house—and I knew what he would find out! I hadn't been able to tell him myself. How would the knowledge affect him, coming from another?

With a sinking heart I watched him make his way along the red brick path to the white door, pull the brass bell-knob that I re-

Through the storm and darkness of the night comes a cry for help, and from an even deeper darkness comes an answer.



membered so well, shining now in warm afternoon sunlight instead of the blue flare of lightning. A woman answered his summons, a young pretty woman, in place of the deaf old soul of a year ago. There was a brief conversation that I couldn't hear; and Tom came slowly back to the car.

"He's dead, darling!" he said. "The end of last July, she told me. Must have been right after we were here; that was the twenty-sixth, you know. She's no relation to him; they just bought the place in the fall; and when I asked her the exact date he died she didn't know."

*She didn't know!* My overstrained nerves gave away under the reaction. I burst into tears.

Tom was beside me in a moment, his arms around me.

"Don't cry, darling!" he remonstrated, "You know he said himself that he hadn't been well for a long time, and he's probably better off as he is. But, darn it!" he added in the boyish way that he has. "I surely wanted to thank him for what he did for us, and never anything that even looked like a bill!"

"It—it just upset me, Tom," I whispered, controlling myself as best I could.

Tom kissed me; and we drove on, leaving behind us the old green-shuttered house, every detail of which will remain forever burned into my memory. But the mere sight of it brought everything back so vividly that, now that we are home again, I am writing out this account of as strange an experience as can possibly befall a human being.

**B**UT I must go back to that July evening, a year ago, when I knelt, terrified and alone in the sunset light, beside Tom's unconscious form, his blood warm and wet on my fingers, ominous mutterings of approaching thunder in my ears.

We were on our wedding-trip, and had been avoiding traveled highways in favor of remote country back-roads like this one. It was a dreadful road, on which we had encountered no settlement—not even a house—for miles; but the mountain country through which it struggled was glorious. The ascent of the last hill, however, had made the radiator boil, and we had stopped to let it cool.

And then I saw the flower.

To this day, I don't know what it was; but it looked as if a little piece of summer sky had been caught in a bunch of green leaves high above the road on the face of the rocky wall that rose steep and sheer on one side.

"Tom, did you ever see anything so lovely as that flower?" I asked.

Tom's gray eyes followed my pointing finger. "I'll get it for you," he said.

"Tom, you couldn't!" In saying that, of course, I made a bad mistake.

"Couldn't I?" Tom retorted. "We'll see!"

As a matter of fact there was plenty of foothold on the jagged rock-face, we found; and quite a wide ledge just below the spot where the flower stood out in its blue loveliness against the gray-green lichened face of the rock.

"You want a rock-garden, darling," Tom said with his dear teasing smile. "Watch me capture the first inmate!"

There is no use going into details. It makes me sick now even to write of the hideous splitting crash with which the ledge, probably weakened by weathering, gave away under Tom's weight . . . and the more hideous silence which succeeded it.

**T**OM lay queerly crumpled and still at the bottom, made no movement, uttered no sound. As I

dropped to my knees beside him, I could see that his head was resting on a broken piece of rock, as on a pillow. When I moved it, my fingers were warm and wet—and red. His face was ghastly in the failing light, his eyes closed.

"Tom!" I begged. "Can't you speak to me?"

But my only reply was an ominous rumble of thunder.

I looked back over the valley behind me. Great ragged black clouds were rolling up from the horizon, obscuring in a heavy pall the golden light of the sunset. As I watched, they were rent by a jagged flash of lightning. A drop of rain fell cold on my hand, another on Tom's death-white face.

"Help!" I screamed, hysterically and senselessly. "Help!"

But even through my blind panic, I knew that there was no help. The country was probably as desolate ahead of us as it had been behind.

Another flash of lightning; another roll of thunder, booming hollowly among the hills, nearer this time. The rain was falling in earnest.

Sheer terror finally brought me to my senses, contradictory as that sounds. Tom wasn't dead. I could still feel his heart-beats, so irregular and faint as to make it only too plain that the dividing line between life and death was pitifully thin. And if, in his shocked condition, he were to be drenched and chilled by the impending downpour. . . .

I didn't dare to think further. Desperation must have lent me superhuman strength, for somehow I managed to get Tom's big helpless body—he is six feet high, and heavy in proportion—into the car which I backed as close to him as I could.

I was exhausted and trembling when the task was accomplished, and with Tom's senseless form lying inert and still on the floor in

the back, I could only crouch sobbing on the front seat while such a storm as I hope never to see again broke over us.

It raged for hours, with crashing thunder and such blinding lightning and sluicing rain that I didn't dare to attempt to move the chainless car along the road which looked more like the bed of a mountain stream than anything else in the uncanny blue glare of the lightning flashes.

**A**T long last, however, the downpour ceased. The storm passed on, but reluctantly, leaving in its wake fitful flashes and intermittent growls of thunder. With shaking fingers I padded the flooring under Tom's head with my coat and sweater, in addition to what I had already put there, and slipping once more into the front seat, started the engine.

The trip along the dark treacherous road seemed endless—a nightmare of skids and side-slips; of jolts that brought my heart to my throat when I thought of Tom's head. In reality the speedometer showed only four miles, and my watch forty-five minutes, when I finally spied a house, withdrawn and lonely-looking. But at last, the weak lamplight in the windows meant people.

But they could do me no good. They had no telephone to call a doctor; nor, they added, had any other of the few scattered houses in the vicinity.

"You'd best push right on to Colmer, ma'am," the man advised me. "It isn't but six miles from here, and there's a doctor. There's one village between here and it; but there's no doctor there—now. More's the pity!"

Could I possibly get Tom there alive? I thought miserably as I started once more into the darkness. His fluttering heart-beats were almost imperceptible.

In my daze of utter misery I noticed nothing, thought of nothing but making the best speed I dared, until the widely scattered houses drew close enough together to make me realize that we were approaching a settlement.

"The one where there isn't a doctor!" I thought wretchedly as the better roadway gave me confidence to press down a little more on the accelerator. But at least there would be telephones!

Just then a dying flash of lightning illumined the front of a house on the left, and flickered wanly across a brass plate by the door. Jamming on the brakes so that the car skidded entirely around, I leaped to the ground and ran up the path.

"Dr. Barton," read the sign in the light from the glass side-panels of the door.

"Thank God!" I sobbed in my relief and surprise, as I pulled at the old-fashioned bell. Apparently I had been too sunk in my misery to notice the little intermediate settlement; no wonder, if it was as small and straggling as some we had passed through! And this must be Colmer.

**E**VERYBODY was evidently in bed and asleep; for the only light was the one in the hall, and there was no answer to my frantically repeated summons but the slow strokes of a clock booming the hour of midnight. I could hear the bell ringing quite plainly; but in desperation I beat upon the door with my fists. That still figure out there on the car floor—dying!

As a last resort I tried the door. It gave! I stumbled into the long white-paneled hall. There was the scent of roses on the air.

"Is there nobody to help us?" I cried into the silence. "I *must* have help!"

Silence again for a moment. And

then the door of the room on my left slowly opened, and a tall old man emerged. He had kind, yet penetrating, dark eyes and thick gray hair.

"What is the trouble, my dear?" he asked with the most reassuring sympathetic smile I had ever met. "I'm sorry you were not answered at once; but my housekeeper is stone deaf—and I had gone to sleep."

Incoherently I poured out my story.

"Bring your car into the drive," he directed briefly, "while I go and light up the office."

He was, as I have said, an old man; but he seemed to have the strength of Samson. For when I stopped the car at the door, he lifted Tom's big helpless form as easily as if it had been a baby's, and carrying it into the consulting-room—to the right of the doorway, just opposite the one from which he had come in answer to my cry—and laid it on the examining-table.

With deft skilful-looking fingers he felt Tom's pulse; his body; his head . . . his pulse again.

"My dear," he said finally, "This boy"—the touch with which he moved Tom's curly dark head was very gentle—"is almost—gone." Desperately I gripped at the chair-back behind me to keep from crying out against the awfulness of the verdict, so much worse now, coming as it did from the lips of one who undoubtedly knew! "We'll have to have an immediate operation—here and now," he added. "It's a bad basal fracture, and we haven't a minute to lose."

**T**HERE and then, by a country general practitioner! As I heard the appalling words, the old-fashioned high-ceiled room seemed to reel around me, the lined kindly face of the old man to recede into a mist.

The speaker of them, however, appeared to regard the prospect as a perfectly simple matter.

"It's forty miles to the nearest hospital and surgeons," I could hear, as from some great distance, the quiet voice going on. "The boy wouldn't last the trip out, and the only doctors you'd find between here and there are my kind—country 'medicos.'"

"Have you ever—performed this operation?" I stammered through trembling lips.

"No," he replied simply, as if that didn't matter in the least; "never in my life."

For a moment stark unreasoning panic seized upon me at the thought of having that most dangerous of operations performed upon the person I loved far better than myself, here, in this country office, by someone who had never done it—and didn't seem to think that made any difference! The dreadful thought occurred to me that he might be insane. But as I met the direct dark eyes that were searching mine across Tom's well-nigh lifeless body, something of their calm cool steadiness seemed to flow into my cringing heart.

Tom was dying. The gray pallor, the sunken, pinched features, the heavy sweat-beads on his head and hands, made that hideously plain, even to me, who knew so little. Any chance was worth the trying!

"Please do it, Doctor," I said.

I shall not try to write about the next half hour. It is too hard, even now, after a year has passed. The grisly-seeming preparations. . . . The rows of ugly little instruments laid out in cruel glistening array on a clean towel. . . . The sponges and bandages in readiness.

"Fortunately I had everything laid out after my last emergency operation, a couple of days ago, so we won't have that to do now," the doctor remarked with his kindly

smile as he hung his coat over the back of a chair, and shrugged himself into his white linen jacket, "And we shan't need ether," he added. "Even when this operation is successfully over, it's some little time before consciousness returns, so we'll be spared that delay, too! I'll just have you go out now." He was deftly shaving away Tom's thick hair. "I'll call you if I need help. And this sort of thing isn't easy to watch!"

AT the door I turned to look back. The rain was once more pouring in sheets down the window-panes, for the storm was returning. The picture is forever engraved on my memory: the bare orderly consulting-room, with its brilliant overhead light; the still figure on the table; the intent gray-haired one bending over it . . . the sudden gleam of a knife.

"Good-by, Tom, darling!" I whispered in my heart. And stumbling out into the hall, I dropped onto a chair beside the door.

The minutes dragged leadenly by. I couldn't even listen for movements in the lighted room, for the roar of the renewed downpour drowned every other sound, even when the long peals of thunder died away.

My teeth were soon chattering, for there seemed to be open windows somewhere. Yet I didn't dare move to look for them lest a call come for me to help in some way. . . . And with the deepening chill, the scent of roses that I had noticed on my entrance became more pronounced. The doctor's hobby must be the growing of fine flowers, I thought—as one does think of trifles in dreadful moments.

At last the door opened, and the tall white-coated figure emerged.

"We'll be all right now, I think, my dear," he said with his be-

nignant smile. "He's coming around nicely."

The terrible grayness was indeed leaving Tom's face, I saw, as I entered the room; his breathing, almost imperceptible before, was now plainly to be seen. He had been moved from the table to the big comfortable sofa that stood against the wall and warmly covered with blankets.

"How can I thank you, Doctor?" I stammered through my grateful tears.

"I don't need any thanks," he answered. "The effort to recall people from the gates of death to those who love them is its own great reward—especially a fine boy like this one!" He smiled again. "No one has ever been able to do me a greater favor than bringing me a good hard emergency case to work on! . . . Yes, that pulse is coming along splendidly."

**I**T was nearly an hour before Tom opened his eyes, clear and sane, for there had been no ether to confuse him.

"Gosh, darling!" he whispered weakly. "I certainly have a head on me! Did I hit something hard?"

"Not so chatty, young man!" broke in the doctor in his kindly way. "You've had a major operation on that head of yours, and it's up to you to keep quiet. I'll just give you something to take the edge off the pain."

"Thank you, sir," Tom said, as the hypodermic plunged into his arm.

"That will make him sleep for twelve hours at least," said the doctor as he pulled the blankets well up around Tom's shoulders. "The undertaker has a good ambulance, and you can get him in the morning to take you to the nearest city hospital; that's Hampton, forty miles from here. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go back to sleep.

I've had a long illness—and I have to rest."

I noticed then, for the first time, what I had failed to mark in my terror for Tom: the pallor of the handsome benevolent face, the shadows under the keen dark eyes.

"Oh, do go and rest, Doctor," I begged. "We'll be quite all right."

"Your hands are cold," Tom murmured sleepily, already under the influence of the quick-acting opiate. "Better cover up well."

"I'll be well covered," the doctor answered reassuringly. His pleasant smile took in both of us; but he stooped to lay a hand on Tom's shoulder for an instant before he passed out of the open door.

But he did not go upstairs, I noted with relief as I heard his retreating footsteps pass across the hall and into the room from which I had roused him. There was something about his calm, benevolent, and wholly reassuring presence that made me thankful to have him near.

**T**OM soon dropped into a heavy, drugged slumber. The night wore on. Beside him, in a big chair, I half-dozed, worn out with the long strain. The storm had died; the house was very still.

Still; that is, except for a shade, or something, that was rattling continually in the room across the hall where there was evidently a window open. For myself, I didn't mind the creeping draft on my feet; but I hated to think that the tired doctor, resting after so delicate an operation, performed when he had been ill, might be roused from his slumber before long if the noise continued. But, half-asleep myself, it was almost dawn before it occurred to me that if I tiptoed quietly in and found and closed the window I could prevent his being disturbed.

Tom always carried a flashlight in his pocket; and by some strange

chance it was quite uninjured by the fall.

Softly I made my way across the hall; softly opened the closed door. The cold air of the room was heavy and sweet with the scent of roses.

Cautiously I flashed the torch.

I was standing in a large old-fashioned parlor, with white-paneled walls and dark walnut furniture. It was the shade of the window directly across from me that was making the disturbance. As I started over to it, I moved the torch slowly around the room—and what I saw brought me to a sudden trembling stop.

Before the fireplace and within a yard of me a coffin was standing, its dark polished surface gleaming dully in the light of the torch. Around the trestle roses were banked, and fresh garden flowers, their odor sweet on the cold air of the room.

And the face on the satin pillow, calm and reposeful in the majesty of death, was the one that had bent so intently over Tom's motionless form, that had smiled so kindly upon both of us . . . so kind still that my impulse to turn and flee was immediately checked.

Incredulously I bent and touched the quietly folded hands. They were icy, with the chill that is not of the world of the living. Shaken and trembling, I dropped upon a chair, my mind a whirling tumult of confused emotion.

**H**E was dead, that tall old man who had been—asleep; who had been ill, and must rest; whose skilful hands, folded now in marble rigidity, had brought Tom back from the Gate which their owner had already passed. . . .

The room was still cold with the chill of the mountain air; the blind still rattled; the heavy odor of the flowers was well-nigh overpowering. But I was not afraid. Groping

for the light switch, I flooded the silent place with radiance, and dropped on my knees beside the coffin.

"Thank you," I whispered as my tears fell fast on the quiet hands that had saved my husband from the grave. "Oh, thank you—thank you!"

And for a long time I knelt there, awed and overcome by a sense of nearness to unseen things that pass human understanding.

With morning light the old housekeeper came down; she was stone deaf, as the doctor had said.

"My land, but you gave me a start!" she exclaimed as I met her at the foot of the stairs, "You'll have to write what you want to say," she added. "I can't hear a word, and I don't hold with those ear-phones and such."

She seemed quite satisfied with my explanation that my husband had been injured; that, seeing the doctor's sign, I had stopped at the house; and that, receiving no answer to my rings, and finding the door open, I had helped him into the surgery to wait till morning for the doctor.

"My, my! but it would just have suited the doctor!" she said. "Nothing he liked better than to be called up from a good sound sleep for something serious. A real doctor, *he* was! Dead in his bed yesterday morning. . . . Good thing you didn't mistake the front parlor for the office," she added. "He's in there—at least, that's where the undertaker said he was going to put him when he brought him back last night, just as I was going to bed—and you might have got a scare. . . . Though I guess he couldn't scare anyone if he still looks as peaceful as he did when I found him in the morning! I'll get you some breakfast before I go into see him." And the housekeeper hurried off toward the kitchen.

**I** TOLD the same story to the undertaker when, in response to my telephoned summons, he arrived with his ambulance. What would they both have said, had I told the truth?

We were only a little more than a hundred miles from home, and he agreed to take us the whole distance for a sum which, to my city mind, seemed very reasonable indeed.

"The doctor's funeral isn't till tomorrow," he said; "so it's easy enough for me to go. I'll just step in and take a look around." And he disappeared into the closed room.

"Can you beat that!" he said as he emerged, an odd expression on his face. "That old housekeeper of his has always been fine at her job, but kind of queer in the head. He'd left a note saying that when he died, he didn't want a mourning affair made of it, and not to put a wreath on the door, or do things different in any way. So she wouldn't have anyone in to stay with her, because that would certainly be doing different. And when I came to fix things up in the parlor, just as she was going up to bed last night, she told me not to slip the spring-lock on the front door when I got through, because he'd never locked it in his life. But who in the world would have thought that she'd have the nerve to put his white office-coat on him instead of his best one that he hardly ever wore! She must have come down to look at him after I'd gone. . . . And believe me," he added, "he looks a lot more like himself!"

For an instant dizziness forced me to close my eyes. . . . That tall spare gray-haired figure, shaking itself into the linen jacket!

"Can there ever be a mistake about people being really dead?" I asked, striving to make my tone sound natural. "Could he perhaps

be in some kind of trance, and have got up and wandered around—dazed?"

**B**UT even as I voiced the words, I realized the ridiculousness of them. "Wandering!" "Dazed!" Those keen searching dark eyes; those deft, sure hands; that super-human strength!

"Mistakes can't be made about death any more," the man replied simply. "We have a test now that is absolutely certain. I don't think I'll say anything about it to her," he added, "I guess people will like to see him just as he looked in the office. I'll just pretend I didn't notice anything."

Nor would the old woman who hadn't seen him in the other coat, notice anything!

On the long trip home, as I sat by Tom's unconscious form on the cot, I learned much about the good old doctor. A man who had loved his profession above everything else in the world, save one thing—his only son, who was to follow in his father's footsteps. The boy had finished medical school; and before beginning on his hospital internship, had gone away on a hunting-trip with a friend. He had fractured his skull in a fall, and died before help could be obtained and the operation that would have saved him performed.

"It broke the doctor's heart, I guess," the undertaker went on. "The boy was all he had, for his wife died twenty years before. And from then on, you could see a little difference in how he felt about his cases. Not that he ever gave anyone anything but the best that was in him, of course; but when it came to young fellows like his boy—and this husband of yours—he'd have been glad to kill himself for them any day. He worked and slaved over them, and sat up nights with them. 'Just to make sure,' he'd

jay! It was overdoing over a young chap with pneumonia that took him off," he added. "He'd had angina for years, and knew he ought to be careful; but instead he worked over the youngster for fifteen hours straight—pulled him through, too—and then came home and went to sleep . . . for good!" The undertaker was quite unashamed of his emotion. "It certainly does seem queer," he added, "to think of a fine young fellow like this one needing his help—and him lying with his hands folded!"

What could I say to that? . . . Nothing!

**T**OM didn't rouse until after we reached the hospital. Though if he had talked, the undertaker would probably have taken what he said for delirious raving. To the surgeons who examined him, I simply said that it had been an emergency operation, performed by a country doctor.

What else could I have said?

It was a splendidly performed operation, they remarked; and the

results bore out their diagnosis. Tom improved rapidly and steadily, and in a far shorter time than I had dared to hope, was as well as ever.

But I have never told him what I alone have known until my decision to tell it to others, in this fashion and under another name. Who could say what effect the knowledge might have upon him that his rescue from death was effected by hands already dead!

Nor have I any explanation—if explanations mean answers to "hows" and "whys." I have heard it said, however, that after death the soul lingers for a time near the familiar body which housed it for so long. If that is true, and the soul of the good old doctor heard once more, in the silence of the night, the call for help that it had never in life refused, why shouldn't it have been permitted to re-enter that body long enough to—answer?

There are many things in life that we must be content to accept without understanding them. Why not this?

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—And Others!





*Inez was swaying upon her knees.*

# The Golden Patio

By Aubrey Feist

**I** FIRST remember "The Golden Patio" as the one ray of light in a dark old house; a door that opened on Fairyland from a world of wax flowers and horse-hair sofas.

The picture belonged to my grandmother and

hung in an angle of the stairs. It fascinated me as a child and often, when no one was about, I climbed on to one of the high-backed chairs and gazed into its yellow heart.

Behind the somber curtain in a decaying patio of Old Spain, a quest of many years comes to its eventful end.

The painting was wrought in oils, and was old and discolored.

It depicted an archway of crumbling stone closed by great gates of twisted iron which I always firmly believed to be locked, as though they were shut upon something intimate; something too beautiful or too terrible to be pried and peered at by mortal eyes. Through the bars could be seen a Spanish courtyard, full of tall, shadowy pillars and palm-trees, and fountains that sparkled beneath the moon. In the darkest corner, there was a door, heavily curtained with sombre velvet, while through a rift in these curtains came light—a misty stream of yellow radiance which flooded one side of the great dim courtyard and gave it its name, "The Golden Patio."

I used to wonder what lay in the room, what secrets were hidden behind those curtains. The patio seemed like a prologue in stone; the gateway to a deeper mystery.

**A** STRANGE old picture, yet, such as it was, the only sign of artistic taste that my grandfather had ever shown. He, Peter Romsey, had been a sea captain; the best of sailors, the worst of men. Even at home they heard of his escapades: low, sordid tales of drunken orgies, of floggings, mutinies and brawls, and of queer cargoes shipped at dead of night, which no honest skipper would have aboard.

And then, quite suddenly, he died. His few effects came home to England: a battered sea-chest, a caul, a sharp gully, some old Spanish lace and "The Patio." My grandmother knew nothing of the facts of his death save some talk about drink and a foreign woman; but, as she had grown to hate his memory, she stowed the chest in the lumber room, where it lay, fast locked, for the rest of her life. The lace, she sold for a third of its value, while, as for "The Golden Patio," it hung in disgrace on the dark old stairs to fill my childish heart with wonder.

It is hard, even now, to realize what a hold that picture had on me. I was a lonely little boy and, like all such children, inclined to dreaming. I wove wild stories and legends about it till, by degrees, it seemed to tell of something strong and elemental, something I could not understand. Romance was in "The Patio," in the close-locked gates and the hidden room; not romance as we northerners know it, but something born in a land of red hills and great slow-surgings rivers, of scorching sun and cruel, hot color. It breathed the spirit of Spain.

Often in later years, while gazing at Goya's masterpieces, I have caught in his fierce, glowing fires and savage faces, a glimpse of that same hard, primitive atmosphere. The picture lured and yet repelled me. It spoke to me of another world.

**E**VEN as the years wore on and I began to dream love stories, full of the lazy lilt of guitars and the perfume of exotic flowers, it was always of wild, unhallowed love, while sometimes, on dark winter nights, the picture was radiant no longer. It looked dull and brown and dead and wicked. It seemed to tell of lust and anger, of savage oaths and the rattle of knives. I feared "The Patio."

By degrees, as the spell grew stronger, I developed a love for everything Spanish. I studied the language of old Castile, I devoured its noble literature; while the fact that the picture at last became mine did not lessen its attraction. It hung in my study for many a year and when, at length, I came to travel, "The Golden Patio" traveled too.

Obedying perhaps some strange instinct, I followed my grandsire's footsteps south. I wandered through Italy and France. For months, I loitered along the Loire; then, when the fever possessed me again, I hastened down through Languedoc to the Pyrenees and Spain.

I shall never forget the day when I first crossed the frontier and steamed slowly southwards from Port Bou. I felt that I was in sight of my goal, that it lay in the haze of those bare brown hills, where the little rugged villages seem carved from the living rock. Yet, as I slept and sweltered among priests and flies and peasants, I ceased to exult and my heart grew cold for I knew that my search was far from ended. My search! Yes, my whole life had become a quest, a quest for something vague and intangible . . . pillars, palm-trees and yellow light.

Often I cursed myself for a fool and sometimes, in the early morning, when the spell of "The Patio" was weak, I thought that I would destroy this lodestone which had drawn me to Spain against my will. Then, at night-time, when the moon came out, and the picture lived and spoke to me, I thanked heaven that I had held my hand, for I knew that without it, I might falter or even, perchance, abandon my mission. I had a mission: of that I was certain. There was a riddle, a mystery to solve; and the key to the mystery was still to be found—in the gates of the Golden Patio.

**F**OR five years, I probed the heart of Spain. For five years, I wandered from town to town, living with gypsies and honest farmers, with smugglers and consumers. I spent lonely nights on the high sierras when the cup of the world was grey with moonshine, and the little twinkling lights in the valley shone like the watch-fires of an army. I drank strong Alcala wine with peasants and watched their ancient rhythmic dances which must have been old in the days of the Moors.

I walked in the avenues of Seville and feasted my eyes on the matchless Giralda. I lounged on the Puerta del Sol at Toledo and saw

bulls butchered at Madrid. I roamed Spain from Burgos to the Rock till, at last, by way of the sea, I came to Palma, lying like a great jewel on the plain, washed by the long bright waves and flanked by the misty mountains of Majorca.

There, in some measure, I found content among people whom time has barely touched; courtly, grave and kindly folk such as they tell of in old tales. I made my home at a vine-covered fonda which stands on the hillside near Porto Pi, and thence it was my custom to drive daily into Palma in the little rattling, dusty trams that wind down the white road among the olives.

Palma itself is a delight; a golden city, full of sunshine, and set in the midst of a flowering plain. It is dry and white with blinding dust, a place of tall palm-trees and prickly pear. There are queer crooked streets, dim echoing churches, and crumbling ramparts of sun-baked stone where fishermen hang their nets to dry and soldiers take their noonday siesta.

I grew to love this city of memories where the past rubs shoulders with the present till, all at once, my peace was shattered. I heard the old insistent call.

**I** WAS a Romsey, and, deep in my heart, was my grandfather's passion for ships and the sea. In all the Balearic Islands, there was nothing I loved like Palma Bay with its crowded harbor, its white feluccas and its swarm of swarthy Spanish seamen. I chanced to be walking there one evening, dreaming and watching the tall-masted ships. I could hear the south wind among the palms, the throb of bells on the still, warm air and the distant hum of the ancient city, sleeping within its broken walls. The sun was down behind Bellver woods, tipping the castle tower

with crimson and pouring its pale light upon the sea. Each burnished wave was tipped with fire. Everything was gold, bright gold!

Standing in the flood of light with everything radiant about me, I obeyed the call again without question and plunged anew into the town. Nobody hurries in Majorca, so I lounged for an hour or two by the Lirico, watching the crowd which thronged the Borne: priests, soldiers, fishermen, girls and bronzed-hued peasants.

Then at last, when the sun had sunk to rest and the trees were turning grey in the gardens, I rose and wandered into the dark maze of alleys that lie in the shadow of the Cathedral. I do not know how long I walked there. The moon came out and the quiet streets emptied. On I went without thought or reason, searching as I had searched for years. I was hardly conscious of my whereabouts when suddenly, looming out of the shadows, I saw the great arch of the Almudaina. I walked through the crooked gateway and blindly on. I turned to the left; to the left again. I emerged from the black mouth of an alley and there before me were gates of iron—the gates of the Golden Patio!

**F**OR a moment, I stared, swept by a storm of conflicting emotions—joy, fear, wonder and a feeling of emptiness and pain. It seemed as though a curtain had been rung down on my life. For years, my life had been a search and now the quest was ended.

Treading softly, I approached and peered between the rusty bars. Within all was rotten and decayed. The fountains were silent; the palms were dead; rough weeds crept through cracks in the broken pavement. I felt disappointed, almost angry. Could it be that I was mistaken?

And then some unseen hand drew the curtain and from the doorway in the corner came pouring floods of dazzling light which threw into sharp relief each withered palm and painted a shining golden wedge on the shadowy flagstones of the courtyard. I hid my eyes, and, in my joy, I breathed a silent prayer of thankfulness. Those long years of search had not been in vain for now there could be no doubt. This was the Patio.

Now across the street stood a high blank wall, and, leaning against it, I saw an old man, a dirty rogue in grey alpacca who puffed a greasy black cigar and watched me through the swirling smoke. He raised his hat as I approached and his fat face creased into a smile.

"The señor Ingles has lost his way?"

I laughed and waved towards the Patio.

"On the contrary, I have found it," I cried.

He raised his eyebrows at my answer; he grinned at me slyly and sidled nearer.

"What is the señor's pleasure to-night?"

"I want to know who lives in that house."

For a moment, the man eyed me very keenly; then he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don Ruy Gondomar lived there, señor."

"And does he live there now?" I asked.

"*Quien sabe, señor?* Who knows?"

And with a secret smile in his eyes, he raised his hat and walked softly away.

**I** GLANCED around. The street was empty. All the houses were in darkness, their shutters closed against the world. The sky was pale with a haze of stars and the

moonlight painted the whole world silver. A silver frame for a monstrous painting of iron bars, black as ink against a glare of pulsing, living yellow.

The Patio! I crept slowly nearer, drawn to it almost against my will. Through the gates came the sweet, hot scent of verbenas and the reek of damp and rotting leaves. The air was heavy and still as death. I could hear the soft drone of the mosquitoes. And then, clear and cold as the note of a bell, came the music of a woman's voice:

"Pedro! Pedro mio!"

Again and again came that thrilling whisper that seemed almost tearful in its anguish.

"Pedro! Pedro! Come to me!"

I opened the great iron gates and entered.

Hardly was I inside the arch before I became conscious of another presence. I felt, I knew that I was not alone. There have been times when, in some crowded room, I have known instinctively that some near relation was standing at my elbow. It was just the same now. I could see no one, but this strange impulse made me peer behind each slender pillar which might conceal a friend or foe.

For a while, I stood motionless in the archway, then feeling my way through the damp vegetation, I crossed the great silent courtyard and came to the little door in the corner. The heavy curtains hid the room but I could hear low sobbing and, through the sobs, that passionate whisper:

"Pedro! Pedro!"

Pedro! I thrilled at the sound of the name, for was I not Peter like all my line? Could it be that this woman was calling me, had called me across the breadth of Europe?

I felt my pulses quickening and nerved myself for the encounter. Then, even as I stood irresolute,

I heard the opening of a door, a frightened gasp and a man's soft laugh.

**I** WAITED no longer but crept back the way that I had come, stealing from moldering pillar to pillar, groping my way through the wet, clinging leaves. At last, after what seemed an age, I came to the gates. With beating heart, I darted into the archway and felt about for the carved handle. And then, the blood seemed to freeze in my veins, for I realized that I was a prisoner. The gates of the Patio were locked!

For a moment, I felt almost frightened, for I knew that I had placed a stone to prevent their clanging and betraying me. Someone had locked the gates deliberately, someone who knew that I had entered. Could it be the man in grey? I remembered his smile and his crafty eyes. Doubtless he was some friend of Don Ruy, who had watched my somewhat furtive entrance and contrived to trap me neatly. Soon he would return with the police and I would be dragged away to jail, charged with trespassing, house-breaking and Heaven knows what else besides, for the Spanish police are very thorough, and justice is swift and merciless in Palma de Majorca.

There was no time to lose, and, if I would escape, there was only one thing for me to do. I must make a clean breast of the whole affair; rouse the household and apologize. After all, my intentions were harmless and it is better to look like a fool than a felon.

**I** WALKED boldly across the courtyard, concealing myself no longer, for concealment was unnecessary. Soon I came opposite the little doorway and caught a glimpse of the room beyond. It was cold and bare, like most houses in

Palma, with great black beams and furniture, and curious three-beaked lamps of brass which threw a flickering yellow glare upon the walls of rough white plaster. There was no romance, no mystery till, all at once, came a rustle of silk and the woman stood leaning in the doorway.

I can see her now, I shall see her always: tall, slim, divinely graceful, her dark eyes wide with fear and loathing, and her fingers twisting and wrenching at her rosary of golden beads. I knew instinctively that she was afraid; afraid of a man who lounged, lolling and smoking, in one of the high-backed leather chairs; a swarthy man with great pouched eyes and lips as red as those of a dancing girl.

She stared straight in front of her, through and beyond me, and, all in a moment, I yearned for her. I loved her face, pallid as a moonstone, her crimson mouth, her haunted eyes, her black hair coiled 'neath the combless mantilla. It seemed as though some strange spirit was in me, something strong and fierce and primitive. All the calm years of my life were forgotten, their lessons lost in a surge of emotion. Hot and trembling, I sprang towards her, and bared my teeth like a savage dog when the man reached out a languid hand and drew her down upon his knee.

With one bound, I leaped the stream of light and crouched in the shadow of the doorway. The curtains hung in sable folds, and behind one of these I concealed myself. There was sweat on my brow and my teeth were chattering. I wanted to rend this man like a beast. I cannot explain my sensations now, and, at the time, I did not attempt to do so. I only know that my blood was on fire and that at my ear was that devil's whisper, urging, tempting me to violence.

THE swarthy man was speaking softly. I could hear his voice like a voice in a dream. It seemed to come from far away. It was strange; weird. I cannot explain it.

"You are beautiful . . . beautiful, ñez," he whispered. "You are like the snows on the Puig Mayor, so white, so cold. . . ."

The lady's white fingers wrenched at her beads and I heard her laugh softly, mirthlessly.

"My husband, Don Ruy, has learned to pay compliments?"

"Of course. It was to be expected. Jealousy is an excellent teacher!" Don Ruy smiled at his wife's tragic face and the butt of his cigar glowed red as he blew a thin cloud of oily smoke. "Is not your beauty renowned in Majorca? Am I not said to be blessed with a wife fit only to mate with angels or—Englishmen?"

The woman's mouth gaped hideously; she stifled a scream with one jeweled hand.

"Why—what do you mean? Ruy, you're mocking me."

"Nothing but idle compliments, ñez. *Caspito!* I'm learning fast. Pray sing."

"I—I cannot, Ruy. I am not well to-night."

At last, Don Ruy raised his voice, a voice that lashed her like a whip.

"Sing, ñez, sing. It is my wish. The Englishman must be entertained."

I heard the beads rattle upon the floor, one by one, slowly, like dripping blood. The woman was groveling on her knees, clawing at her husband's shoulders and striking that smiling, impassive face with little vicious, tight-clenched hands.

"Ruy! Ruy! You fiend! You devil! I'm innocent. I swear by the Cross."

DON RUY laughed shortly and spat at her; then, without haste or hesitation, he drew a long Carra-

cas dagger. I saw the blade gleam as he slowly unclasped it, and felt my flesh tingling with fear.

"You fool," he laughed softly. "You pair of fools. Fools to doubt my vigilance. Fools to put faith in Pablo Mendez."

Iñez gave a shriek at the sound of the name. She kept repeating it, wildly, insanely.

"Pablo? Pablo? My servant betrayed me? Pablo Mendez whom I trusted?"

"Of course he betrayed you, *caritá mia*. Gold tempted him as love tempted you. *He* sold his honor for gold, Iñez. 'Twas he who called me back from Pollensa to watch your meetings with the Englishman. 'Twas he who betrayed your Pedro to-night. Ah, Pablo Mendez shall be rewarded. He is an honest, a trusty servant."

I tried to shut my ears to her cries, her oaths, her prayers, her piteous pleading. I strove to catch some glimmer of light, some answer to this monstrous riddle. This House of the Patio was accursed, and I, it would seem, was under its spell, drawn into the midst of a web that was closing and tightening slowly round me. I buried my face in the folds of the curtain, I pressed my hands upon my ears, but still I could hear her pitiful moaning and that ceaseless cry of: "Mercy! Mercy!"

"Mercy?" sneered Ruy. "What mercy had you—you and your foul Englishman? What did you care for my honor, my pride, for a name that's been stainless since Jaime's day? Oh, you were cunning, I'll give you your due. But I could be cunning, also, Iñez. To-night, by my orders, the gates of the Patio were left unlocked. I am a considerate husband."

A strangled cry escaped me, and Don Ruy raised his eyes. I saw that, like the blade of his knife, they shone dully yellow in the lamplight.

"Your lover is near," he went on quietly, smiling and glancing to-

wards the curtains. "Pablo was watching across the street, and, when your Englishman entered my gates, he locked them; locked them and trapped him, Iñez. He is here. He is safe; but I will be kind. Your *cortejo* shall lie in your arms to-night."

I FREED my limbs from the folds of the curtain. I crooked my hands and prepared to kill. Don Ruy was silent now and motionless, peering towards me with narrowed eyes. Some movement of the curtain must have attracted his attention for, flinging Iñez on one side, he crept slowly forward, crouched almost double, his face wreathed in a ghastly grin and the long knife glimmering in his hand.

Something seemed to snap in my brain. I became a prey to blind blood-lust. I longed for a dagger to slay this man who stood between me and my woman. I bared my teeth; I crouched to spring. *But Don Ruy strode to the other curtain.* With a low, wicked oath, he tore it aside; then even as he raised his arm, there came a livid streak of steel and a long knife was buried in his throat!

For a moment, there was utter silence. Don Ruy slithered to the floor, where he lay smiling horribly in death. Iñez was swaying upon her knees, when the curtain was flung back without a sound, and a man leaped forward and caught her in his arms. He was so quick that I could not see his face, but, as he knelt with his back towards me, something in his build and carriage seemed strangely, horribly familiar. I knew at once that this was the man of whose silent presence I had been conscious in the Patio. His spirit was somehow attuned to mine. He influenced my thoughts and actions. It was not Pablo Mendez. It was no one I knew, and yet. . . .

The rest of that scene is indescribable. It was almost as though it had

been rehearsed. There was no violence, no strong emotion; just a dull apathy, a deadness. The man and the woman both acted with a sort of dreary, senseless monotony, as though they were in some grotesque play. There was a sense of repetition. . . .

Between them, they straightened Don Ruy's limbs and set a pale Crucifix in his hands. Once and once only did Iñez speak, pointing a white finger at his face.

"Oh, Pedro," she moaned. "Oh, Pedro. His eyes!"

**S**TILL with his back towards me, the strange man knelt and took two pesetas from his pocket. Roughly he closed the eyelids and weighed them down, while the woman crouched trembling by his side, with utter despair in her ashen face. I can see them now, those three grim figures: the man, the woman and poor Don Ruy with the great white coins on his eyes and his sallow throat all creeping crimson.

Pedro and Iñez knelt for a moment; then hand in hand, guiltily like thieves, they crept out softly into the Patio. The woman's white fingers were pressed to her lips and she kept glancing back with wide, glassy eyes; but the man dragged her on remorselessly, and, although I could not see his face, I knew, in my heart, that he was laughing. There could be no doubt, he was utterly callous; and perhaps it was this very savagery that broke the spell of silence which bound me.

"Murderers! Murderers!" I screamed when they were all but lost in the darkness. "Come back, you devils. You've murdered him."

Still they kept on without any haste, till they stood by the great gates of twisted iron which now stood open for their passing. I was at their heels. I was almost on them when, all at once, with a soft, evil laugh, the man stepped out from the

shadow and stood within an arm's length of me, full in the glare of golden light. He seemed almost wraith-like in that brilliance; a shadow without form or substance. I stared at him and screamed with horror, for he was as tall and as broad as I. He had red hair and eyes as dark as mine. Save for the loose mouth and heavy jaw, *the man's face was my own!*

**W**HEN I came out of my swoon it was getting light. The dawn was creeping up from the sea and the Patio was cold and gray. I staggered slowly to my feet and reeled through those grotesque, evil gates. Across the street was the high blank wall and, leaning against it, I saw an old man . . . a dirty rogue in gray alpacca who puffed a greasy black cigar and watched me through the swirling smoke.

"*Buenas dies tengen,*" he cried in the ancient dialect of the island. "It is cold at this early hour, is it not, for those who are poor and have no homes?"

"Traitor!" I cried. "Do you know what you've done? There was devil's work last night, Pablo Mendez."

The old fellow scratched his dirty chin and raised his black sombrero.

"The caballero is mistaken. My name is not Mendez," he said softly. "I am Jose Diego Ramon Concepcion Esteban Alvarez."

"But the House?" I cried wildly. "The House of the Patio? Who lives there? Tell me! Tell me, man!"

"*Si, si, señor.* That old place yonder. . . ." He shrugged and smiled. "There was a murder there, years ago. Don Ruy Gondomar was killed. An Englishman stabbed him and stole his wife."

I felt the hair rising on my scalp. "An Englishman? Do you know his name?"

He thought for a moment with half-shut eyes; then all at once, he snapped his fingers.



"I believe . . . yes, it was a sailor called Romsey; an evil liver, from all accounts. 'Twas he or another. I cannot remember. . . . Bah! what does it matter? He is dead."

"But Romsey!" I gasped. "Peter Romsey! My grandfather!"

"Your grandfather? Is that so, indeed?" In an instant, Alvarez was all

smiles. "Ah, he was a great one, El Capitan Ingles. A noble lover! Neat with the knife."

"And the house? Is it empty? Who lives there now?"

The old man crossed himself and shrugged his shoulders as he moved away.

"*Quien sabe, señor?* Who knows?"

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## Superstitions

**A** COMPILATION of all the superstitions attaching to weddings would fill a large book, but some of the more interesting are:

It is customary in some countries to fling money over the heads of a newly married pair as they leave the church, to insure their good fortune.

A speech is often made, or a song sung, at wedding feasts in Scandinavian countries—an effort ending in an unexpected crash which sets everybody laughing and is the signal for general wishes for good luck.

An old custom is that of flinging stockings on the evening of a marriage. The girls would take those of the bridegroom, the men those of the bride, and throw them over their heads; and if they fell on the bride or groom to whom they belonged the thrower was sure to marry soon. Nowadays it is flowers, the girl catching the bouquet thrown by the bride being next in turn.

A bride must not look into a mirror after she is completely dressed in her wedding apparel, but must reserve some article to be put on after she is through admiring herself.

It is often considered unlucky for the bride not to weep at her wedding.

That bridesmaid will die an old maid who stumbles on the way to the altar.

In Scotland old shoes and slippers are cast at the newly married couple to bring them luck. They are carefully collected again after the couple has left.

In the Isle of Man, if, by a stratagem, one of the bride's shoes can be stolen from her feet on the way to church, the bridegroom has to treat the whole crowd in order to ransom it.

Among the ancient Peruvians it was the custom for a suitor having the father's consent to go to the girl's house and put a pair of shoes on her feet. If she consented she kept the shoes on and allowed him to lead her to his home.

In Sweden, girls sometimes try their luck by hiding under plates or cups a coin, a ring and a piece of black ribbon. If the coin comes to light first she will get a rich husband; if the ring, she will

at least marry; but if the ribbon, she will die an old maid.

It is universally thought that the ring, especially the wedding ring, is a symbol of never-ending love and affection that should flow always in an unbroken circle.

Many other superstitions are of unusual interest. Among the Japanese five days of the year are designated as unlucky, and in order to avert their bad influence they have been made into days of great festivals. A Japanese avoids beginning a journey on an inauspicious day. All their native hotels and inns have printed tables showing what days of the month are unfavorable for travel.

In some parts of England it is still thought that it is good luck for a male to be the first one to cross the threshold of a house, and bad luck for a female. This superstition sometimes requires a man or boy to be hired for a small fee to enter the house before the occupants are up.

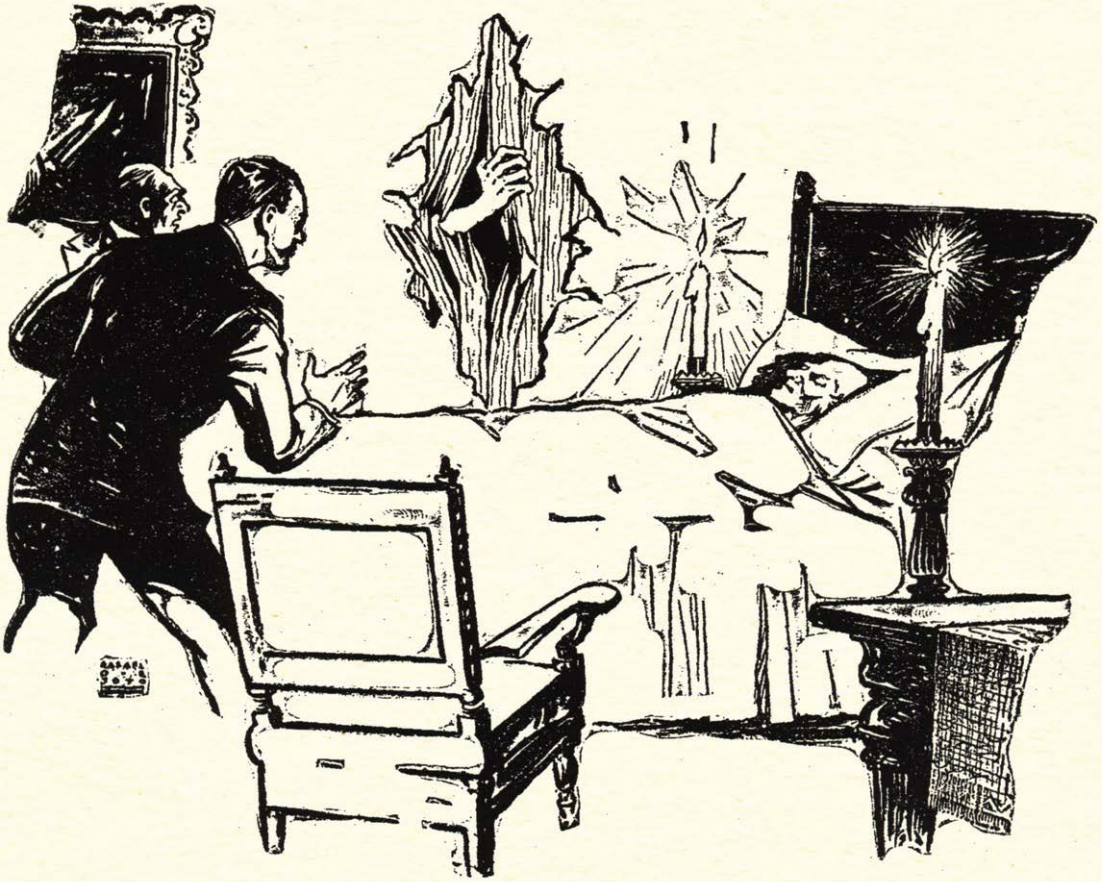
It is considered lucky to put on new clothes on New Years Day. Also to bathe.

The Druids held mistletoe in high esteem, and regarded it with religious superstition, often using it in their incantations.

Mistletoe is still used widely for decoration during Christmas, and is usually hung from a chandelier or over a doorway. A girl standing under a spray of it may be kissed by any man catching her there. If she refuses to be kissed she will have bad luck. If she is kissed seven times in one day she will marry one of her kissers within a year.

If in eating you miss your mouth and the food falls, it is unlucky and indicates approaching illness.

One of the commonest of customs is that of touching or knocking on wood in order to prevent disappointment or to ward off evil. Its origin is much in doubt. It has been attributed to the ancient religious rite of touching a crucifix when taking an oath, also the touching of the beads of a rosary while in prayer, while among the ignorant peasants of Europe it may have had its beginning in the habit of knocking loudly to frighten off evil spirits.



*A large portion of the wall collapsed.*

# The Nameless Offspring

By Clark Ashton Smith

**M**ANY and multiform are the dim horrors of Earth, infesting her ways from the prime. They sleep beneath the unturned stone; they rise with the tree from its root; they move beneath the sea and in subterranean places; they dwell in the inmost adyta; they emerge betimes from the shutten

sepulchre of haughty bronze and the low grave that is sealed with clay. There be some that are long known to man, and others as yet unknown that abide the terrible latter days of their revealing. Those

"It is that spawn which the hidden dweller in the vaults has begotten upon mortality."

which are the most dreadful and the loathliest of all are haply still to be declared. But among those

*that have revealed themselves aforesaid and have made manifest their veritable presence, there is one which may not openly be named for its exceeding foulness. It is that spawn which the hidden dweller in the vaults has begotten upon mortality.*

From the "Necronomicon" of  
Abdul Alhazred

**I**N a sense, it is fortunate that the story I must now relate should be so largely a thing of undetermined shadows, of half-shaped hints and forbidden inferences. Otherwise, it could never be written by human hand or read by human eye. My own slight part in the hideous drama was limited to its last act; and to me its earlier scenes were merely a remote and ghastly legend. Yet, even so, the broken reflex of its unnatural horrors has crowded out in perspective the main events of normal life; has made them seem no more than frail gossamers, woven on the dark, windy verge of some unsealed abyss, some deep, half-open channel, wherein Earth's nethermost corruptions lurk and fester.

The legend of which I speak was familiar to me from childhood, as a theme of family whispers and head shakings, for Sir John Tremoth had been a schoolmate of my father. But I had never met Sir John, had never visited Tremoth Hall, till the time of those happenings which formed the final tragedy. My father had taken me from England to Canada when I was a small infant; he had prospered in Manitoba as an apiarist; and after his death the bee ranch had kept me too busy for years to execute a long-cherished dream of visiting my natal land and exploring its rural by-ways.

When, finally, I set sail, the story was pretty dim in my memory; and Tremoth Hall was no con-

scious part of my itinerary when I began a motorcycle tour of the English counties. In any case, I should never have been drawn to the neighborhood out of morbid curiosity, such as the frightful tale might possibly have evoked in others. My visit, as it happened, was purely accidental. I had forgotten the exact location of the place, and did not even dream that I was in its vicinity. If I had known, it seems to me that I should have turned aside, in spite of the circumstances that impelled me to seek shelter, rather than intrude upon the almost demoniacal misery of its owner.

**W**HEN I came to Tremoth Hall, I had ridden all day, in early autumn, through a rolling countryside with leisurely, winding thoroughfares and lanes. The day had been fair, with skies of pale azure above noble parks that were tinged with the first amber and crimson of the following year. But toward the middle of the afternoon, a mist had come in from the hidden ocean across low hills and had closed me about with its moving phantom circle. Somehow, in that deceptive fog, I managed to lose my way, to miss the milepost that would have given me my direction to the town where I had planned to spend the ensuing night.

I went on for a while, at random, thinking that I should soon reach another crossroad. The way that I followed was little more than a rough lane and was singularly deserted. The fog had darkened and drawn closer, obliterating all horizons; but from what I could see of it, the country was one of heath and boulders, with no sign of cultivation. I topped a level ridge and went down a long, monotonous slope as the mist continued to thicken with twilight. I thought that I was riding toward the west;

but before me, in the wan dusk, there was no faintest gleaming or flare of color to betoken the drowned sunset. A dank odor that was touched with salt, like the smell of sea marshes, came to meet me.

The road turned at a sharp angle, and I seemed to be riding between downs and marshland. The night gathered with an almost unnatural quickness, as if in haste to overtake me; and I began to feel a sort of dim concern and alarm, as if I had gone astray in regions that were more dubious than an English county. The fog and twilight seemed to withhold a silent landscape of chill, deathly, disquieting mystery.

**T**HEN, to the left of my road and a little before me, I saw a light that somehow suggested a mournful and tear-dimmed eye. It shone among blurred, uncertain masses that were like trees from a ghostland wood. A nearer mass, as I approached it, was resolved into a small lodge-building, such as would guard the entrance of some estate. It was dark and apparently unoccupied. Pausing and peering, I saw the outlines of a wrought-iron gate in a hedge of untrimmed yew.

It all had a desolate and forbidding air; and I felt in my very marrow the brooding chillness that had come in from the unseen marsh in that dismal, ever-coiling fog. But the light was promise of human nearness on the lonely downs; and I might obtain shelter for the night, or at least find someone who could direct me to a town or inn.

Somewhat to my surprise, the gate was unlocked. It swung inward with a rusty grating sound, as if it had not been opened for a long time; and pushing my motorcycle before me, I followed a weed-grown drive toward the light.

The rambling mass of a large manor-house disclosed itself, among trees and shrubs whose artificial forms, like the hedge of ragged yew, were assuming a wilder grotesquery than they had received from the hand of the topiary.

The fog had turned into a bleak drizzle. Almost groping in the gloom, I found a dark door, at some distance from the window that gave forth the solitary light. In response to my thrice-repeated knock, I heard at length the muffled sound of slow, dragging footfalls. The door was opened with a gradualness that seemed to indicate caution or reluctance, and I saw before me an old man, bearing a lighted taper in his hand. His fingers trembled with palsy or decrepitude, and monstrous shadows flickered behind him in a dim hallway, and touched his wrinkled features as with the flitting of ominous, batlike wings.

**“W**HAT do you wish, sir?” he asked. The voice, though quavering and hesitant, was far from churlish and did not suggest the attitude of suspicion and downright inhospitality which I had begun to apprehend. However, I sensed a sort of irresolution or dubiety; and as the old man listened to my account of the circumstances that had led me to knock at that lonely door, I saw that he was scrutinizing me with a keenness that belied my first impression of extreme senility.

“I knew you were a stranger in these parts,” he commented, when I had finished. “But might I inquire your name, sir?”

“I am Henry Chaldane.”

“Are you not the son of Mr. Arthur Chaldane?”

Somewhat mystified, I admitted the ascribed paternity.

“You resemble your father, sir. Mr. Chaldane and Sir John Tre-

moth were great friends, in the days before your father went to Canada. Will you not come in, sir? This is Tremoth Hall. Sir John has not been in the habit of receiving guests for a long time; but I shall tell him that you are here; and it may be that he will wish to see you."

Startled, and not altogether agreeably surprised at the discovery of my whereabouts, I followed the old man to a book-lined study whose furnishings bore evidence of luxury and neglect. Here he lit an oil lamp of antique fashion, with a dusty, painted shade, and left me alone with the dustier volumes and furniture.

**I** FELT a queer embarrassment, a sense of actual intrusion, as I waited in the wan yellow lamplight. There came back to me the details of the strange, horrific, half-forgotten story I had overheard from my father in childhood years.

Lady Agatha Tremoth, Sir John's wife, in the first year of their marriage, had become the victim of cataleptic seizures. The third seizure had apparently terminated in death, for she did not revive after the usual interval, and displayed all the familiar marks of the rigor mortis. Lady Agatha's body was placed in the family vaults, which were of almost fabulous age and extent, and had been excavated in the hill behind the manor-house. On the day following the interment, Sir John, troubled by a queer, insistent doubt as to the finality of the medical verdict, had reentered the vaults in time to hear a wild cry, and had found Lady Agatha sitting up in her coffin. The nailed lid was lying on the stone floor, and it seemed impossible that it could have been removed by the struggles of the frail woman. However, there was no other plausible explanation, though Lady Agatha

herself could throw little light on the circumstances of her strange resurrection.

Half dazed, and almost delirious, in a state of dire terror that was easily understandable, she told an incoherent tale of her experience. She did not seem to remember struggling to free herself from the coffin, but was troubled mainly by recollections of a pale, hideous, un-human face which she had seen in the gloom on awakening from her prolonged and deathlike sleep. It was the sight of this face, stooping over her as she lay in the *open* coffin, that had caused her to cry out so wildly. The thing had vanished before Sir John's approach, fleeing swiftly to the inner vaults; and she had formed only a vague idea of its bodily appearance. She thought, however, that it was large and white, and ran like an animal on all fours, though its limbs were semihuman.

**O**F course, her tale was regarded as a sort of dream, or a figment of delirium induced by the awful shock of her experience, which had blotted out all recollection of its true terror. But the memory of the horrible face and figure had seemed to obsess her permanently, and was plainly fraught with associations of mind-unhinging fear. She did not recover from her illness, but lived on in a shattered condition of brain and body; and nine months later she died, after giving birth to her first child.

Her death was a merciful thing; for the child, it seemed, was one of those appalling monsters that sometimes appear in human families. The exact nature of its abnormality was not known, though frightful and divergent rumors had purported to emanate from the doctor, nurses and servants who had seen it. Some of the latter had left Tremoth Hall and had refused to return, after a

single glimpse of the monstrosity.

After Lady Agatha's death, Sir John had withdrawn from society; and little or nothing was divulged in regard to his doings or the fate of the horrible infant. People said, however, that the child was kept in a locked room with iron-barred windows, which no one but Sir John himself ever entered. The tragedy had blighted his whole life, and he had become a recluse, living alone with one or two faithful servants, and allowing his estate to decline grievously through neglect.

Doubtless, I thought, the old man who had admitted me was one of the remaining servitors. I was still reviewing the dreadful legend, still striving to recollect certain particulars that had almost passed from memory, when I heard the sound of footsteps which, from their slowness and feebleness, I took to be those of the returning manservant.

**H**OWEVER, I was mistaken; for the person who entered was plainly Sir John Tremoth himself. The tall, slightly bent figure, the face that was lined as if by the trickling of some corrosive acid, were marked with a dignity that seemed to triumph over the double ravages of mortal sorrow and illness. Somehow—though I could have calculated his real age—I had expected an old man; but he was scarcely beyond middle life. His cadaverous pallor and feeble tottering walk were those of a man who is stricken with some fatal malady.

His manner, as he addressed me, was impeccably courteous and even gracious. But the voice was that of one to whom the ordinary relations and actions of life had long since become meaningless and perfunctory.

"Harper tells me that you are the son of my old school friend, Arthur Chaldane," he said. "I bid you wel-

come to such poor hospitality as I am able to offer. I have not received guests for many years, and I fear you will find the Hall pretty dull and dismal and will think me an indifferent host. Nevertheless, you must remain, at least for the night. Harper has gone to prepare dinner for us."

"You are very kind," I replied. "I fear, however, that I am intruding. If—"

"Not at all," he countered firmly. "You must be my guest. It is miles to the nearest inn, and the fog is changing into a heavy rain. Indeed, I am glad to have you. You must tell me all about your father and yourself at dinner. In the meanwhile, I'll try to find a room for you, if you'll come with me."

**H**E led me to the second floor of the manor-house and down a long hall with beams and panels of ancient oak. We passed several doors which were doubtless those of bed-chambers. All were closed, and one of the doors was reinforced with iron bars, heavy and sinister as those of a dungeon cell. Inevitably I surmised that this was the chamber in which the monstrous child had been confined, and also I wondered if the abnormality still lived, after a lapse of time that must have been nearly thirty years. How abysmal, how abhorrent, must have been its departure from the human type, to necessitate an immediate removal from the sight of others! And what characteristics of its further development could have rendered necessary the massive bars on an oaken door which, by itself, was strong enough to have resisted the assaults of any common man or beast?

Without even glancing at the door, my host went on, carrying a taper that scarcely shook in his feeble fingers. My curious reflections, as I followed him, were in-

errupted with nerve-shattering suddenness by a loud cry that seemed to issue from the barred room. The sound was a long, ever-mounting ululation, infra-bass at first like the tomb-muffled voice of a demon, and rising through abominable degrees to a shrill, ravenous fury, as if the demon had emerged by a series of underground steps to the open air. It was neither human nor bestial, it was wholly preternatural, hellish, macabre; and I shuddered with an insupportable eeriness, that still persisted when the demon voice, after reaching its culmination, had returned by reverse degrees to a profound sepulchral silence.

**S**IR JOHN had given no apparent heed to the awful sound, but had gone on with no more than his usual faltering. He had reached the end of the hall, and was pausing before the second chamber from the one with the sealed door.

"I'll let you have this room," he said. "It's just beyond the one that I occupy." He did not turn his face toward me as he spoke; and his voice was unnaturally toneless and restrained. I realized with another shudder that the chamber he had indicated as his own was adjacent to the room from which the frightful ululation had appeared to issue.

The chamber to which he now admitted me had manifestly not been used for years. The air was chill, stagnant, unwholesome, with an all-pervading mustiness; and the antique furniture had gathered the inevitable increment of dust and cobwebs. Sir John began to apologize.

"I didn't realize the condition of the room," he said. "I'll send Harper after dinner, to do a little dusting and clearing, and put fresh linen on the bed."

I protested, rather vaguely, that there was no need for him to

apologize. The unhuman loneliness and decay of the old manor-house, its lustrums and decades of neglect, and the corresponding desolation of its owner, had impressed me more painfully than ever. And I dared not speculate overmuch concerning the ghastly secret of the barred chamber, and the hellish howling that still echoed in my shaken nerves. Already I regretted the singular fortuity that had drawn me to that place of evil and festering shadows. I felt an urgent desire to leave, to continue my journey even in the face of the bleak autumnal rain and wind-blown darkness. But I could think of no excuse that would be sufficiently tangible and valid. Manifestly, there was nothing to do but remain.

**O**UR dinner was served in a dismal but stately room, by the old man whom Sir John had referred to as Harper. The meal was plain but substantial and well-cooked; and the service was impeccable. I had begun to infer that Harper was the only servant—a combination of valet, butler, house-keeper and chef.

In spite of my hunger, and the pains taken by my host to make me feel at ease, the meal was a solemn and almost funereal ceremony. I could not forget my father's story; and still less could I forget the sealed door and the baleful ululation. Whatever it was, the monstrosity still lived; and I felt a complex mingling of admiration, pity and horror as I looked at the gaunt and gallant face of Sir John Tremoth, and reflected upon the lifelong hell to which he had been condemned, and the apparent fortitude with which he had borne its unthinkable ordeals.

A bottle of excellent sherry was brought in. Over this, we sat for an hour or more. Sir John spoke at some length concerning my father,

of whose death he had not previously heard; and he drew me out in regard to my own affairs with the subtle adroitness of a polished man of the world. He said little about himself, and not even by hint or implication did he refer to the tragic history which I have outlined.

Since I am rather abstemious, and did not empty my glass with much frequency, the major part of the heavy wine was consumed by my host. Toward the end, it seemed to bring out in him a curious vein of confidentiality; and he spoke for the first time of the ill health that was all too patent in his appearance. I learned that he was subject to that most painful form of heart disease, angina pectoris, and had recently recovered from an attack of unusual severity.

"The next one will finish me," he said. "And it may come at any time—perhaps to-night." He made the announcement very simply, as if he were voicing a commonplace or venturing a prediction about the weather. Then, after a slight pause, he went on, with more emphasis and weightiness of tone:

"Maybe you'll think me queer, but I have a fixed prejudice against burial or vault interment. I want my remains to be thoroughly cremated, and have left careful directions to that end. Harper will see to it that they are fulfilled. Fire is the cleanest and purest of the elements, and it cuts short all the damnable processes between death and ultimate disintegration. I can't bear the idea of some moldy, worm-infested tomb."

HE continued to discourse on the subject for some time, with a singular elaboration and tenseness of manner that showed it to be a familiar theme of thought, if not an actual obsession. It seemed to possess a morbid fascination for

him; and there was a painful light in his hollow, haunted eyes, and a touch of rigidly subdued hysteria in his voice, as he spoke. I remembered the interment of Lady Agatha, and her tragic resurrection, and the dim, delirious horror of the vaults that had formed an inexplicable and vaguely disturbing part of her story. It was not hard to understand Sir John's aversion to burial; but I was far from suspecting the full terror and ghastliness on which his repugnance had been founded.

Harper had disappeared after bringing the sherry; and I surmised that he had been given orders for the renovation of my room. We had now drained our last glasses; and my host had ended his peroration. The wine, which had animated him briefly, seemed to die out, and he looked more ill and haggard than ever. Pleading my own fatigue, I expressed a wish to retire; and he, with his invariable courtliness, insisted on seeing me to my chamber and making sure of my comfort, before seeking his own bed.

In the hall above, we met Harper, who was just descending from a flight of stairs that must have led to an attic or third floor. He was carrying a heavy iron pan, in which a few scraps of meat remained; and I caught an odor of pronounced gaminess, almost of virtual putrescence, from the pan as he went by. I wondered if he had been feeding the unknown monstrosity, and if perhaps its food were supplied to it through a trap in the ceiling of the barred room. The surmise was reasonable enough, but the odor of the scraps, by a train of remote, half-literary association, had begun to suggest other surmises which, it would seem, were beyond the realm of possibility and reason. Certain evasive, incoherent hints appeared to join themselves



suddenly to an atrocious and abhorrent whole. With imperfect success, I assured myself that the thing I had fancied was incredible to science; was a mere creation of superstitious diablerie. No, it could not be . . . here in England, of all places . . . that corpse-devouring demon of Arabesque tales and legends, known as the *ghoul*.

Contrary to my fears, there was no repetition of the fiendish howling as we passed the secret room. But I thought that I heard a measured crunching, such as a large animal would make in devouring its food.

**M**Y room, though still drear and dismal enough, had been cleared of its accumulated dust and matted gossamers. After a personal inspection, Sir John left me and retired to his own chamber. I was struck by his deathly pallor and weakness, as he said good night to me, and felt guiltily apprehensive that the strain of receiving and entertaining a guest might have aggravated the dire disease from which he suffered. I seemed to detect actual pain and torment beneath his careful armor of urbanity, and wondered if the urbanity had not been maintained at an excessive cost.

The fatigue of my day-long journey, together with the heavy wine I had drunk, should have conduced to early slumber. But though I lay with tightly closed lids in the darkness, I could not dismiss those evil shadows, those black and charnel larvæ, that swarmed upon me from the ancient house. Insufferable and forbidden things besieged me with filthy talons, brushed me with noisome coils, as I tossed through eternal hours and lay staring at the gray square of the storm-darkened window. The dripping of the rain, the sough and moan of the wind, resolved themselves to a dread

mutter of half-articulate voices that plotted against my peace and whispered loathfully of nameless secrets in demonian language.

At length, after the seeming lapse of nocturnal centuries, the tempest died away, and I no longer heard the equivocal voices. The window lightened a little in the black wall; and the terrors of my night-long insomnia seemed to withdraw partially, but without bringing the surcease of slumber. I became aware of utter silence; and then, in the silence, of a queer, faint, disquieting sound whose cause and location baffled me for many minutes.

**T**HE sound was muffled and far off at times; then it seemed to draw near, as if it were in the next room. I began to identify it as a sort of scratching, such as would be made by the claws of an animal on solid woodwork. Sitting up in bed, and listening attentively, I realized with a fresh start of horror that it came from the direction of the barred chamber. It took on a strange resonance; then it became almost inaudible; and suddenly, for awhile, it ceased. In the interim, I heard a single groan, like that of a man in great agony or terror. I could not mistake the source of the groan, which had issued from Sir John Tremoth's room; nor was I doubtful any longer as to the causation of the scratching.

The groan was not repeated; but the damnable clawing sound began again and was continued till day-break. Then, as if the creature that had caused the noise were wholly nocturnal in its habits, the faint, vibrant rasping ceased and was not resumed. In a state of dull, nightmarish apprehension, drugged with weariness and want of sleep, I had listened to it with intolerably straining ears. With its cessation, in the hueless, livid dawn, I slid into a deep slumber, from which

the muffled and amorphous specters of the old Hall were unable to detain me any longer.

**I** WAS awakened by a loud knocking on my door—a knocking in which even my sleep-confused senses could recognize the imperative and urgent. It must have been close upon midday; and feeling guilty at having overslept so egregiously, I ran to the door and opened it. The old manservant, Harper, was standing without, and his tremulous, grief-broken manner told me before he spoke that something of dire import had occurred.

“I regret to tell you, Mr. Chaldane,” he quavered, “that Sir John is dead. He did not answer my knock as usual; so I made bold to enter his room. He must have died early this morning.”

Inexpressibly shocked by his announcement, I recalled the single groan I had heard in the gray beginning of dawn. My host, perhaps, had been dying at that very moment. I recalled, too, the detestable nightmare scratching. Unavoidably, I wondered if the groan had been occasioned by fear as well as by physical pain. Had the strain and suspense of listening to that hideous sound brought on the final paroxysm of Sir John’s malady? I could not be sure of the truth; but my brain seethed with awful and ghastly conjectures.

With the futile formalities that one employs on such occasions, I tried to condole with the aged servant, and offered him such assistance as I could in making the necessary arrangements for the disposition of his master’s remains. Since there was no telephone in the house, I volunteered to find a doctor who would examine the body and sign the death certificate. The old man seemed to feel a singular relief and gratitude.

“Thank you, sir,” he said fervent-

ly. Then, as if in explanation: “I don’t want to leave Sir John—I promised him that I’d keep a close watch over his body.” He went on to speak of Sir John’s desire for cremation. It seemed that the baronet had left explicit directions for the building of a pyre of driftwood on the hill behind the Hall, the burning of his remains on this pyre, and the sowing of his ashes on the fields of the estate. These directions he had enjoined and empowered the servant to carry out as soon after death as possible. No one was to be present at the ceremony, except Harper and the hired pall bearers; and Sir John’s nearer relatives—none of whom lived in the vicinity—were not to be informed of his demise till all was over.

I refused Harper’s offer to prepare my breakfast, telling him that I could obtain a meal in the neighboring village. There was a strange uneasiness in his manner; and I realized, with thoughts and emotions not to be specified in this narrative, that he was anxious to begin his promised vigil beside Sir John’s corpse.

**I**T would be tedious and unnecessary to detail the funeral afternoon that followed. The heavy sea fog had returned; and I seemed to grope my way through a sodden but unreal world as I sought the near-by town. I succeeded in locating a doctor and also in securing several men to build the pyre and act as pall bearers. I was met everywhere with an odd taciturnity, and no one seemed willing to comment on Sir John’s death or to speak of the dark legendry that was attached to Tremoth Hall.

Harper, to my amazement, had proposed that the cremation should take place at once. This, however, proved to be impracticable. When all the formalities and arrangements

had been completed, the fog turned into a steady, everlasting downpour which rendered impossible the lighting of the pyre; and we were compelled to defer the ceremony. I had promised Harper that I should remain at the Hall till all was done; and so it was that I spent a second night beneath that roof of accursed and abominable secrets.

The darkness came on betimes. After a last visit to the village, in which I procured some sandwiches for Harper and myself in lieu of dinner, I returned to the lonely Hall. I was met by Harper on the stairs, as I ascended to the death-chamber. There was an increased agitation in his manner, as if something had happened to frighten him.

"I wonder if you'd keep me company to-night, Mr. Haldane," he said. "It's a gruesome watch that I'm asking you to share, and it may be a dangerous one. But Sir John would thank you, I am sure. If you have a weapon of any sort, it will be well to bring it with you."

It was impossible to refuse his request, and I assented at once. I was unarmed; so Harper insisted on equipping me with an antique revolver, of which he himself carried the mate.

"Look here, Harper," I said bluntly, as we followed the hall to Sir John's chamber, "what are you afraid of?"

**H**E flinched visibly at the question and seemed unwilling to answer. Then, after a moment, he appeared to realize that frankness was necessary.

"It's the thing in the barred room," he explained. "You must have heard it, sir. We've had the care of it, Sir John and I, these eight and twenty years; and we've always feared that it might break out. It never gave us much trouble—as long as we kept it well-fed. But for the last three nights, it has

been scratching at the thick oaken wall of Sir John's chamber, which is something it never did before. Sir John thought it knew that he was going to die, and that it wanted to reach his body—being hungry for other food than we had given it. That's why we must guard him closely to-night, Mr. Chaldane. I pray to God that the wall will hold; but the thing keeps on clawing and clawing, like a demon; and I don't like the hollowness of the sound—as if the wall were getting pretty thin."

Appalled by this confirmation of my own most repugnant surmise, I could offer no rejoinder, since all comment would have been futile. With Harper's open avowal, the abnormality took on a darker and more encroaching shadow, a more potent and tyrannic menace. Willingly would I have foregone the promised vigil—but this, of course, it was impossible to do.

The bestial, diabolic scratching, louder and more frantic than before, assailed my ears as we passed the barred room. All too readily, I understood the nameless fear that had impelled the old man to request my company. The sound was inexpressibly alarming and nerve-sapping, with its grim, macabre insistence, its intimation of ghoulish hunger. It became even plainer, with a hideous, tearing vibrancy, when we entered the room of death.

**D**URING the whole course of that funeral day, I had refrained from visiting this chamber, since I am lacking in the morbid curiosity which impels many to gaze upon the dead. So it was that I beheld my host for the second and last time. Fully dressed and prepared for the pyre, he lay on the chill white bed whose heavily figured, arraslike curtains had been drawn back. The room was lit by several tall tapers, arranged on a

little table in curious brazen candelabrae that were greened with antiquity; but the light seemed to afford only a doubtful, dolorous glimmering in the drear spaciousness and mortuary shadows.

Somewhat against my will, I gazed on the dead features, and averted my eyes very hastily. I was prepared for the stony pallor and rigor, but not for the full betrayal of that hideous revulsion, that inhuman terror and horror, which must have corroded the man's heart through infernal years; and which, with almost superhuman control, he had masked from the casual beholder in life. The revelation was too painful, and I could not look at him again. In a sense, it seemed that he was not dead; that he was still listening with agonized attention to the dreadful sounds that might well have served to precipitate the final attack of his malady.

There were several chairs, dating, I think, like the bed itself, from the seventeenth century. Harper and I seated ourselves near the small table and between the death-bed and the paneled wall of blackish wood from which the ceaseless clawing sound appeared to issue. In tacit silence, with drawn and cocked revolvers, we began our ghastly vigil.

**A**S we sat and waited, I was driven to picture the unnamed monstrosity; and formless or half-formed images of charnel nightmare pursued each other in chaotic succession through my mind. An atrocious curiosity, to which I should normally have been a stranger, prompted me to question Harper; but I was restrained by an even more powerful inhibition. On his part, the old man volunteered no information or comment whatever, but watched the wall with fear-bright eyes that did not seem to waver in his palsy-nodding head.

It would be impossible to convey the unnatural tension, the macabre suspense and baleful expectation of the hours that followed. The woodwork must have been of great thickness and hardness, such as would have defied the assaults of any normal creature equipped only with talons or teeth; but in spite of such obvious arguments as these, I thought momentarily to see it crumble inward. The scratching noise went on eternally; and to my febrile fancy, it grew sharper and nearer every instant. At recurrent intervals, I seemed to hear a low, eager, doglike whining, such as a ravenous animal would make when it neared the goal of its burrowing.

Neither of us had spoken of what we should do, in case the monster should attain its objective; but there seemed to be an unvoiced agreement. However, with a superstitiousness of which I should not have believed myself capable, I began to wonder if the monster possessed enough of humanity in its composition to be vulnerable to mere revolver bullets. To what extent would it display the traits of its unknown and fabulous paternity? I tried to convince myself that such questions and wonderings were patently absurd; but was drawn to them again and again, as if by the allurements of some forbidden gulf.

**T**HE night wore on, like the flowing of a dark, sluggish stream; and the tall, funeral tapers had burned to within an inch of their verdigris-eaten sockets. It was this circumstance alone that gave me an idea of the passage of time; for I seemed to be drowning in a black eternity, motionless beneath the crawling and seething of blind horrors. I had grown so accustomed to the clawing noise in the woodwork, and the sound had gone on so long, that I deemed its ever-

growing sharpness and hollowness a mere hallucination; and so it was that the end of our vigil came without apparent warning.

Suddenly, as I stared at the wall and listened with frozen fixity, I heard a harsh, splintering sound, and saw that a narrow strip had broken loose and was hanging from the panel. Then, before I could collect myself or credit the awful witness of my senses, a large semi-circular portion of the wall collapsed in many splinters beneath the impact of some ponderous body.

Mercifully, perhaps, I have never been able to recall with any degree of distinctness the hellish thing that issued from the panel. The visual shock, by its own excess of horror, has almost blotted the details from memory. I have, however, the blurred impression of a huge, whitish, hairless and semi-quadruped body, of canine teeth in a half-human face, and long hyena nails at the end of forelimbs that were both arms and legs. A charnel stench preceded the apparition, like a breath from the den of some carrion-eating animal; and then, with a single nightmare leap, the thing was upon us.

I heard the staccato crack of Harper's revolver, sharp and vengeful in the closed room; but there was only a rusty click from my own weapon. Perhaps the cartridge was too old; any rate, it had misfired. Before I could press the trigger again, I was hurled to the floor with terrific violence, striking my head against the heavy base of the little table. A black curtain, spangled with countless fires, appeared to fall upon me and to blot the room from sight. Then all the fires went out, and there was only darkness.

**A** GAIN, slowly, I became conscious of flame and shadow; but the flame was bright and flick-

ering, and seemed to grow ever more brilliant. Then my dull, doubtful senses were sharply revived and clarified by the acrid odor of burning cloth. The features of the room returned to vision, and I found that I was lying huddled against the overthrown table, gazing toward the death-bed. The guttering candles had been hurled to the floor. One of them was eating a slow circle of fire in the carpet beside me; and another, spreading, had ignited the bed-curtains, which were flaring swiftly upward to the great canopy. Even as I lay staring, huge, ruddy tatters of the burning fabric fell upon the bed in a dozen places, and the body of Sir John Tremoth was ringed about with starting flames.

I staggered heavily to my feet, dazed and giddy with the fall that had hurled me into oblivion. The room was empty, except for the old manservant, who lay near the door, moaning indistinctly. The door itself stood open, as if someone—or something—had gone out during my period of unconsciousness.

I turned again to the bed, with some instinctive, half-formed intention of trying to extinguish the blaze. The flames were spreading rapidly, were leaping higher, but they were not swift enough to veil from my sickened eyes the hands and features—if one could any longer call them such—of that which had been Sir John Tremoth. Of the last horror that had overtaken him, I must forbear explicit mention; and I would that I could likewise avoid the remembrance. All too tardily had the monster been frightened away by the fire. . . .

**T**HERE is little more to tell. Looking back once more, as I reeled from the smoke-laden room with Harper in my arms, I saw that the bed and its canopy had become a mass of mounting flames. The

unhappy baronet had found in his own death-chamber the funeral pyre for which he had longed.

It was nearly dawn when we emerged from the doomed manor-house. The rain had ceased, leaving a heaven lined with high and dead-gray clouds. The chill air appeared to revive the aged manservant, and he stood feebly beside me, uttering not a word, as we watched an ever-climbing spire of flame that broke from the somber roof of Tremoth Hall and began to cast a sullen glare on the unkempt hedges.

In the combined light of the fireless dawn and the lurid conflagration, we both saw at our feet the semihuman, monstrous footprints, with their mark of long and ghoulish nails, that had been trodden freshly and deeply in the rain-wet soil. They came from the direction of the manor-house, and ran toward the heath-clad hill that rose behind it.

Still without speaking, we followed the steps. Almost without interruption, they led to the entrance of the ancient family vaults, to the heavy iron door in the hillside that had been closed for a full generation by Sir John Tremoth's order. The door itself swung open, and we saw that its rusty chain and lock had been shattered by a strength that was more than the strength of man or beast. Then, peering within, we saw the clay-touched outline of the unreturning footprints that went downward into mausolean darkness on the stairs.

**W**E were both weaponless, having left our revolvers behind us in the death-chamber; but we did not hesitate long. Harper possessed a liberal supply of matches; and looking about, I found a heavy billet of water-soaked wood, which might serve in lieu of a cudgel. In grim silence, with tacit determination, and forgetful of any danger, we conducted a thorough search of the well-nigh interminable vaults, striking match after match as we went on in the musty shadows.

The traces of ghoulish footsteps grew fainter as we followed them into those black recesses; and we found nothing anywhere but noisome dampness and undisturbed cobwebs and the countless coffins of the dead. The thing that we sought had vanished utterly, as if swallowed up by the subterranean walls.

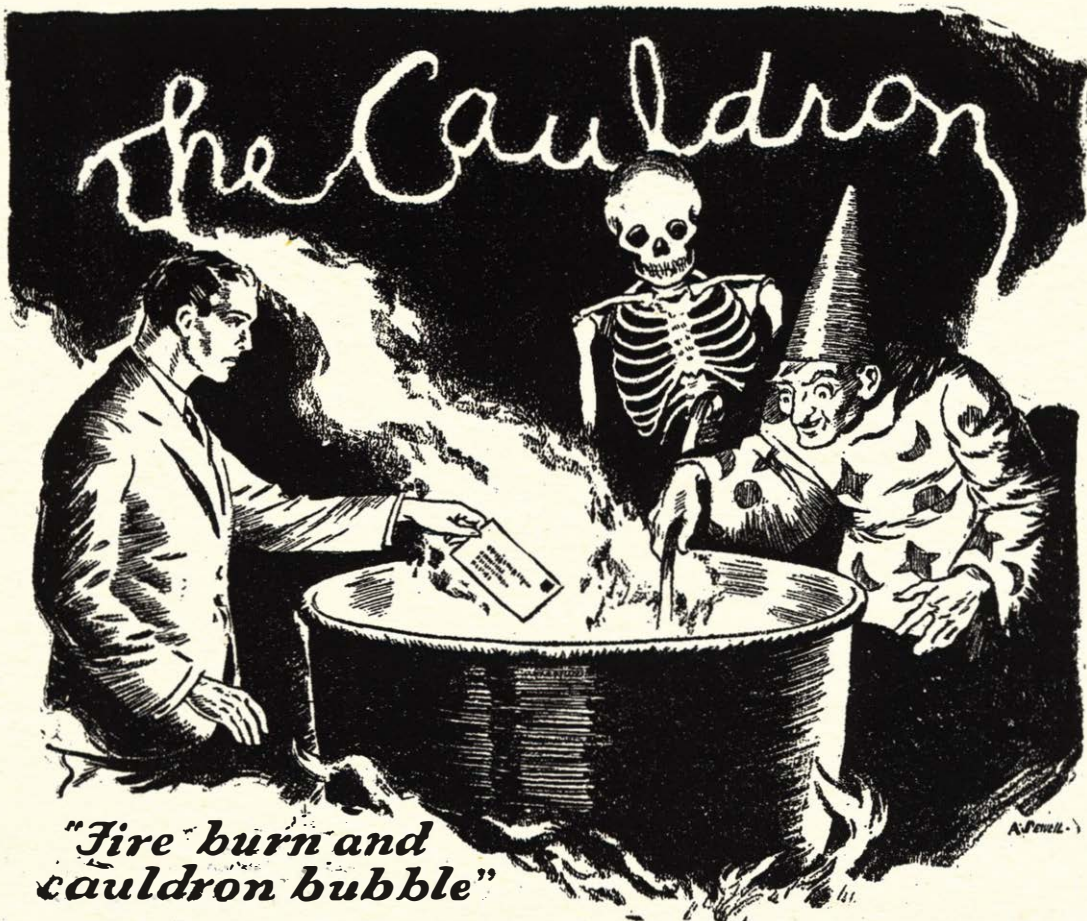
At last we returned to the entrance. There, as we stood blinking in the full daylight, with gray and haggard faces, Harper spoke for the first time, saying in his slow, tremulous voice:

"Many years ago—soon after Lady Agatha's death—Sir John and I searched the vaults from end to end; but we could find no trace of the thing we suspected. Now, as then, it is useless to seek. There are mysteries which, God helping, will never be fathomed. We know only that the offspring of the vaults has gone back to the vaults. There may it remain."

Silently, in my shaken heart, I echoed his last words and his wish.

## STRANGE TALES

*Is Issued Every Other Month*



## A MEETING PLACE FOR SORCERERS AND APPRENTICES

*"And Cauldron Bubble. . ."*

Our thanks goes to all you thousands of readers who so loyally have supported *Strange Tales* through its initial issues, and our special gratitude to those who without hope of seeing their letters in print have written us kind words of encouragement, criticism and advice.

In a very real sense you letter-writers are our "associate editors," for without your expressed opinions we could never be sure we were procuring for you just the kind of stories you most want.

We watch your likes very carefully. Our new meeting place, "The Cauldron," appears here to-day only because so many of you have asked for it.

We are sure you will like "The Cauldron." It is patterned on one of the most successful departments of which we know—"The Readers' Corner," in *Strange Tales'* companion magazine, *Astounding Stories*—a feature a good many of you

already enjoy for its lively arguments and discussions and enjoyable give and take.

"The Cauldron" will be a place especially for readers, for we have found that it is readers who make the best departments. Only from you can come the clash of ideas, of personalities, of preferences and of sarcasms that make such a meeting place entertainment for all. We want any thing you've got that's related to *Strange Tales* or the *Weird Fiction* theme—your yens and poisons, your love-pats and maledictions, your "Why-do-you's?" and "Why-don't-you's?" your heart and—aye—your bitternesses.

Anything! We've had "The Cauldron" made especially stout (see picture): dynamite and prussic acid aren't so powerful after all: so toss in your most potent magic, you sorcerers and apprentices! You can't get more out of a "Cauldron" than you put into it!

*Brains burn and "Cauldron" bubble!*

—The Editor.

*You Forgot the Garlic*

Dear Editor:

I'm warning you!

You're going to have to be a super-exorcist with horse-shoes in both pockets! You'll have to bar your office doors with iron, mark them with witch-marks, and arm your office force with silver-bulleted guns! There's going to be a reign of eldritch terror, because—

The malignant superimposed entities of scores of thousands of readers will swarm down in a ghost arm upon your editorial office, writhing about the barred windows, howling in mad cacophony, squeezing in at keyholes. In your paltry terrestrial ignorance you have weakened a barrier between the material world and the Borderland. The ghosts of a host of readers are howling at your door.

*Why didn't you make Strange Tales a monthly magazine?*

That, candidly speaking, Mr. Editor, is what I call a gyp. Your first issue was excellent. I was certainly attracted to that sinister-looking cover with the bat-shaped logotype. Your list of authors is unbelievably wonderful, and for cat's sake (hm-m—note the masterly expletives) keep this magazine different from others and don't use the same authors as you find in magazines of a similar type.

Oh, yes, and of course don't forget a readers' corner. You should have a strange [strange?—Ed.] meeting place in some roped-off-section of the book, where the readers of Strange Tales can get together and discuss their likes and dislikes under the Druids' tree.

By the way, "The Dead Who Walk," by Ray Cummings, was a wow. It took high honors in your first issue by a mile. Your authors are going to have to step some to produce something superior to it.

But where's the serial? Say, we've just got have a serial. That's the only thing that binds magazines together in their consecutive issues.—J. Harvey Haggard, 940—5th St., San Bernardino, Cal.

*Intangible Spirits*

Dear Editor:

Congratulations! Not content with publishing the best Science Fiction magazine on the market, Astounding Stories, you bring out a true sister magazine, Strange Tales. Who cares if it's a nickel more?

Astounding Stories has been the medium of the best Science Fiction to be had; make Strange Tales the best for Weird Fiction. And give us really *weird* stories, Mr. Bates!

I'm disgusted on one point. It's this: every story but Diffin's in the first issue was on spirits and spiritualism. And his was about half-and-half. You can't live on spirits; I mean the mag can't. They're too intangible for one thing; the readers will

get fed up on them, too. Cummings' nov-  
elette was a *story*, no doubt about that.

The cover design was *perfect*. If anything conveyed the spirit of the mag, that was it. But why not give Paul a chance sometime on the cover? I won't need any editorial: that inspiring bit by the editor on page 7 will do me for years to come. More power to you! But give us a readers' corner.—Linus Hogenmiller, 502 N. Washington St., Farmington, Mo.

*Note: One Can't Go to Sleep*

Dear Editor:

I faced the prospect of an afternoon at the office with nothing more strenuous to do than see that the telephone didn't take wings and fly away—a boring outlook conducive to drowsiness. Then I passed a newsstand and idly purchased Strange Tales. (Note—I didn't go to sleep on the job. In fact, I was so absorbed that I really couldn't swear whether the phone rang or not!)

"The Place of the Pythons" was especially good. Ray Cummings, of course, is unsurpassable. A dull story from his pen would be a miracle, but, even so, "The Dead Who Walk" is worthy of high mention.

I won't take time to mention more than these two, but count me as a regular fan for Strange Tales. It is truly a phenomenal magazine.

One request: *please* don't start any serials. If they were as good as your complete stories, I would die of suspense from lying awake nights in eery anticipation of the next episode.—T. M. Edgerton, Washington, D. C.

*Real Praise*

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of fantastic fiction ever since I was a kid knee-high to a grasshopper, and I want to say that I've read all the magazines on the theme that ever came out; and while they were good for a few months they seemed to run out of good stories and then ran poor ones. And now a few words about A. S. and S. T.

Your magazines are the answers to all my prayers. Your Astounding Stories is superb, and now your Strange Tales even better; but why the every other month? Haven't you enough faith in your readers to put it out every month? Even twice a month would be too long to wait for them. I'm sure the others readers of your magazines would want them that often.

All your stories are the best I've read, and I'm hoping they will stay that way. If for any reason certain readers kick about the stories, don't listen to them, they are what I think everyone is looking for. They keep a person interested to the last page.

As for your first issue of Strange Tales,



it is, in modern language, the berries! Let's hope you change your mind and bring it out at least once a month. I like stories of reanimated mummies, and hope your writers send in one soon. I've read *Astounding Stories* since the first issue was put out, and will continue to read them until I am too old to read or am broke. I think I'd take the last quarter I owned to buy your book, so I guess I've said enough for one time.—Silas Zimmerman, R. F. D. 6, Tunkhannock, Pa.

### *And Here It Is*

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the first issue of *Strange Tales*. It's great! It is almost as good as *Astounding Stories*, which is high praise, indeed.

Wesso's cover and inside illustrations were excellent; so were the others. The best story was "The Dead Who Walk," with "Dr. Muncing, Exorcist" and "The Awful Injustice" second and third. I would like to see a Dr. Muncing story appear in every issue. "The Place of the Pythons" and "A Cry from Beyond" also deserve special mention.

You certainly can pick out the best authors. You are right when you say that the list of contributors to *Strange Tales* reads like the "Who's Who" of fantastic fiction. How about getting some stories by H. P. Lovecraft, the premier writer of *Weird Fiction*, Robert E. Howard, whose stories can't be beat for action and originality, and H. Warner Munn? Donald Wandrei and Frank Belknap Long, Jr., are also good. As for the stories, I don't care what kind they are, as long as they are *weird*. The weirder, the better.

The short articles you have at the end of some stories explaining various beliefs and superstitions are very good. I'd like to see many more of them.

There is only one thing wrong with *Strange Tales*: it is not a monthly. It is in all respects a companion magazine to *Astounding Stories* with this one exception.

Of course, you will have a department for readers' letters similar to "The Readers' Corner" in *Astounding Stories*.—Michael Fogaris, 157 Fourth St., Passaic, N. J.

### *A Brute for Punishment*

Dear Editor:

Ah! At last it has come out! Needless to say, I'm referring to *Strange Tales*. As a good editor, you ask for help from the "associate editors" on how to run the magazine. Well, here's what I say.

First, don't let us have the old question of even edges repeated. You know what the Readers want by now. Keep those edges smooth!

Second, please keep in mind that no one wants reprints. And especially so in a bi-

monthly. Who wants to wait two months to read a few stories and then find out that he's already read some of them?

Third, I'm glad to note that there were no serials. It would be unfair to have to have us wait so long between installments. But, if there are a deluge of requests for serials, have them—making the magazine a monthly first!

Fourth, a readers' corner (no explanation needed).

Fifth, I want the stories so weird and utterly strange that the type and words of the story themselves will shiver. I want that feeling of starting at every sound I hear at midnight. I want my hair to stand on end. I want my blood to freeze. I want those horror stories, vampire stories, voodoo stories to be appalling, terrifying, and horrifying! I don't want to be able to sleep! [*All right*. You brought it on yourself.—Ed.]

Good luck to *Strange Tales*. It already eclipses all the magazines that publish this kind of fiction!—Julius Schwartz, 407 E. 183rd St., New York, N. Y.

### *Thanks So Much*

Dear Editor:

Having read the first copy of your new magazine entitled *Strange Tales*, I wish to say that it was extremely interesting. Being a very devoted admirer of all your publications and something of a freelance writer myself when my spirit moves and my imagination runs away with me, I take this liberty of expressing my best wishes for a brilliant success to your new magazine.—George Norin, Jr. c/o A. H. Renshaw, Noroton, Conn.

### *"Henry, the Flit!"*

Dear Editor:

I used to think to myself: Will I ever find the mag of my mind? The one that is my ideal? Maybe it's a dream; and yet it might be on the corner newsstand, waiting for me. Will I recognize it as the best of buys? As no other buy could be? Or will I pass it by, and never even know that it is My Ideal? My Ideal!

Thanks to its sister magazine, *Astounding Stories*, I did not pass *Strange Tales* by when it came out.

Ray Cummings wrote a marvelous story when he did "The Dead Who Walk." I didn't think he had it in him to write *Weird Fiction*. But he's got all it takes—and more!

The November issue of "our" mag is slick. "Cassius" is one of the most unique stories I have ever read. Such an astounding idea! Without even reading the stories I would say that those written by Capt. Meek, Victor Rousseau and Arthur J. Burks were all X. And I'd be right! It's funny. For years they've been marvelous S. F. authors and then, all of a sudden—poof!—and they're writing real stuff about

elementals, esoteric beings and goodness knows what all!

And now, before a vampire or something grabs me, I want to say something about the forthcoming January issue: I'll wager anything it's going to be the best issue yet. For in the first place there's Edmond Hamilton! and—oh my gosh!—Jack Williamson, too! and—oh boy!—you've gotten wise at last: you're going to print a story of Saturn! That's real swell! All strange tales don't have to be about ghosts and the like. Other things can be weird.

If it weren't for—*Henry, the Flit! An elemental's coming for me!*—Forrest J. Ackerman, 530 Staples Ave., San Francisco, Cal.

### *Splendid Criticism*

Dear Editor:

You are attempting a worthy project in your decision to stimulate that type of literature which Poe so aptly termed "the arabesque and fantastic," and for which, so long as "total understanding" is denied man, there must always be an eery fascination for the general reader. Many critics overlook the importance of the weird tale in the literary larder of "every man's" home. This is because the superficial is always most apparent. Being so it is perfectly obvious that the comic, romantic and adventurous are valued because they are most prevalent. But—and the simile is not far-fetched—precisely as important to the story as salt is to food, and in somewhat similar proportions, is the enviable position of the weird tale. All success in your effort toward the creation and perpetuation of the type.

But if there is a place in the sun for the weird tale, it is no less true that there is a grave responsibility devolving upon it. In no circumstances must it deviate from the practical requisites of literature in general. There must be something more than a succession of impossibilities reacting upon one or more dummies inserted to represent human beings. The weird tale must always bear in mind that it subserves the human who moves throughout it; never in any condition must the human become a mere hodge-podge and the narrative degenerate into drivel of rot and absurdity. True, every artist may take it for granted that nothing is impossible and so give his imagination the freest rein; but he must always remember that the character behaves accordingly—and that is precisely where the average weird tale writer finds his Charybdis: he fails to "carry his character."

Certainly it cannot be denied that it is far more difficult to portray great emotional crises than to sketch the average trivialities of prosy life. The former the weird tale always sets out to do. Hence its glory when successful—and its attendant ignominy when inadequate. It has been my

experience—and I feel others will echo my sentiment as I express it—to find nothing quite so meaningless and fatuous as the tale which strives for weirdness and achieves maudlin sentimentousness.

There, to the editor and the authors—and I hope all I say is accepted in the spirit in which it is given—I suggest a careful analysis of and attention to story substances in its two-fold aspect of character and setting, with particular stress on the character rendition. The most glaring fault in the usual weird tale is its deficiency of character. Psychology is an unplumbed abyss of boundless possibilities. Why not more attention centered upon it?

Thus far I have generalized. Now I make some special proposals.

First, it would be a very good idea to organize a reader's section devoted to reader comment and criticism of the magazine.

Second, I strongly advise the editors to place less emphasis upon the names of authors appearing in the magazines than the value of what they submit.

Finally, and this is strictly individual, I recommend the publication of no story exceeding 10,000 words. Even Poe could not sustain power beyond that limitation.

In conclusion I am listing the stories in your first issue and criticising each briefly.

1—"The Dead Who Walk." This is a perfect illustration of the hodge-podge earlier referred to in this letter. The characters are inane, and there is a vacancy from beginning to end. A most distressing tale. Somebody slipped up in accepting it for publication. Mr. Cummings has done far better but never any worse.

2—"The Place of the Pythons." This is vivid and well written. Mr. Burks has a style of his own, but he, too, shows traces of unbelief in what he writes. He seems to admit he is merely playing a part.

3—"The Dark Castle." Miss Brandon is unknown to me but she has a story-telling disposition evidently; only the matter involved in this particular fantasy is so stale, so common, so un-weird because of its having been used so often, that the entire picture is one committed by rote. No more vampire tales, editor, unless they vary the by-now stupid monotone.

Dr. Muncing gives ample space to develop within. Mr. MacCreagh can go far with this character if he is judicious and open to expansion. This first attempt has a very poor foil in Mr. James Terry. By all means, if this man played football, give him some backbone and make him a second Watson. Otherwise eliminate him early.

4—"The Dog That Laughed." A scientific story which follows in the wake of the "Birthmark" and offers unique avenues of approach to the reader. This story is relatively good and does not grate upon the sensibilities.

5—"The Return of the Sorcerer" is perhaps the best story in the issue and comes

nearest to having the qualities most sure to awaken interest and suspense, realistic impossibility (the paradox is more apparent than real), judicious narration, and the sense of restraint in the midst of frenzy that goes far to give the story a genuine ring.

6—"Nasturtia" is satisfactory and this, too, despite botanical liberties on the part of the author. Capt. Meek does not write like Henry Van Dyke, but he makes a creditable endeavor.

7—"A Cry From Beyond" shows originality and control. Mr. Rousseau's story, as can be said of the preceding three, belongs nearer the front.

8—"The Awful Injustice" is a fairly new and worthy representation of an old situation. This tale offered a large opening for graphic character analysis but Mr. Hurst contented himself with the briefest sketch, and that, perhaps, not as capable as it might have been. Hence there is a sense of incompleteness in the story.

This is quite a lengthy letter. I trust it causes no rankling if some of the criticism has taken on a quincelike flavor and aspect. Certainly it has not been intended other than as the expression of a most simple perception.—A. Lewis, Clairton, Pa.

### *Appreciation*

Dear Editor:

There will be no brickbats in this comment, nothing but praise for a true companion to *Astounding Stories*. It certainly filled in a big gap in my magazine shelf. Let me be among the first ones to congratulate you.

That was a very good introductory offer for the first three issues of *Strange Tales*, but I was too impatient and grabbed my copy off the newsstand. From what I observed, there were plenty of others doing the same thing.

In my humble opinion you couldn't have elected a better author than Ray Cummings to skyrocket the first issue off with a bang. Let's have more of those living-dead tales. We like 'em!—F. F. Hepburn, 30 Montrose St., Malden, Mass.

### *"Agonizing to Wait"*

Dear Editor:

*Strange Tales* is a splendid magazine, and I was lucky enough to discover the first issue on the first day it appeared.

I liked your wonderful tales of mystery, awe inspiring imaginative fiction and the ever popular ghoulish stories filled with drama, action and thrills, such as only authors of the highest literary ability can put into story form. I am only sorry that *Strange Tales* is not issued every month instead of every other month. It will be agonizing to wait till November for my second copy. I really don't know what I'll do in the meantime. *Strange Tales* may not be the only magazine of its kind but it's the best!

May I make a suggestion? Wouldn't it be appropriate to create a critics' column, thereby bringing into harmony [Harmony?—Ed.] the readers of the magazine, and inspiring the authors of the stories to greater zeal by encouragement from the readers themselves? For the small additional cost of compository work, a page or two extra to print and the mite more of ink used in the printing of those extra pages, I firmly believe it would be well worth the effort, not only to you, but also to us readers who just love to say a few words in favor of those true fellows who are contributing so much to make *Strange Tales* the one perfect magazine of Weird Fiction it has the right to be.

In criticizing the stories in the September issue, I have nothing to say but that each and every tale is full of merits and worthy of the most intelligent reader.—Anthony F. Kolker, 7278 Burnette Ave., Detroit, Mich.

### *Suggestions*

Dear Editor:

The other day I purchased a copy of the first number of *Strange Tales*, and this letter is written to tell you how very pleased I am to know of this new magazine. If it keeps anywhere near the standard of its first issue, it will be, as the poet said, "A thing of beauty and a joy forever."

I have read much along these lines, both in serious study and in fiction, and feel satisfied that your writers are of the highest type in their knowledge of the occult, and their way of expressing their deep thoughts in story form is worthy of the greatest admiration.

You ask for suggestions. Here are a few:

Have no serials. Depend on merit, not on the silly idea that we, the people, buy your product to "finish a story!"

Use a plain, black and white cover, telling the nature of your stories. Put the colored picture on good paper inside so that we can detach same and build up a library of such unusual pictures (using only one side of the paper, of course). A gaudy cover can easily frighten away "serious-minded" folk who would be drawn to a sober statement of the actual contents. Many a time with another *Weird Fiction* magazine that I have taken for years, I have had to apologize for its cover design, explaining to friends that the stories within were not sexy stuff dealing with the half-naked women depicted on the outside.

Finally, avoid that cheap style of advertisement, offering various articles at ten cents appealing to boys, morons and silly folk. Surely the people who read your stories of occult lore, do not want to buy a ten cent "telescope" which allows you to "see your best girl and all she is doing!"

It is a thankless job telling a company how to publish their magazine, but you have asked us, and you are getting my

opinion, anyway [So I see!—Ed.]! Do not start a story with a big display, and “tail it off” in the rear pages, where one must follow it through a maze of extraneous matter. I know you try to tangle it up so that we’ll read your advertisements, but no book of short stories would treat a good tale that way. Nothing cheapens the appeal of a story more than such silly tactics. [But we don’t do that!—Ed.]—L. P. Rees, 531 Markham St., Toronto 4, Canada.

### *All Right—Go Ahead*

Dear Editor:

Two months ago, when the announcement that a *Weird Fiction* magazine was coming out, I received it with the greatest joy and enthusiasm. I immediately invested four-bits in a three months’ subscription. And, after reading two issues, I have most emphatically concluded that it was a wise investment. I’ll say right here and now that though *Science Fiction* is my love, my life, my all, *Weird Fiction* is not far behind in the order of my appreciation—and you have already printed some excellent weird stories.

Arthur J. Burks, whose work in *Astounding Stories* I have so mercilessly run down, is an ace in *Strange Tales*. “The Place of the Pythons” and “Guatemozin, the Visitant” were masterpieces of *Weird Fiction*. Ray Cummings, too, was very good in “The Dead Who Walk.”

In *Science Fiction*, I look primarily for science, but in *Weird Fiction* I look for excellent writing. In *Science Fiction* the style is a secondary matter; but in *Weird Fiction* I look for vivid word-pictures; for smooth, beautiful and unique styles; I want the author to picture in splendid description every detail, every horror, every terror in the story; I want to be thrilled by tremendous power in style and plot. I do not look for adventure and fast action; instead I look for horrible situations and descriptions of weird monsters, etc. But to be of value, these situations and descriptions must be written with such vividness that the reader sees them as did the characters. “The Place of the Pythons” is an example of excellent *Weird Fiction*.

The greatest objection I have is that *Strange Tales* comes only once every two months. I’m sure that you will make it a monthly after you are assured that it is a success. Make this change as soon as possible. You have my hearty cooperation!

If you start a readers’ corner, and I hope you do, why not give it a weird name, and also why not have the readers, instead of merely writing letters of appreciation, start some ghost arguments and discussions to liven things up?—Carlyle J. Besette, Charlotte, Vt.

### *Other Sorcerers’ Apprentices*

Other good letters have so piled up that there won’t be room for them, but I want to publicly acknowledge and thank those who in this issue must be neglected. Among them are Benjamin Ross, 723 St. George Ave., Rahway, N. J., who asks boys, girls, men and women interested in love adventure to write to him (which sounds bad, but I’m sure he means it well); Charles M. Stephens, who finds our first number a “gem”; Lucien Filiatrault, who wishes S. T. “happy landings”; Arthur Kemp, Jr., who demands that we issue S. T. monthly; Jack Feeney, who calls our new mag “marvelous” and who also asks that it be brought out monthly; Kenneth F. Haley (I see I’d better say once, to cover *all* the letters, that their writers were delighted with S. T.), who thinks we run “just a bit too much to the ghost story type”; A. Basile, who especially liked “The Place of the Pythons” and “The Dead Who Walk”; Ralph Bohmer, who likes very much our use of a bat for the background of the name of our magazine, and who strongly urges us to keep S. T. a bi-monthly so that our *Weird Fiction* will retain its unique flavor; L. Roviello, who wishes we had brought S. T. out sooner; Adeline Clear, who says, “*Strange Tales* makes a good sister magazine to *Astounding Stories*, and now we will get a splendid variety”; Robert Leonard Russell, whose injunction to start a readers’ department we are herewith obeying; V. G. Train, who asks for a sequel to the Dr. Muncing story; Walter Baker, whom we really should take into partnership, for he says, “Three of my friends wanted to read my copy of *Strange Tales*, but I made them buy copies for themselves!”; Jack Darrow, who liked our second issue better than the first; Paul S. Smith, who likes not less than ten rather short stories in each issue; Daniel Jacoby, who especially liked “Dr. Muncing, Exorcist”; Joseph Richards, who found all the stories in our initial issue to be “exciting”; J. Wasso, who admonishes us to keep our shorter stories “short and snappy”; Joseph Edelman, who likes *Weird Fiction* better than our *Astounding Stories’ Science Fiction*; Joe Hatch, who raises three rousing cheers for Wesso; Robert Blasberg, who finds our tales “mighty thrilling” and “creepy”; Jack Nell, who especially enjoyed Ray Cummings’ “The Dead Who Walk”; James G. Lane, who finds the stories of varying quality, but consoles us with, “but . . . you are bound to make a few stumbles before you learn to walk”; and Emrick Schaub, who found “*Nasturtia*” and “*A Cry from Beyond*” “rotten,” but all the other stories in the first issue very good.

—The Editor.



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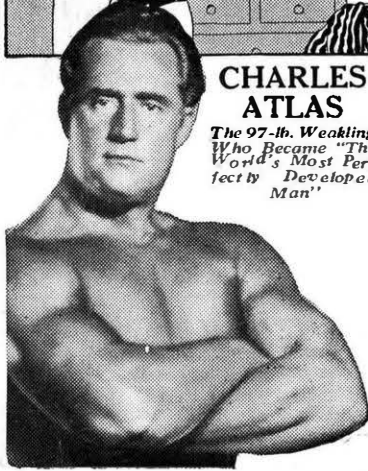
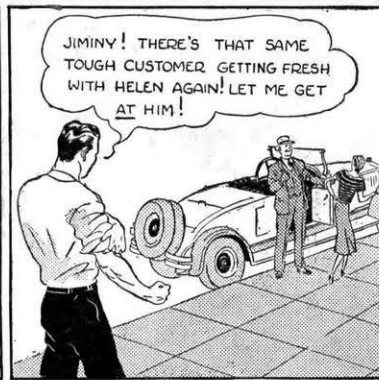
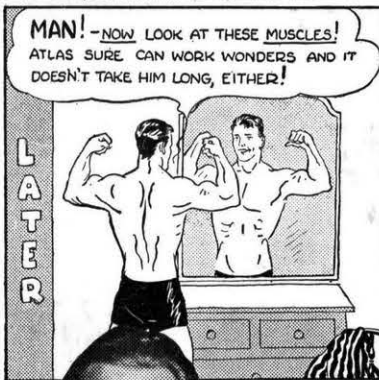
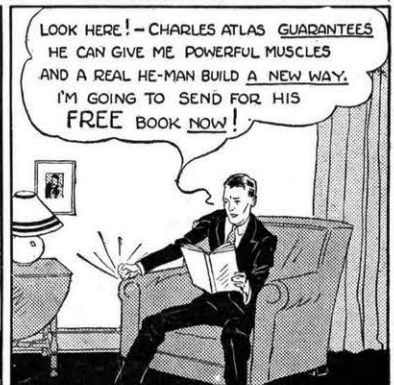
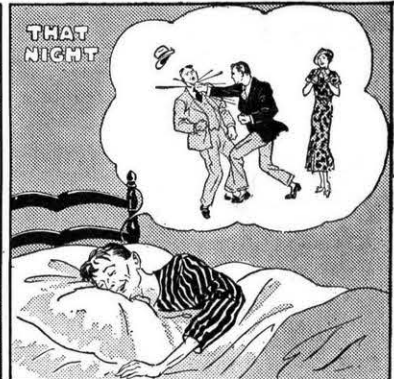
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