

Strange Creatures IX

Fables & Quirks

Edited by
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Arment Biological Press

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Editor's Note

This is an odd one, I admit. Certainly, this is not our typical collection of cryptozoology-related short stories. None of these tales is meant to be taken seriously from a biological standpoint. They run the gamut from legendary beasts from folklore and tall tales, to speculative creatures from the author's imagination. Still, these stories do reflect the idea that there are mysteries we have yet to fathom.

Our next volume will be back to straight-forward cryptofiction. We continue to solicit stories for future volumes. In the meantime, enjoy.

Chad Arment

Contents

In the Abyss	H. G. Wells
The People of the Pit	A. Merritt
The Willows	Algernon Blackwood
The Hodag	Lake Shore Kearney
Water Kelpie	Rev. Dr. Jamieson
The Habitants of Middle Islet	William Hope Hodgson
St. George and the Dragon	Agnes Grozier Herbertson

In the Abyss

H. G. Wells

The lieutenant stood in front of the steel sphere and gnawed a piece of pine splinter. "What do you think of it, Steevens?" he asked.

"It's an idea," said Steevens, in the tone of one who keeps an open mind.

"I believe it will smash—flat," said the lieutenant.

"He seems to have calculated it all out pretty well," said Steevens, still impartial.

"But think of the pressure," said the lieutenant. "At the surface of the water it's fourteen pounds to the inch, thirty feet down it's double that; sixty, treble; ninety, four times; nine hundred, forty times; five thousand three hundred—that's a mile—it's two hundred and forty times fourteen pounds; that's—let 's see—thirty hundredweight—a ton and a half, Steevens; *a ton and a half* to the square inch. And the ocean where he's going is five miles deep. That's seven and a half—"

"Sounds a lot," said Steevens, "but it's jolly thick steel."

The lieutenant made no answer, but resumed his pine splinter. The object of their conversation was a huge globe of steel, having an exterior diameter of perhaps eight feet. It looked like the shot for some Titanic piece of artillery. It was elaborately nested in a monstrous scaffolding built into the framework of the vessel, and the gigantic spars that were presently to sling it overboard gave the stern of the ship an appearance that had raised the curiosity of every decent sailor who had sighted it, from the pool of London to the Tropic of Capricorn. In two places, one above the other, the steel gave place to a couple of circular windows of enormously thick glass, and one of these, set in a steel frame of great solidity, was now partially unscrewed. Both the men had seen the interior of this globe for the first time that morning. It was elaborately padded with air cushions, with little studs sunk between bulging pillows to work the simple mechanism of the affair. Everything was elaborately padded, even the Myer's apparatus which was to absorb carbonic acid and replace the oxygen inspired by its tenant, when he had crept in by the glass manhole, and

had been screwed in. It was so elaborately padded that a man might have been fired from a gun in it with perfect safety. And it had need to be, for presently a man was to crawl in through that glass manhole, to be screwed up tightly, and to be flung overboard, and to sink down—down—down, for five miles, even as the lieutenant said. It had taken the strongest hold of his imagination; it made him a bore at mess; and he found Steevens, the new arrival aboard, a godsend to talk to about it, over and over again.

“It’s my opinion,” said the lieutenant, “that that glass will simply bend in and bulge and smash, under a pressure of that sort. Daubrie has made rocks run like water under big pressures—and, you mark my words—”

“If the glass did break in,” said Steevens, “what then?”

“The water would shoot in like a jet of iron. Have you ever felt a straight jet of high pressure water? It would hit as hard as a bullet. It would simply smash him and flatten him. It would tear down his throat, and into his lungs; it would blow in his ears—”

“What a detailed imagination you have,” protested Steevens, who saw things vividly.

“It’s a simple statement of the inevitable,” said the lieutenant.

“And the globe?”

“Would just give out a few little bubbles, and it would settle down comfortably against the day of judgment, among the oozes and the bottom clay—with poor Elstead spread over his own smashed cushions like butter over bread “

He repeated this sentence as though he liked it very much. “Like butter over bread,” he said.

“Having a look at the jigger?” said a voice behind them, and Elstead stood behind them, spick and span in white, with a cigarette between his teeth, and his eyes smiling out of the shadow of his ample hat-brim. “What’s that about bread and butter, Weybridge? Grumbling as usual about the insufficient pay of naval officers? It won’t be more than a day now before I start. We are to get the slings ready to-day. This clean sky and gentle swell is just the kind of thing for swinging off twenty tons of lead and iron; isn’t it?”

“It won’t affect you much,” said Weybridge.

“No. Seventy or eighty feet down, and I shall be there in a dozen seconds, there’s not a particle moving, though the wind shriek itself hoarse up above, and the water lifts halfway to the clouds. No. Down there—” He moved to the side of the ship and the other two followed him. All three leant forward on their elbows and stared down into the yellow-green water.

“*Peace*,” said Elstead, finishing his thought aloud.

“Are you dead certain that clockwork will act?” asked Weybridge, presently.

“It has worked thirty-five times,” said Elstead. “It’s bound to work.”

“But if it doesn’t?”

“Why shouldn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t go down in that confounded thing,” said Weybridge, “for twenty thousand pounds.”

“Cheerful chap you are,” said Elstead, and spat sociably at a bubble below.

“I don’t understand yet how you mean to work the thing,” said Steevens.

“In the first place I’m screwed into the sphere,” said Elstead, “and when I’ve turned the electric light off and on three times to show I’m cheerful, I’m swung out over the stern by that crane, with all those big lead sinkers slung below me. The top lead weight has a roller carrying a hundred fathoms of strong cord rolled up, and that’s all that joins the sinkers to the sphere, except the slings that will be cut when the affair is dropped. We use cord rather than wire rope because it’s easier to cut and more buoyant—necessary points as you will see.

“Through each of these lead weights you notice there is a hole, and an iron rod will be run through that and will project six feet on the lower side. If that rod is rammed up from below it knocks up a lever and sets the clockwork in motion at the side of the cylinder on which the cord winds.

“Very well. The whole affair is lowered gently into the water, and the slings are cut. The sphere floats—with the air in it, it’s lighter than water; but the lead

weights go down straight and the cord runs out. When the cord is all paid out, the sphere will go down too, pulled down by the cord.”

“But why the cord?” asked Steevens. “Why not fasten the weights directly to the sphere?”

“Because of the smash down below. The whole affair will go rushing down, mile after mile, at a headlong pace at last. It would be knocked to pieces on the bottom if it wasn’t for that cord. But the weights will hit the bottom, and directly they do the buoyancy of the sphere will come into play. It will go on sinking slower and slower; come to a stop at last and then begin to float upward again.

“That’s where the clockwork comes in. Directly the weights smash against the sea bottom, the rod will be knocked through and will kick up the clockwork, and the cord will be rewound on the reel. I shall be lugged down to the sea bottom. There I shall stay for half an hour, with the electric light on, looking about me. Then the clockwork will release a spring knife, the cord will be cut, and up I shall rush again, like a soda-water bubble. The cord itself will help the flotation.”

“And if you should chance to hit a ship?” said Weybridge.

“I should come up at such a pace, I should go clean through it,” said Elstead, “like a cannon ball. You needn’t worry about that.”

“And suppose some nimble crustacean should wriggle into your clockwork—”

“It would be a pressing sort of invitation for me to stop,” said Elstead, turning his back on the water and staring at the sphere.

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They had swung Elstead overboard by eleven o’clock. The day was serenely bright and calm, with the horizon lost in haze. The electric glare in the little upper compartment beamed cheerfully three times. Then they let him down slowly to the surface of the water, and a sailor in the stern chains hung ready to cut the tackle that held the lead weights and the sphere together. The globe, which had looked so large on deck, looked the smallest thing conceivable under the stem of the ship. It rolled a little, and its two dark windows, which

floated uppermost, seemed like eyes turned up in round wonderment at the people who crowded the rail. A voice wondered how Elstead liked the rolling. "Are you ready?" sang out the Commander. "Aye, aye, sir!" "Then let her go!"

The rope of the tackle tightened against the blade and was cut, and an eddy rolled over the globe in a grotesquely helpless fashion. Some one waved a handkerchief, some one else tried an ineffectual cheer, a middy was counting slowly: "Eight, nine, ten!" Another roll, then with a jerk and a splash the thing righted itself.

It seemed to be stationary for a moment, to grow rapidly smaller, and then the water closed over it, and it became visible, enlarged by refraction and dimmer, below the surface. Before one could count three it had disappeared. There was a flicker of white light far down in the water, that diminished to a speck and vanished. Then there was nothing but a depth of water going down into blackness, through which a shark was swimming.

Then suddenly the screw of the cruiser began to rotate, the water was crickled, the shark disappeared in a wrinkled confusion, and a torrent of foam rushed across the crystalline clearness that had swallowed up Elstead. "What's the idee?" said one A. B. to another.

"We're going to lay off about a couple of miles, 'fear he should hit us when he comes up," said his mate.

The ship steamed slowly to her new position. Aboard her almost every one who was unoccupied remained watching the breathing swell into which the sphere had sunk. For the next half hour it is doubtful if a word was spoken that did not bear directly or indirectly on Elstead. The December sun was now high in the sky, and the heat very considerable.

"He'll be cold enough down there," said Weybridge. "They say that below a certain depth sea-water's always just about freezing."

"Where'll he come up?" asked Steevens. "I've lost my bearings."

"That's the spot," said the Commander, who prided himself on his omniscience. He extended a precise finger south-eastward. "And this, I reckon, is pretty nearly the moment," he said. "He's been thirty-five minutes."

“How long does it take to reach the bottom of the ocean?” asked Steevens.

“For a depth of five miles, and reckoning—as we did—an acceleration to two foot per second, both ways, is just about three-quarters of a minute.”

“Then he’s overdue,” said Weybridge.

“Pretty nearly,” said the Commander. “I suppose it takes a few minutes for that cord of his to wind in.”

“I forgot that,” said Weybridge, evidently relieved.

And then began the suspense. A minute slowly dragged itself out, and no sphere shot out of the water. Another followed, and nothing broke the low oily swell. The sailors explained to one another that little point about the winding-in of the cord. The rigging was dotted with expectant faces. “Come up, Elstead!” called one hairy-chested salt, impatiently, and the others caught it up, and shouted as though they were waiting for the curtain of a theatre to rise.

The Commander glanced irritably at them.

“Of course, if the acceleration’s less than two,” he said, “he’ll be all the longer. We aren’t absolutely certain that was the proper figure. I’m no slavish believer in calculations.”

Steevens agreed concisely. No one on the quarter-deck spoke for a couple of minutes. Then Steevens’s watch-case clicked.

When, twenty-one minutes after, the sun reached the zenith, they were still waiting for the globe to re-appear, and not a man aboard had dared to whisper that hope was dead. It was Weybridge who first gave expression to that realisation. He spoke while the sound of eight bells still hung in the air. “I always distrusted that window,” he said quite suddenly to Steevens.

“Good God!” said Steevens, “you don’t think—”

“Well!” said Weybridge, and left the rest to his imagination.

“I’m no great believer in calculations myself,” said the Commander, dubiously, “so that I’m not altogether hopeless yet.” And at midnight the gunboat was

steaming slowly in a spiral round the spot where the globe had sunk, and the white beam of the electric light fled and halted and swept discontentedly onward again over the waste of phosphorescent waters under the little stars.

“If his window hasn’t burst and smashed him,” said Weybridge, “then it’s a cursed sight worse, for his clockwork has gone wrong and he’s alive now, five miles under our feet, down there in the cold and dark, anchored in that little bubble of his, where never a ray of light has shone or a human being lived, since the waters were gathered together. He’s there without food, feeling hungry and thirsty and scared, wondering whether he’ll starve or stifle. Which will it be? The Myer’s apparatus is running out, I suppose. How long do they last?”

“Good Heavens!” he exclaimed, “what little things we are! What daring little devils! Down there, miles and miles of water—all water, and all this empty water about us and this sky. Gulfs!” He threw his hands out, and as he did so a little white streak swept noiselessly up the sky, travelling more slowly, stopped, became a motionless dot as though a new star had fallen up into the sky. Then it went sliding back again and lost itself amidst the reflections of the stars, and the white haze of the sea’s phosphorescence.

At the sight he stopped, arm extended and mouth open. He shut his mouth, opened it again and waved his arms with an impatient gesture. Then he turned, shouted, “El-stead ahoy,” to the first watch, and went at a run to Lindley and the search light. “I saw him,” he said. “Starboard there! His light’s on and he’s just shot out of the water. Bring the light round. We ought to see him drifting, when he lifts on the swell.”

But they never picked up the explorer until dawn. Then they almost ran him down. The crane was swung out and a boat’s crew hooked the chain to the sphere. When they had shipped the sphere they unscrewed the manhole and peered into the darkness of the interior (for the electric light chamber was intended to illuminate the water about the sphere, and was shut off entirely from its general cavity).

The air was very hot within the cavity, and the india-rubber at the lip of the manhole was soft. There was no answer to their eager questions and no sound of movement within. Elstead seemed to be lying motionless, crumpled up in the bottom of the globe. The ship’s doctor crawled in and lifted him out to the men outside. For a moment or so they did not know whether Elstead was alive or dead. His face, in the yellow glow of the ship’s lamps, glistened with perspiration. They carried him down to his own cabin.

He was not dead they found, but in a state of absolute nervous collapse, and besides cruelly bruised. For some days he had to lie perfectly still. It was a week before he could tell his experiences.

Almost his first words were that he was going down again. The sphere would have to be altered, he said, in order to allow him to throw off the cord if need be, and that was all. He had had the most marvellous experience. "You thought I should find nothing but ooze," he said. "You laughed at my explorations, and I've discovered a new world!" He told his story in disconnected fragments, and chiefly from the wrong end so that it is impossible to re-tell it in his words. But what follows is the narrative of his experience.

It began atrociously, he said. Before the cord ran out the thing kept rolling over. He felt like a frog in a football. He could see nothing but the crane and the sky overhead, with an occasional glimpse of the people on the ship's rail. He couldn't tell a bit which way the thing would roll next. Suddenly he would find his feet going up and try to step, and over he went rolling, head over heels and just anyhow on the padding. Any other shape would have been more comfortable, but no other shape was to be relied upon under the huge pressure of the nethermost abyss.

Suddenly the swaying ceased; the globe righted, and when he had picked himself up, he saw the water all about him greeny-blue with an attenuated light filtering down from above, and a shoal of little floating things went rushing up past him, as it seemed to him, towards the light. And even as he looked it grew darker and darker, until the water above was as dark as the midnight sky, albeit of a greener shade, and the water below black. And little transparent things in the water developed a faint glint of luminosity, and shot past him in faint greenish streaks.

And the feeling of falling! It was just like the start of a lift, he said, only it kept on. One has to imagine what that means, that keeping on. It was then of all times that Elstead repented of his adventure. He saw the chances against him in an altogether new light. He thought of the big cuttle-fish people knew to exist in the middle waters, the kind of things they find half-digested in whales at times, or floating dead and rotten and half eaten by fish. Suppose one caught hold and wouldn't leave go. And had the clockwork really been sufficiently tested? But whether he wanted to go on or go back mattered not the slightest now.

In fifty seconds everything was as black as night outside, except where the beam from his light struck through the waters, and picked out every now and then some fish or scrap of sinking matter. They flashed by too fast for him to see what they were. Once he thought he passed a shark. And then the sphere began to get hot by friction against the water. They had underestimated this, it seems.

The first thing he noticed was that he was perspiring, and then he heard a hissing, growing louder, under his feet, and saw a lot of little bubbles—very little bubbles they were—rushing upward like a fan through the water outside. Steam! He felt the window and it was hot. He turned on the minute glow lamp that lit his own cavity, looked at the padded watch by the studs, and saw he had been travelling now for two minutes. It came into his head that the window would crack through the conflict of temperatures, for he knew the bottom water was very near freezing.

Then suddenly the floor of the sphere seemed to press against his feet, the rush of bubbles outside grew slower and slower and the hissing diminished. The sphere rolled a little. The window had not cracked, nothing had given, and he knew that the dangers of sinking, at any rate, were over.

In another minute or so, he would be on the floor of the abyss. He thought, he said, of Steevens and Weybridge and the rest of them five miles overhead, higher to him than the very highest clouds that ever floated over land are to us, steaming slowly and staring down and wondering what had happened to him.

He peered out of the window. There were no more bubbles now, and the hissing had stopped. Outside there was a heavy blackness—as black as black velvet—except where the electric light pierced the empty water and showed the colour of it—a yellow green. Then three things like shapes of fire swam into sight, following each other through the water. Whether they were little and near, or big and far off, he could not tell.

Each was outlined in a bluish light almost as bright as the lights of a fishing-smack, a light which seemed to be smoking greatly, and all along the sides of them were specks of this, like the lighted portholes of a ship. Their phosphorescence seemed to go out as they came into the radiance of his lamp, and he saw then that they were indeed fish of some strange sort, with huge heads, vast eyes, and dwindling bodies and tails. Their eyes were turned towards him, and he judged they were following him down. He supposed they were attracted by his glare.

Presently others of the same sort joined them. As he went on down he noticed that the water became of a pallid colour, and that little specks twinkled in his ray like motes in sunbeam. This was probably due to the clouds of ooze and mud that the impact of his leaden sinkers had disturbed.

By the time he was drawn down to the lead weights he was in a dense fog of white that his electric light failed altogether to pierce for more than a few yards, and many minutes elapsed before the hanging sheets of sediment subsided to any extent. Then, lit by his light and by the transient phosphorescence of a distant shoal of fishes, he was able to see under the huge blackness of the super-incumbent water an undulating expanse of greyish-white ooze, broken here and there by tangled thickets of a growth of sea lilies, waving hungry tentacles in the air.

Farther away were the graceful translucent outlines of a group of gigantic sponges. About this floor there were scattered a number of bristling flattish tufts of rich purple and black, which he decided must be some sort of sea-urchin, and small, large-eyed or blind things, having a curious resemblance, some to woodlice, and others to lobsters, crawled sluggishly across the track of the light and vanished into the obscurity again, leaving furrowed trails behind them.

Then suddenly the hovering swarm of little fishes veered about and came towards him as a flight of starlings might do. They passed over him like a phosphorescent snow, and then he saw behind them some larger creature advancing towards the sphere.

At first he could see it only dimly, a faintly moving figure remotely suggestive of a walking man, and then it came into the spray of light that the lamp shot out. As the glare struck it, it shut its eyes, dazzled. He stared in rigid astonishment.

It was a strange, vertebrated animal. Its dark purple head was dimly suggestive of a chameleon, but it had such a high forehead and such a braincase as no reptile ever displayed before; the vertical pitch of its face gave it a most extraordinary resemblance to a human being.

Two large and protruding eyes projected from sockets in chameleon fashion, and it had a broad reptilian mouth with horny lips beneath its little nostrils. In the position of the ears were two huge gill covers, and out of these floated a branching tree of coralline filaments, almost like the tree-like gills that very young rays and sharks possess.

But the humanity of the face was not the most extraordinary thing about the creature. It was a biped, its almost globular body was poised on a tripod of two frog-like legs and a long thick tail, and its fore limbs, which grotesquely caricatured the human hand much as a frog's do, carried a long shaft of bone, tipped with copper. The colour of the creature was variegated: its head, hands, and legs were purple; but its skin, which hung loosely upon it, even as clothes might do, was a phosphorescent grey. And it stood there, blinded by the light.

At last this unknown creature of the abyss blinked its eyes open, and, shading them with its disengaged hand, opened its mouth and gave vent to a shouting noise, articulate almost as speech might be, that penetrated even the steel case and padded jacket of the sphere. How a shouting may be accomplished without lungs Elstead does not profess to explain. It then moved sideways out of the glare into the mystery of shadow that bordered it on either side, and Elstead felt rather than saw that it was coming towards him. Fancying the light had attracted it, he turned the switch that cut off the current. In another moment something soft dabbled upon the steel, and the globe swayed.

Then the shouting was repeated, and it seemed to him that a distant echo answered it. The dabbling recurred, and the globe swayed and ground against the spindle over which the wire was rolled. He stood in the blackness, and peered out into the everlasting night of the abyss. And presently he saw, very faint and remote, other phosphorescent quasi-human forms hurrying towards him.

Hardly knowing what he did, he felt about in his swaying prison for the stud of the exterior electric light, and came by accident against his own small glow lamp in its padded recess. The sphere twisted, and then threw him down; he heard shouts like shouts of surprise, and when he rose to his feet he saw two pairs of stalked eyes peering into the lower window and reflecting his light.

In another moment hands were dabbling vigorously at his steel casing, and there was a sound, horrible enough in his position, of the metal protection of the clockwork being vigorously hammered. That, indeed, sent his heart into his mouth, for if these strange creatures succeeded in stopping that his release would never occur. Scarcely had he thought as much when he felt the sphere sway violently, and the floor of it press hard against his feet. He turned off the small glow lamp that lit the interior, and sent the ray of the large light in the separate compartment out into the water. The sea floor and the manlike creatures had disappeared, and a couple of fish chasing each other dropped suddenly by the window.

He thought at once that these strange denizens of the deep sea had broken the wire rope, and that he had escaped. He drove up faster and faster, and then stopped with a jerk that sent him flying against the padded roof of his prison. For half a minute perhaps he was too astonished to think.

Then he felt that the sphere was spinning slowly, and rocking, and it seemed to him that it was also being drawn through the water. By crouching close to the window he managed to make his weight effective and roll that part of the sphere downward, but he could see nothing save the pale ray of his light striking down ineffectively into the darkness. It occurred to him that he would see more if he turned the lamp off and allowed his eyes to grow accustomed to the profound obscurity.

In this he was wise. After some minutes the velvety blackness became a translucent blackness, and then far away, and as faint as the zodiacal light of an English summer evening, he saw shapes moving below. He judged these creatures had detached his cable and were towing him along the sea bottom.

And then he saw something faint and remote across the undulations of the submarine plain, a broad horizon of pale luminosity that extended this way and that way as far as the range of his little window permitted him to see. To this he was being towed, as a balloon might be towed by men out of the open country into a town. He approached it very slowly, and very slowly the dim irradiation was gathered together into more definite shapes.

It was nearly five o'clock before he came over this luminous area, and by that time he could make out an arrangement suggestive of streets and houses grouped about a vast roofless erection that was grotesquely suggestive of a ruined abbey. It was spread out like a map below him. The houses were all roofless inclosures of walls, and their substance being, as he afterwards saw, of phosphorescent bones, gave the place an appearance as if it were built of drowned moonshine.

Among the inner caves of the place waving trees of crinoid stretched their tentacles, and tall, slender, glassy sponges shot like shining minarets and lilies of filmy light out of the general glow of the city. In the open spaces of the place he could see a stirring movement as of crowds of people, but he was too many fathoms above them to distinguish the individuals in those crowds.

Then slowly they pulled him down, and as they did so the details of the

place crept slowly upon his apprehension. He saw that the courses of the cloudy buildings were marked out with beaded lines of round objects, and then he perceived that at several points below him in broad open spaces were forms like the encrusted shapes of ships.

Slowly and surely he was drawn down, and the forms below him became brighter, clearer, were more distinct. He was being pulled down, he perceived, towards the large building in the centre of the town, and he could catch a glimpse ever and again of the multitudinous forms that were lugging at his cord. He was astonished to see that the rigging of one of the ships, which formed such a prominent feature of the place, was crowded with a host of gesticulating figures regarding him, and then the walls of the great building rose about him silently, and hid the city from his eyes.

And such walls they were, of water-logged wood, and twisted wire rope and iron spars, and copper, and the bones and skulls of dead men.

The skulls ran in curious zigzag lines and spirals and fantastic curves over the building; and in and out of their eye-sockets, and over the whole surface of the place, lurked and played a multitude of silvery little fishes.

And now he was at such a level that he could see these strange people of the abyss plainly once more. To his astonishment, he perceived that they were prostrating themselves before him, all save one, dressed as it seemed in a robe of placoid scales, and crowned with a luminous diadem, who stood with his reptilian mouth opening and shutting as though he led the chanting of the worshippers.

They continued worshipping him, without rest or intermission, for the space of three hours.

Most circumstantial was Elstead's account of this astounding city and its people, these people of perpetual night, who have never seen sun or moon or stars, green vegetation, nor any living air-breathing creatures, who know nothing of fire, nor any light but the phosphorescent light of living things.

Startling as is his story, it is yet more startling to find that scientific men, of such eminence as Adams and Jenkins, find nothing incredible in it. They tell me they see no reason why intelligent, water-breathing, vertebrated creatures inured to a low temperature and enormous pressure, and of such a heavy

structure, that neither alive nor dead would they float, might not live upon the bottom of the deep sea, and quite unsuspected by us, descendants like ourselves of the great Theriomorpha of the New Red Sandstone age.

We should be known to them, however, as strange meteoric creatures wont to fall catastrophically dead out of the mysterious blackness of their watery sky. And not only we ourselves, but our ships, our metals, our appliances, would come raining down out of the night. Sometimes sinking things would smite down and crush them, as if it were the judgment of some unseen power above, and sometimes would come things of the utmost rarity or utility or shapes of inspiring suggestion. One can understand, perhaps, something of their behaviour at the descent of a living man, if one thinks what a barbaric people might do, to whom an enhaloed shining creature came suddenly out of the sky.

At one time or another Elstead probably told the officers of the *Ptarmigan* every detail of his strange twelve hours in the abyss. That he also intended to write them down is certain, but he never did, and so unhappily we have to piece together the discrepant fragments of his story from the reminiscences of Commander Simmons, Weybridge, Steevens, Lindley, and the others.

We see the thing darkly in fragmentary glimpses — the huge ghostly building, the bowing, chanting people, with their dark, chameleon-like heads and faintly luminous forms, and Elstead, with his light turned on again, vainly trying to convey to their minds that the cord by which the sphere was held was to be severed. Minute after minute slipped away, and Elstead, looking at his watch, was horrified to find that he had oxygen only for four hours more. But the chant in his honour kept on as remorselessly as if it was the marching song of his approaching death.

The manner of his release he does not understand, but to judge by the end of cord that hung from the sphere, it had been cut through by rubbing against the edge of the altar. Abruptly the sphere rolled over, and he swept up, out of their world, as an ethereal creature clothed in a vacuum would sweep through our own atmosphere back to its native ether again. He must have torn out of their sight as a hydrogen bubble hastens upwards from our air. A strange ascension it must have seemed to them.

The sphere rushed up with even greater velocity than, when weighed with the lead sinkers, it had rushed down. It became exceedingly hot. It drove up with the windows uppermost, and he remembers the torrent of bubbles frothing

against the glass. Every moment he expected this to fly. Then suddenly something like a huge wheel seemed to be released in his head, the padded compartment began spinning about him, and he fainted. His next recollection was of his cabin, and of the doctor's voice.

But that is the substance of the extraordinary story that Elstead related in fragments to the officers of the *Ptarmigan*. He promised to write it all down at a later date. His mind was chiefly occupied with the improvement of his apparatus, which was effected at Rio.

It remains only to tell that on February 2d, 1896, he made his second descent into the ocean abyss, with the improvements his first experience suggested. What happened we shall probably never know. He never returned. The *Ptarmigan* beat about over the point of his submersion, seeking him in vain for thirteen days. Then she returned to Rio, and the news was telegraphed to his friends. So the matter remains for the present. But it is hardly probable that any further attempt will be made to verify his strange story of these hitherto unsuspected cities of the deep sea.

The People of the Pit

A. Merritt

North of us a shaft of light shot half way to the zenith. It came from behind the five peaks. The beam drove up through a column of blue haze whose edges were marked as sharply as the rain that streams from the edges of a thunder cloud. It was like the flash of a searchlight through an azure mist. It cast no shadows.

As it struck upward, the summits were outlined hard and black and I saw that the whole mountain was shaped like a hand. As the light silhouetted it, the gigantic fingers stretched, the hand seemed to thrust itself forward. It was exactly as though it moved to push something back. The shining beam held steady for a moment; then broke into myriad little luminous globes that swung to and fro and dropped gently. They seemed to be searching.

The forest had become very still. Every wood noise held its breath. I felt the dogs pressing against my legs. They, too, were silent; but every muscle in their bodies trembled, their hair was stiff along their backs and their eyes, fixed on the falling lights, were filmed with the terror glaze.

I looked at Anderson. He was staring at the north where once more the beam had pulsed upward.

“It can’t be the aurora,” I spoke without moving my lips. My mouth was as dry as though Lao T’zai had poured his fear dust down my throat.

“If it is I never saw one like it,” he answered in the same tone. “Besides, who ever heard of an aurora at this time of the year?”

He voiced the thought that was in my own mind.

“It makes me think something is being hunted up there,” he said, “an unholy sort of hunt—it’s well for us to be out of range.”

“The mountain seems to move each time the shaft shoots up,” I said. “What’s it keeping back, Starr? It makes me think of the frozen hand of cloud that Shan Nadour set before the Gate of Ghouls to keep them in the lairs that Eblis cut for them.”

He raised a hand—listening.

From the north and high overhead there came a whispering. It was not the rustling of the aurora, that rushing, crackling sound like the ghosts of winds that blew at Creation racing through the skeleton leaves of ancient trees that sheltered Lilith. It was a whispering that held in it a demand. It was eager. It called us to come up where the beam was flashing. It drew. There was in it a note of inexorable insistence. It touched my heart with a thousand tiny fear-tipped fingers and it filled me with a vast longing to race on and merge myself in the light. It must have been so that Ulysses felt when he strained at the mast and strove to obey the crystal sweet singing of the Sirens.

The whispering grew louder.

“What the hell’s the matter with those dogs?” cried Anderson savagely. “Look at them!”

The malamutes, whining, were racing away toward the light. We saw them disappear among the trees. There came back to us a mournful howling. Then that too died away and left nothing but the insistent murmuring overhead.

The glade we had camped in looked straight to the north. We had reached, I suppose, three hundred miles above the first great bend of the Koskokwim toward the Yukon. Certainly we were in an untrodden part of the wilderness. We had pushed through from Dawson at the breaking of the spring, on a fair lead to the lost five peaks between which, so the Athabaskan medicine man had told us, the gold streams out like putty from a clenched fist. Not an Indian were we able to get to go with us. The land of the Hand Mountain was accursed, they said. We had sighted the peaks the night before, their tops faintly outlined against a pulsing glow. And now we saw the light that had led us to them.

Anderson stiffened. Through the whispering had broken a curious pad-pad and a rustling. It sounded as though a small bear were moving toward us. I threw a pile of wood on the fire and, as it blazed up, saw something break through the bushes. It walked on all fours, but it did not walk like a bear. All at once it flashed upon me—it was like a baby crawling upstairs. The forepaws lifted themselves in grotesquely infantile fashion. It was grotesque but it was—terrible. It drew closer. We reached for our guns—and dropped them. Suddenly we knew that this crawling thing was a man!

It was a man. Still with the high climbing pad-pad he swayed to the fire. He stopped.

“Safe,” whispered the crawling man, in a voice that was an echo of the murmur overhead. “Quite safe here. They can’t get out of the blue, you know. They can’t get you—unless you go to them—”

He fell over on his side. We ran to him. Anderson knelt.

“God’s love!” he said. “Frank, look at this!”

He pointed to the hands. The wrists were covered with torn rags of a heavy shirt. The hands themselves were stumps! The fingers had been bent into the palms and the flesh had been worn to the bone. They looked like the feet of a little black elephant! My eyes traveled down the body. Around the waist was a heavy band of yellow metal. From it fell a ring and a dozen links of shining white chain!

“What is he? Where did he come from?” said Anderson. “Look, he’s fast asleep—yet even in his sleep his arms try to climb and his feet draw themselves up one after the other! And his knees—how in God’s name was he ever able to move on them?”

It was even as he said. In the deep sleep that had come upon the crawler, arms and legs kept raising in a deliberate, dreadful climbing motion. It was as though they had a life of their own—they kept their movement independently of the motionless body. They were semaphoric motions. If you have ever stood at the back of a train and had watched the semaphores rise and fall you will know exactly what I mean.

Abruptly the overhead whispering ceased. The shaft of light dropped and did not rise again. The crawling man became still. A gentle glow began to grow around us. It was dawn, and the short Alaskan summer night was over. Anderson rubbed his eyes and turned to me a haggard face.

“Man!” he exclaimed. “You look as though you have been through a spell of sickness!”

“No more than you, Starr,” I said. “What do you make of it all?”

“I’m thinking our only answer lies there,” he answered, pointing to the figure that lay so motionless under the blankets we had thrown over him. “Whatever it was—that’s what it was after. There was no aurora about that light, Frank. It was like the flaring up of some queer hell the preacher folk never frightened us with.”

“We’ll go no further today,” I said. “I wouldn’t wake him for all the gold that runs between the fingers of the five peaks—nor for all the devils that may be behind them.”

The crawling man lay in a sleep as deep as the Styx. We bathed and bandaged the pads that had been his hands. Arms and legs were as rigid as though they were crutches. He did not move while we worked over him. He lay as he had fallen, the arms a trifle raised, the knees bent.

“Why did he crawl?” whispered Anderson. “Why didn’t he walk?”

I was filing the band about the waist. It was gold, but it was like no gold I had ever handled. Pure gold is soft. This was soft, but it had an unclean, viscid life of its own. It clung to the file. I gashed through it, bent it away from the body and hurled it far off. It was— loathsome!

All that day he slept. Darkness came and still he slept. That night there was no shaft of light, no questing globes, no whispering. Some spell of horror seemed lifted from the land. It was noon when the crawling man awoke. I jumped as the pleasant, drawling voice sounded.

“How long have I slept?” he asked. His pale blue eyes grew quizzical as I stared at him.

“A night—and almost two days,” I said.

“Was there any light up there last night?” He nodded to the north eagerly. “Any whispering?”

“Neither,” I answered. His head fell back and he stared up at the sky.

“They’ve given it up, then?” he said at last.

“Who have given it up?” asked Anderson.

“Why, the people of the pit,” replied the crawling man quietly.

We stared at him.

“The people of the pit,” he said. “Things that the Devil made before the Flood and that somehow have escaped God’s vengeance. You weren’t in any danger from them—unless you had followed their call. They can’t get any further than the blue haze. I was their prisoner,” he added simply. “They were trying to whisper me back to them!”

Anderson and I looked at each other, the same thought in both our minds.

“You’re wrong,” said the crawling man. “I’m not insane. Give me a very little to drink. I’m going to die soon, but I want you to take me as far south as you can before I die, and afterwards I want you to build a big fire and burn me. I want to be in such shape that no infernal spell of theirs can drag my body back to them. You’ll do it too, when I’ve told you about them—” He hesitated. “I think their chain is off me?” he said.

“I cut it off,” I answered shortly.

“Thank God for that, too,” whispered the crawling man.

He drank the brandy and water we lifted to his lips.

“Arms and legs quite dead,” he said. “Dead as I’ll be soon. Well, they did well for me. Now I’ll tell you what’s up there behind that hand. Hell!

“Now listen. My name is Stanton—Sinclair Stanton. Class of 1900, Yale. Explorer. I started away from Dawson last year to hunt for five peaks that rise like a hand in a haunted country and run pure gold between them. Same thing you were after? I thought so. Late last fall my comrade sickened. Sent him back with some Indians. Little later all my Indians ran away from me. I decided I’d stick, built a cabin, stocked myself with food and lay down to winter it. In the spring I started off again. Little less than two weeks ago I sighted the five peaks. Not from this side, though—the other. Give me some more brandy.

“I’d made too wide a detour,” he went on. “I’d gotten too far north. I beat back. From this side you see nothing but forest straight up to the base of the Hand Mountain. Over on the other side—”

He was silent for a moment.

“Over there is forest, too. But it doesn’t reach so far. No! I came out of it. Stretching miles in front of me was a level plain. It was as worn and ancient looking as the desert around the ruins of Babylon. At its end rose the peaks. Between me and them—far off—was what looked like a low dike of rocks. Then—I ran across the road!”

“The road!” cried Anderson incredulously.

“The road,” said the crawling man. “A fine smooth stone road. It ran straight on to the mountain. Oh, it was road all right—and worn as though millions and millions of feet had passed over it for thousands of years. On each side of it were sand and heaps of stones. After a while, I began to notice these stones. They were cut, and the shape of the heaps somehow gave me the idea that a hundred thousand years ago they might have been houses. I sensed man about them and at the same time they smelled of immemorial antiquity. Well—

“The peaks grew closer. The heaps of ruins thicker. Something inexpressibly desolate hovered over them; something reached from them that struck my heart like the touch of ghosts so old that they could be only the ghosts of ghosts. I went on.

“And now I saw that what I had thought to be the low rock range at the base of the peaks was a thicker litter of ruins. The Hand Mountain was really much farther off. The road passed between two high rocks that raised themselves like a gateway.”

The crawling man paused.

“They were a gateway,” he said. “I reached them. I went between them. And then I sprawled and clutched the earth in sheer awe! I was on a broad stone platform. Before me was—sheer space! Imagine the Grand Canyon five times as wide and with the bottom dropped out. That is what I was looking into. It was like peeping over the edge of a cleft world down into the infinity where the planets roll! On the far side stood the five peaks. They looked like a gigantic warning hand stretched up to the sky. The lip of the abyss curved away on each side of me.

“I could see down perhaps a thousand feet. Then a thick blue haze shut out

the eye. It was like the blue you see gather on the high hills at dusk. And the pit—it was awesome; awesome as the Maori Gulf of Ranalak, that sinks between the living and the dead and that only the freshly released soul has strength to leap—but never strength to cross again.

“I crept back from the verge and stood up, weak. My hand rested against one of the pillars of the gateway. There was carving upon it. It bore in still sharp outlines the heroic figure of a man. His back was turned. His arms were outstretched. There was an odd, peaked headdress upon him. I looked at the opposite pillar. It bore a figure exactly similar. The pillars were triangular and the carvings were on the side away from the pit. The figures seemed to be holding something back. I looked closer. Behind the outstretched hands I seemed to see other shapes.

“I traced them out vaguely. Suddenly I felt unaccountably sick. There had come to me an impression of enormous upright slugs. Their swollen bodies were faintly cut—all except the heads which were well-marked globes. They were—unutterably loathsome. I turned from the gates back to the void. I stretched myself upon the slab and looked over the edge.

“A stairway led down into the pit!”

“A stairway!” we cried.

“A stairway,” repeated the crawling man as patiently as before. “It seemed not so much carved out of the rock as built into it. The slabs were about six feet long and three feet wide. It ran down from the platform and vanished into the blue haze.”

“But who could build such a stairway as that?” I said. “A stairway built into the wall of a precipice and leading down into a bottomless pit!”

“Not bottomless,” said the crawling man quietly. “There was a bottom. I reached it!”

“Reached it?” we repeated.

“Yes, by the stairway,” answered the crawling man. “You see—I went down it!”

“Yes,” he said. “I went down the stairway. But not that day. I made my

camp back of the gates. At dawn I filled my knapsack with food, my two canteens with water from a spring that wells up there by the gateway, walked between the carved monoliths and stepped over the edge of the pit.

“The steps ran along the side of the rock at a forty-degree pitch. As I went down and down I studied them. They were of a greenish rock quite different from the granitic porphyry that formed the wall of the precipice. At first I thought that the builders had taken advantage of an outcropping stratum, and had carved from it their gigantic flight. But the regularity of the angle at which it fell made me doubtful of this theory.

“After I had gone perhaps half a mile I stepped out upon a landing. From this landing the stairs made a V-shaped turn and ran on downward, clinging to the cliff at the same angle as the first flight; it was a zigzag, and after I had made three of these turns I knew that the steps dropped straight down in a succession of such angles. No strata could be so regular as that. No, the stairway was built by hands! But whose? The answer is in those ruins around the edge, I think—never to be read.

“By noon I had lost sight of the five peaks and the lip of the abyss. Above me, below me, was nothing but the blue haze. Beside me, too, was nothingness, for the further breast of rock had long since vanished. I felt no dizziness, and any trace of fear was swallowed in a vast curiosity. What was I to discover? Some ancient and wonderful civilization that had ruled when the Poles were tropical gardens? Nothing living, I felt sure—all was too old for life. Still, a stairway so wonderful must lead to something quite as wonderful, I knew. What was it? I went on.

“At regular intervals I had passed the mouths of small caves. There would be two thousand steps and then an opening, two thousand more steps and an opening—and so on and on. Late that afternoon I stopped before one of these clefts. I suppose I had gone then three miles down the pit, although the angles were such that I had walked in all fully ten miles. I examined the entrance. On each side were carved the figures of the great portal above, only now they were standing face forward, the arms outstretched as though to hold something back from the outer depths. Their faces were covered with veils. There were no hideous shapes behind them. I went inside. The fissure ran back for twenty yards like a burrow. It was dry and perfectly light. Outside I could see the blue haze rising upward like a column, its edges clearly marked. I felt an extraordinary sense of security, although I had not been conscious of any fear. I felt that the figures at the entrance were guardians—but against what?

“The blue haze thickened and grew faintly luminescent. I fancied that it was dusk above. I ate and drank a little and slept. When I awoke the blue had lightened again, and I fancied it was dawn above. I went on. I forgot the gulf yawning at my side. I felt no fatigue and little hunger or thirst, although I had drunk and eaten sparingly. That night I spent within another of the caves, and at dawn I descended again.

“It was late that day when I first saw the city—”

He was silent for a time.

“The city,” he said at last; “there is a city, you know. But not such a city as you have ever seen—nor any other man who has lived to tell of it. The pit, I think, is shaped like a bottle; the opening before the five peaks is the neck. But how wide the bottom is I do not know—thousands of miles maybe. I had begun to catch little glints of light far down in the blue. Then I saw the tops of—trees, I suppose they are. But not our kind of trees—unpleasant, snaky kind of trees. They reared themselves on high thin trunks and their tops were nests of thick tendrils with ugly little leaves like arrow heads. The trees were red, a vivid angry red. Here and there I glimpsed spots of shining yellow. I knew these were water because I could see things breaking through their surface or at least I could see the splash and ripple, but what it was that disturbed them I never saw.

“Straight beneath me was the—city. I looked down upon mile after mile of closely packed cylinders. They lay upon their sides in pyramids of three, of five—of dozens—piled upon each other. It is hard to make you see what that city is like—look, suppose you have water pipes of a certain length and first you lay three of them side by side and on top of them you place two and on these two one; or suppose you take five for a foundation and place on these four and then three, then two and then one. Do you see? That was the way they looked. But they were topped by towers, by minarets, by flares, by fans and twisted monstrosities. They gleamed as though coated with pale rose flame. Beside them the venomous red trees raised themselves like the heads of hydras guarding nests of gigantic, jeweled and sleeping worms!

“A few feet beneath me the stairway jutted out into a titanic arch, unearthly as the span that bridges Hell and leads to Asgard. It curved out and down straight through the top of the highest pile of carven cylinders and then it vanished through it. It was appalling—it was demonic—”

The crawling man stopped. His eyes rolled up into his head. He trembled and his arms and legs began their horrible crawling movement. From his lips came a whispering. It was an echo of the high murmuring we had heard the night he came to us. I put my hands over his eyes. He quieted.

“The Things Accursed!” he said. “The People of the Pit! Did I whisper? Yes—but they can’t get me now—they can’t!”

After a time he began as quietly as before.

“I crossed the span. I went down through the top of that—building. Blue darkness shrouded me for a moment and I felt the steps twist into a spiral. I wound down and then—I was standing high up in—I can’t tell you in what, I’ll have to call it a room. We have no images for what is in the pit. A hundred feet below me was the floor. The walls sloped down and out from where I stood in a series of widening crescents. The place was colossal—and it was filled with a curious mottled red light. It was like the light inside a green and gold flecked fire opal. I went down to the last step. Far in front of me rose a high, columned altar. Its pillars were carved in monstrous scrolls—like mad octopuses with a thousand drunken tentacles; they rested on the backs of shapeless monstrosities carved in crimson stone. The altar front was a gigantic slab of purple covered with carvings.

“I can’t describe these carvings! No human being could—the human eye cannot grasp them any more than it can grasp the shapes that haunt the fourth dimension. Only a subtle sense in the back of the brain sensed them vaguely. They were formless things that gave no conscious image, yet pressed into the mind like small hot seals—ideas of hate—of combats between unthinkable monstrous things—victories in a nebulous hell of steaming, obscene jungles—aspirations and ideals immeasurably loathsome—

“And as I stood I grew aware of something that lay behind the lip of the altar fifty feet above me. I knew it was there—I felt it with every hair and every tiny bit of my skin. Something infinitely malignant, infinitely horrible, infinitely ancient. It lurked, it brooded, it threatened and it—was invisible!

“Behind me was a circle of blue light. I ran for it. Something urged me to turn back, to climb the stairs and make away. It was impossible. Repulsion for that unseen Thing raced me onward as though a current had my feet. I passed through the circle. I was out on a street that stretched on into dim distance between rows of the carven cylinders.

“Here and there the red trees arose. Between them rolled the stone burrows. And now I could take in the amazing ornamentation that clothed them. They were like the trunks of smooth-skinned trees that had fallen and had been clothed with high-reaching noxious orchids. Yes—those cylinders were like that—and more. They should have gone out with the dinosaurs. They were—monstrous. They struck the eyes like a blow and they passed across the nerves like a rasp. And nowhere was there sight or sound of living thing.

“There were circular openings in the cylinders like the circle in the Temple of the Stairway. I passed through one of them. I was in a long, bare vaulted room whose curving sides half closed twenty feet over my head, leaving a wide slit that opened into another vaulted chamber above. There was absolutely nothing in the room save the same mottled reddish light that I had seen in the Temple. I stumbled. I still could see nothing, but there WAS something on the floor over which I had tripped. I reached down—and my hand touched a thing cold and smooth—that moved under it. I turned and ran out of that place—I was filled with a loathing that had in it something of madness—I ran on and on blindly—wringing my hands—weeping with horror—

“When I came to myself I was still among the stone cylinders and red trees. I tried to retrace my steps; to find the Temple. I was more than afraid. I was like a new-loosed soul panic-stricken with the first terrors of Hell. I could not find the Temple! Then the haze began to thicken and glow; the cylinders to shine more brightly. I knew that it was dusk in the world above and I felt that with dusk my time of peril had come; that the thickening of the haze was the signal for the awakening of whatever things lived in this pit.

“I scrambled up the sides of one of the burrows. I hid behind a twisted nightmare of stone. Perhaps, I thought, there was a chance of remaining hidden until the blue lightened, and the peril passed. There began to grow around me a murmur. It was everywhere—and it grew and grew into a great whispering. I peeped from the side of the stone down into the street. I saw lights passing and repassing. More and more lights—they swam out of the circular doorways and they thronged the street. The highest were eight feet above the pave; the lowest perhaps two. They hurried, they sauntered, they bowed, they stopped and whispered—and there was nothing under them!”

“Nothing under them!” breathed Anderson.

“No,” he went on, “that was the terrible part of it—there was nothing under

them. Yet certainly the lights were living things. They had consciousness, volition, thought—what else I did not know. They were nearly two feet across—the largest. Their center was a bright nucleus—red, blue, green. This nucleus faded off, gradually, into a misty glow that did not end abruptly. It, too, seemed to fade off into nothingness—but a nothingness that had under it a—somethingness. I strained my eyes trying to grasp this body into which the lights merged and which one could only feel was there, but could not see.

“And all at once I grew rigid. Something cold, and thin like a whip, had touched my face. I turned my head. Close behind were three of the lights. They were a pale blue. They looked at me—if you can imagine lights that are eyes. Another whiplash gripped my shoulder. Under the closest light came a shrill whispering. I shrieked. Abruptly the murmuring in the street ceased. I dragged my eyes from the pale blue globe that held them and looked out—the lights in the streets were rising by myriads to the level of where I stood! There they stopped and peered at me. They crowded and jostled as though they were a crowd of curious people—on Broadway. I felt a score of the lashes touch me—

“When I came to myself I was again in the great Place of the Stairway, lying at the foot of the altar. All was silent. There were no lights—only the mottled red glow. I jumped to my feet and ran toward the steps. Something jerked me back to my knees. And then I saw that around my waist had been fastened a yellow ring of metal. From it hung a chain and this chain passed up over the lip of the high ledge. I was chained to the altar!

“I reached into my pockets for my knife to cut through the ring. It was not there! I had been stripped of everything except one of the canteens that I had hung around my neck and which I suppose They had thought was—part of me. I tried to break the ring. It seemed alive. It writhed in my hands and it drew itself closer around me! I pulled at the chain. It was immovable. There came to me the consciousness of the unseen Thing above the altar. I groveled at the foot of the slab and wept. Think—alone in that place of strange light with the brooding ancient Horror above me—a monstrous Thing, a Thing unthinkable—an unseen Thing that poured forth horror—

“After a while I gripped myself. Then I saw beside one of the pillars a yellow bowl filled with a thick white liquid. I drank it. If it killed I did not care. But its taste was pleasant and as I drank, strength came back to me with a rush. Clearly I was not to be starved. The lights, whatever they were, had a conception of human needs.

“And now the reddish mottled gleam began to deepen. Outside arose the humming and through the circle that was the entrance came streaming the globes. They ranged themselves in ranks until they filled the Temple. Their whispering grew into a chant, a cadenced whispering chant that rose and fell, rose and fell, while to its rhythm the globes lifted and sank, lifted and sank.

“All that night the lights came and went—and all that night the chant sounded as they rose and fell. At the last I felt myself only an atom of consciousness in a sea of cadenced whispering; an atom that rose and fell with the bowing globes. I tell you that even my heart pulsed in unison with them! The red glow faded, the lights streamed out; the whispering died. I was again alone and I knew that once again day had broken in my own world.

“I slept. When I awoke I found beside the pillar more of the white liquid. I scrutinized the chain that held me to the altar. I began to rub two of the links together. I did this for hours. When the red began to thicken there was a ridge worn in the links. Hope rushed up within me. There was, then, a chance to escape.

“With the thickening the lights came again. All through that night the whispering chant sounded, and the globes rose and fell. The chant seized me. It pulsed through me until every nerve and muscle quivered to it. My lips began to quiver. They strove like a man trying to cry out in a nightmare. And at last they, too, were whispering the chant of the people of the pit. My body bowed in unison with the lights—I was, in movement and sound, one with the nameless things while my soul sank back sick with horror and powerless. While I whispered I—saw them!”

“Saw the lights?” I asked stupidly.

“Saw the Things under the lights,” he answered. “Great transparent snail-like bodies—dozens of waving tentacles stretching from them—round gaping mouths under the luminous seeing globes. They were like the ghosts of inconceivably monstrous slugs! I could see through them. And as I stared, still bowing and whispering, the dawn came and they streamed to and through the entrance. They did not crawl or walk—they floated! They floated and were—gone!

“I did not sleep. I worked all that day at my chain. By the thickening of the red I had worn it a sixth through. And all that night I whispered and bowed with the pit people, joining in their chant to the Thing that brooded above me!

“Twice again the red thickened and the chant held me—then on the morning of the fifth day I broke through the worn links of the chain. I was free! I drank from the bowl of white liquid and poured what was left in my flask. I ran to the Stairway. I rushed up and past that unseen Horror behind the altar ledge and was out upon the Bridge. I raced across the span and up the Stairway.

“Can you think what it is to climb straight up the verge of a cleftworld—with hell behind you? Hell was behind me and terror rode me. The city had long been lost in the blue haze before I knew that I could climb no more. My heart beat upon my ears like a sledge. I fell before one of the little caves feeling that here at last was sanctuary. I crept far back within it and waited for the haze to thicken. Almost at once it did so. From far below me came a vast and angry murmur. At the mouth of the rift I saw a light pulse up through the blue; die down, and as it dimmed I saw myriads of the globes that are the eyes of the pit people swing downward into the abyss. Again and again the light pulsed and the globes fell. They were hunting me. The whispering grew louder, more insistent.

“There grew in me the dreadful desire to join in the whispering as I had done in the Temple. I bit my lips through and through to still them. All that night the beam shot up through the abyss, the globes swung and the whispering sounded—and now I knew the purpose of the caves and of the sculptured figures that still had power to guard them. But what were the people who had carved them? Why had they built their city around the verge and why had they set that Stairway in the pit? What had they been to those Things that dwelt at the bottom and what use had the Things been to them that they should live beside their dwelling place? That there had been some purpose was certain. No work so prodigious as the Stairway would have been undertaken otherwise. But what was the purpose? And why was it that those who had dwelt about the abyss had passed away ages gone, and the dwellers in the abyss still lived? I could find no answer—nor can I find any now. I have not the shred of a theory.

“Dawn came as I wondered and with it silence. I drank what was left of the liquid in my canteen, crept from the cave and began to climb again. That afternoon my legs gave out. I tore off my shirt, made from it pads for my knees and coverings for my hands. I crawled upward. I crawled up and up. And again I crept into one of the caves and waited until again the blue thickened, the shaft of light shot through it and the whispering came.

“But now there was a new note in the whispering. It was no longer threatening.

It called and coaxed. It drew. A new terror gripped me. There had come upon me a mighty desire to leave the cave and go out where the lights swung; to let them do with me as they pleased, carry me where they wished. The desire grew. It gained fresh impulse with every rise of the beam until at last I vibrated with the desire as I had vibrated to the chant in the Temple. My body was a pendulum. Up would go the beam and I would swing toward it! Only my soul kept steady. It held me fast to the floor of the cave. And all that night it fought with my body against the spell of the pit people.

“Dawn came. Again I crept from the cave and faced the Stairway. I could not rise. My hands were torn and bleeding; my knees an agony. I forced myself upward step by step. After a while my hands became numb, the pain left my knees. They deadened. Step by step my will drove my body upward upon them.

“And then—a nightmare of crawling up infinite stretches of steps—memories of dull horror while hidden within caves with the lights pulsing without and whisperings that called and called me—memory of a time when I awoke to find that my body was obeying the call and had carried me halfway out between the guardians of the portals while thousands of gleaming globes rested in the blue haze and watched me. Glimpses of bitter fights against sleep and always, always—a climb up and up along infinite distances of steps that led from Abaddon to a Paradise of blue sky and open world!

“At last a consciousness of the clear sky close above me, the lip of the pit before me—memory of passing between the great portals of the pit and of steady withdrawal from it—dreams of giant men with strange peaked crowns and veiled faces who pushed me onward and onward and held back Roman-candle globules of light that sought to draw me back to a gulf wherein planets swam between the branches of red trees that had snakes for crowns.

“And then a long, long sleep—how long God alone knows—in a cleft of rocks; an awakening to see far in the north the beam still rising and falling, the lights still hunting, the whispering high above me calling.

“Again crawling on dead arms and legs that moved—that moved—like the Ancient Mariner’s ship—without volition of mine, but that carried me from a haunted place. And then—your fire—and this— safety!”

The crawling man smiled at us for a moment. Then swiftly life faded from his face. He slept.

That afternoon we struck camp and carrying the crawling man started back south. For three days we carried him and still he slept. And on the third day, still sleeping, he died. We built a great pile of wood and we burned his body as he had asked. We scattered his ashes about the forest with the ashes of the trees that had consumed him. It must be a great magic indeed that could disentangle those ashes and draw him back in a rushing cloud to the pit he called Accursed. I do not think that even the People of the Pit have such a spell. No.

But we did not return to the five peaks to see.

The Willows

Algernon Blackwood

After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Buda-Pesth, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in colour as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe*, meaning marshes.

In high flood this great acreage of sand, shingle-beds, and willow-grown islands is almost topped by the water, but in normal seasons the bushes bend and rustle in the free winds, showing their silver leaves to the sunshine in an ever-moving plain of bewildering beauty. These willows never attain to the dignity of trees; they have no rigid trunks; they remain humble bushes, with rounded tops and soft outline, swaying on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and *alive*. For the wind sends waves rising and falling over the whole surface, waves of leaves instead of waves of water, green swells like the sea, too, until the branches turn and lift, and then silvery white as their under-side turns to the sun.

Happy to slip beyond the control of the stern banks, the Danube here wanders about at will among the intricate network of channels intersecting the islands everywhere with broad avenues down which the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the flood-time obliterates their very existence.

Properly speaking, this fascinating part of the river's life begins soon after leaving Pressburg, and we, in our Canadian canoe, with gipsy tent and frying-pan on board, reached it on the crest of a rising flood about mid-July. That very same morning, when the sky was reddening before sunrise, we had slipped swiftly through still-sleeping Vienna, leaving it a couple of hours later a mere patch of smoke against the blue hills of the Wienerwald on the horizon; we had breakfasted below Fischeramend under a grove of birch trees roaring in

the wind; and had then swept on the tearing current past Orth, Hainburg, Petronell (the old Roman Carnuntum of Marcus Aurelius,) and so under the frowning heights of Theben on a spur of the Carpathians, where the March steals in quietly from the left and the frontier is crossed between Austria and Hungary.

Racing along at twelve kilometres an hour soon took us well into Hungary, and the muddy waters—sure sign of flood—sent us aground on many a shingle-bed, and twisted us like a cork in many a sudden belching whirlpool before the towers of Pressburg (Hungarian, Poszóny) showed against the sky; and then the canoe, leaping like a spirited horse, flew at top speed under the grey walls, negotiated safely the sunken chain of the Fliegende Brücke ferry, turned the corner sharply to the left, and plunged on yellow foam into the wilderness of islands, sand-banks, and swampland beyond—the land of the willows.

The change came suddenly, as when a series of bioscope pictures snaps down on the streets of a town and shifts without warning into the scenery of lake and forest. We entered the land of desolation on wings, and in less than half an hour there was neither boat nor fishing-hut nor red roof, nor any single sign of human habitation and civilisation within sight. The sense of remoteness from the world of human kind, the utter isolation, the fascination of this singular world of willows, winds, and waters, instantly laid its spell upon us both, so that we allowed laughingly to one another that we ought by rights to have held some special kind of passport to admit us, and that we had, somewhat audaciously, come without asking leave into a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic—a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them.

Though still early in the afternoon, the ceaseless buffetings of a most tempestuous wind made us feel weary, and we at once began casting about for a suitable camping-ground for the night. But the bewildering character of the islands made landing difficult; the swirling flood carried us in-shore and then swept us out again; the willow branches tore our hands as we seized them to stop the canoe, and we pulled many a yard of sandy bank into the water before at length we shot with a great sideways blow from the wind into a backwater and managed to beach the bows in a cloud of spray. Then we lay panting and laughing after our exertions on hot yellow sand, sheltered from the wind, and in the full blaze of a scorching sun, a cloudless blue sky above, and an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides,

shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of our efforts.

“What a river!” I said to my companion, thinking of all the way we had travelled from the source in the Black Forest, and how he had often been obliged to wade and push in the upper shallows at the beginning of June.

“Won’t stand much nonsense now, will it?” he said, pulling the canoe a little farther into safety up the sand, and then composing himself for a nap.

I lay by his side, happy and peaceful in the bath of the elements—water, wind, sand, and the great fire of the sun—thinking of the long journey that lay behind us, and of the great stretch before us to the Black Sea, and how lucky I was to have such a delightful and charming travelling companion as my friend, the Swede.

We had made many similar journeys together, but the Danube, more than any other river I knew, impressed us from the very beginning with its *aliveness*. From its tiny bubbling entry into the world among the pinewood gardens of Donaueschingen, until this moment when it began to play the great river-game of losing itself among the deserted swamps, unobserved, unrestrained, it had seemed to us like following the growth of some living creature. Sleepy at first, but later developing violent desires as it became conscious of its deep soul, it rolled, like some huge fluid being, through all the countries we had passed, holding our little craft on its mighty shoulders, playing roughly with us sometimes, yet always friendly and well-meaning, till at length we had come inevitably to regard it as a Great Personage.

How, indeed, could it be otherwise, since it told us so much of its secret life? At night we heard it singing to the moon as we lay in our tent, uttering that odd sibilant note peculiar to itself and said to be caused by the rapid tearing of the pebbles along its bed, so great is its hurrying speed. We knew, too, the voice of its gurgling whirlpools, suddenly bubbling up on a surface previously quite calm; the roar of its shallows and swift rapids; its constant steady thundering below all mere surface sounds; and that ceaseless tearing of its icy waters at the banks. How it stood up and shouted when the rains fell flat upon its face! And how its laughter roared out when the wind blew upstream and tried to stop its growing speed! We knew all its sounds and voices, its tumblings and foamings, its unnecessary splashing against the bridges; that self-conscious chatter when there were hills to look on; the affected dignity of its speech when it passed

through the little towns, far too important to laugh; and all these faint, sweet whisperings when the sun caught it fairly in some slow curve and poured down upon it till the steam rose.

It was full of tricks, too, in its early life before the great world knew it. There were places in the upper reaches among the Swabian forests, when yet the first whispers of its destiny had not reached it, where it elected to disappear through holes in the ground, to appear again on the other side of the porous limestone hills and start a new river with another name; leaving, too, so little water in its own bed that we had to climb out and wade and push the canoe through miles of shallows.

And a chief pleasure, in those early days of its irresponsible youth, was to lie low, like Brer Fox, just before the little turbulent tributaries came to join it from the Alps, and to refuse to acknowledge them when in, but to run for miles side by side, the dividing line well marked, the very levels different, the Danube utterly declining to recognise the newcomer. Below Passau, however, it gave up this particular trick, for there the Inn comes in with a thundering power impossible to ignore, and so pushes and incommodes the parent river that there is hardly room for them in the long twisting gorge that follows, and the Danube is shoved this way and that against the cliffs, and forced to hurry itself with great waves and much dashing to and fro in order to get through in time. And during the fight our canoe slipped down from its shoulder to its breast, and had the time of its life among the struggling waves. But the Inn taught the old river a lesson, and after Passau it no longer pretended to ignore new arrivals.

This was many days back, of course, and since then we had come to know other aspects of the great creature, and across the Bavarian wheat plain of Straubing she wandered so slowly under the blazing June sun that we could well imagine only the surface inches were water, while below there moved, concealed as by a silken mantle, a whole army of Undines, passing silently and unseen down to the sea, and very leisurely too, lest they be discovered.

Much, too, we forgave her because of her friendliness to the birds and animals that haunted the shores. Cormorants lined the banks in lonely places in rows like short black palings; grey crows crowded the shingle-beds; storks stood fishing in the vistas of shallower water that opened up between the islands, and hawks, swans, and marsh birds of all sorts filled the air with glinting wings and singing, petulant cries. It was impossible to feel annoyed with the river's vagaries after seeing a deer leap with a splash into the water at

sunrise and swim past the bows of the canoe; and often we saw fawns peering at us from the underbrush, or looked straight into the brown eyes of a stag as we charged full tilt round a corner and entered another reach of the river. Foxes, too, everywhere haunted the banks, tripping daintily among the driftwood and disappearing so suddenly that it was impossible to see how they managed it.

But now, after leaving Pressburg, everything changed a little, and the Danube became more serious. It ceased trifling. It was half-way to the Black Sea, within scenting distance almost of other, stranger countries where no tricks would be permitted or understood. It became suddenly grown-up, and claimed our respect and even our awe. It broke out into three arms, for one thing, that only met again a hundred kilometres farther down, and for a canoe there were no indications which one was intended to be followed.

“If you take a side channel,” said the Hungarian officer we met in the Pressburg shop while buying provisions, “you may find yourselves, when the flood subsides, forty miles from anywhere, high and dry, and you may easily starve. There are no people, no farms, no fishermen. I warn you not to continue. The river, too, is still rising, and this wind will increase.”

The rising river did not alarm us in the least, but the matter of being left high and dry by a sudden subsidence of the waters might be serious, and we had consequently laid in an extra stock of provisions. For the rest, the officer’s prophecy held true, and the wind, blowing down a perfectly clear sky, increased steadily till it reached the dignity of a westerly gale.

It was earlier than usual when we camped, for the sun was a good hour or two from the horizon, and leaving my friend still asleep on the hot sand, I wandered about in desultory examination of our hotel. The island, I found, was less than an acre in extent, a mere sandy bank standing some two or three feet above the level of the river. The far end, pointing into the sunset, was covered with flying spray which the tremendous wind drove off the crests of the broken waves. It was triangular in shape, with the apex up stream.

I stood there for several minutes, watching the impetuous crimson flood bearing down with a shouting roar, dashing in waves against the bank as though to sweep it bodily away, and then swirling by in two foaming streams on either side. The ground seemed to shake with the shock and rush, while the furious movement of the willow bushes as the wind poured over them increased the curious illusion that the island itself actually moved. Above, for a mile or two, I

could see the great river descending upon me: it was like looking up the slope of a sliding hill, white with foam, and leaping up everywhere to show itself to the sun.

The rest of the island was too thickly grown with willows to make walking pleasant, but I made the tour, nevertheless. From the lower end the light, of course, changed, and the river looked dark and angry. Only the backs of the flying waves were visible, streaked with foam, and pushed forcibly by the great puffs of wind that fell upon them from behind. For a short mile it was visible, pouring in and out among the islands, and then disappearing with a huge sweep into the willows, which closed about it like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there together in such overpowering numbers.

Altogether it was an impressive scene, with its utter loneliness, its bizarre suggestion; and as I gazed, long and curiously, a singular emotion began to stir somewhere in the depths of me. Midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept, unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm.

A rising river, perhaps, always suggests something of the ominous: many of the little islands I saw before me would probably have been swept away by the morning; this resistless, thundering flood of water touched the sense of awe. Yet I was aware that my uneasiness lay deeper far than the emotions of awe and wonder. It was not that I felt. Nor had it directly to do with the power of the driving wind—this shouting hurricane that might almost carry up a few acres of willows into the air and scatter them like so much chaff over the landscape. The wind was simply enjoying itself, for nothing rose out of the flat landscape to stop it, and I was conscious of sharing its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement. Yet this novel emotion had nothing to do with the wind. Indeed, so vague was the sense of distress I experienced, that it was impossible to trace it to its source and deal with it accordingly, though I was aware somehow that it had to do with my realisation of our utter insignificance before this unrestrained power of the elements about me. The huge-grown river had something to do with it too—a vague, unpleasant idea that we had somehow trifled with these great elemental forces in whose power we lay helpless every hour of the day and night. For here, indeed, they were gigantically at play together, and the sight appealed to the imagination.

But my emotion, so far as I could understand it, seemed to attach itself more particularly to the willow bushes, to these acres and acres of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach, pressing upon the river as though to suffocate it, standing in dense array mile after mile beneath the sky, watching, waiting, listening. And, apart quite from the elements, the willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us.

Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt.

With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different, I felt. Some essence emanated from them that besieged the heart. A sense of awe awakened, true, but of awe touched somewhere by a vague terror. Their serried ranks, growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where we were intruders, a world where we were not wanted or invited to remain—where we ran grave risks perhaps!

The feeling, however, though it refused to yield its meaning entirely to analysis, did not at the time trouble me by passing into menace. Yet it never left me quite, even during the very practical business of putting up the tent in a hurricane of wind and building a fire for the stew-pot. It remained, just enough to bother and perplex, and to rob a most delightful camping-ground of a good portion of its charm. To my companion, however, I said nothing, for he was a man I considered devoid of imagination. In the first place, I could never have explained to him what I meant, and in the second, he would have laughed stupidly at me if I had.

There was a slight depression in the centre of the island, and here we pitched the tent. The surrounding willows broke the wind a bit.

“A poor camp,” observed the imperturbable Swede when at last the tent

stood upright; “no stones and precious little firewood. I’m for moving on early to-morrow—eh? This sand won’t hold anything.”

But the experience of a collapsing tent at midnight had taught us many devices, and we made the cosy gipsy house as safe as possible, and then set about collecting a store of wood to last till bed-time. Willow bushes drop no branches, and driftwood was our only source of supply. We hunted the shores pretty thoroughly. Everywhere the banks were crumbling as the rising flood tore at them and carried away great portions with a splash and a gurgle.

“The island’s much smaller than when we landed,” said the accurate Swede. “It won’t last long at this rate. We’d better drag the canoe close to the tent, and be ready to start at a moment’s notice. *I shall sleep in my clothes.*”

He was a little distance off, climbing along the bank, and I heard his rather jolly laugh as he spoke.

“By Jove!” I heard him call, a moment later, and turned to see what had caused his exclamation. But for the moment he was hidden by the willows, and I could not find him.

“What in the world’s this?” I heard him cry again, and this time his voice had become serious.

I ran up quickly and joined him on the bank. He was looking over the river, pointing at something in the water.

“Good heavens, it’s a man’s body!” he cried excitedly. “Look!”

A black thing, turning over and over in the foaming waves, swept rapidly past. It kept disappearing and coming up to the surface again. It was about twenty feet from the shore, and just as it was opposite to where we stood it lurched round and looked straight at us. We saw its eyes reflecting the sunset, and gleaming an odd yellow as the body turned over. Then it gave a swift, gulping plunge, and dived out of sight in a flash.

“An otter, by gad!” we exclaimed in the same breath, laughing.

It was an otter, alive, and out on the hunt; yet it had looked exactly like the body of a drowned man turning helplessly in the current. Far below it came to the

surface once again, and we saw its black skin, wet and shining in the sunlight.

Then, too, just as we turned back, our arms full of driftwood, another thing happened to recall us to the river bank. This time it really was a man, and what was more, a man in a boat. Now a small boat on the Danube was an unusual sight at any time, but here in this deserted region, and at flood time, it was so unexpected as to constitute a real event. We stood and stared.

Whether it was due to the slanting sunlight, or the refraction from the wonderfully illumined water, I cannot say, but, whatever the cause, I found it difficult to focus my sight properly upon the flying apparition. It seemed, however, to be a man standing upright in a sort of flat-bottomed boat, steering with a long oar, and being carried down the opposite shore at a tremendous pace. He apparently was looking across in our direction, but the distance was too great and the light too uncertain for us to make out very plainly what he was about. It seemed to me that he was gesticulating and making signs at us. His voice came across the water to us shouting something furiously, but the wind drowned it so that no single word was audible. There was something curious about the whole appearance—man, boat, signs, voice—that made an impression on me out of all proportion to its cause.

“He’s crossing himself!” I cried. “Look, he’s making the sign of the Cross!”

“I believe you’re right,” the Swede said, shading his eyes with his hand and watching the man out of sight. He seemed to be gone in a moment, melting away down there into the sea of willows where the sun caught them in the bend of the river and turned them into a great crimson wall of beauty. Mist, too, had begun to rise, so that the air was hazy.

“But what in the world is he doing at nightfall on this flooded river?” I said, half to myself. “Where is he going at such a time, and what did he mean by his signs and shouting? D’you think he wished to warn us about something?”

“He saw our smoke, and thought we were spirits probably,” laughed my companion. “These Hungarians believe in all sorts of rubbish: you remember the shopwoman at Pressburg warning us that no one ever landed here because it belonged to some sort of beings outside man’s world! I suppose they believe in fairies and elementals, possibly demons too. That peasant in the boat saw people on the islands for the first time in his life,” he added, after a slight pause, “and it scared him, that’s all.”

The Swede's tone of voice was not convincing, and his manner lacked something that was usually there. I noted the change instantly while he talked, though without being able to label it precisely.

"If they had enough imagination," I laughed loudly—I remember trying to make as much *noise* as I could—"they might well people a place like this with the old gods of antiquity. The Romans must have haunted all this region more or less with their shrines and sacred groves and elemental deities."

The subject dropped and we returned to our stew-pot, for my friend was not given to imaginative conversation as a rule. Moreover, just then I remember feeling distinctly glad that he was not imaginative; his stolid, practical nature suddenly seemed to me welcome and comforting. It was an admirable temperament, I felt: he could steer down rapids like a red Indian, shoot dangerous bridges and whirlpools better than any white man I ever saw in a canoe. He was a grand fellow for an adventurous trip, a tower of strength when untoward things happened. I looked at his strong face and light curly hair as he staggered along under his pile of driftwood (twice the size of mine!), and I experienced a feeling of relief. Yes, I was distinctly glad just then that the Swede was—what he was, and that he never made remarks that suggested more than they said.

"The river's still rising, though," he added, as if following out some thoughts of his own, and dropping his load with a gasp. This island will be under water in two days if it goes on."

"I wish the *wind* would go down," I said. "I don't care a fig for the river."

The flood, indeed, had no terrors for us; we could get off at ten minutes' notice, and the more water the better we liked it. It meant an increasing current and the obliteration of the treacherous shingle-beds that so often threatened to tear the bottom out of our canoe.

Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness, howling overhead and shaking the willows round us like straws. Curious sounds accompanied it sometimes, like the explosion of heavy guns, and it fell upon the water and the island in great flat blows of immense power. It made me think of the sounds a planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space.

But the sky kept wholly clear of clouds, and soon after supper the full moon

rose up in the east and covered the river and the plain of shouting willows with a light like the day.

We lay on the sandy patch beside the fire, smoking, listening to the noises of the night round us, and talking happily of the journey we had already made, and of our plans ahead. The map lay spread in the door of the tent, but the high wind made it hard to study, and presently we lowered the curtain and extinguished the lantern. The firelight was enough to smoke and see each other's faces by, and the sparks flew about overhead like fireworks. A few yards beyond, the river gurgled and hissed, and from time to time a heavy splash announced the falling away of further portions of the bank.

Our talk, I noticed, had to do with the far-away scenes and incidents of our first camps in the Black Forest, or of other subjects altogether remote from the present setting, for neither of us spoke of the actual moment more than was necessary—almost as though we had agreed tacitly to avoid discussion of the camp and its incidents. Neither the otter nor the boatman, for instance, received the honour of a single mention, though ordinarily these would have furnished discussion for the greater part of the evening. They were, of course, distinct events in such a place.

The scarcity of wood made it a business to keep the fire going, for the wind, that drove the smoke in our faces wherever we sat, helped at the same time to make a forced draught. We took it in turn to make foraging expeditions into the darkness, and the quantity the Swede brought back always made me feel that he took an absurdly long time finding it; for the fact was I did not care much about being left alone, and yet it always seemed to be my turn to grub about among the bushes or scramble along the slippery banks in the moonlight. The long day's battle with wind and water—such wind and such water!—had tired us both, and an early bed was the obvious programme. Yet neither of us made the move for the tent. We lay there, tending the fire, talking in desultory fashion, peering about us into the dense willow bushes, and listening to the thunder of wind and river. The loneliness of the place had entered our very bones, and silence seemed natural, for after a bit the sound of our voices became a trifle unreal and forced; whispering would have been the fitting mode of communication, I felt, and the human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate. It was like talking out loud in church, or in some place where it was not lawful, perhaps not quite *safe*, to be overheard.

The eeriness of this lonely island, set among a million willows, swept by a hurricane, and surrounded by hurrying deep waters, touched us both, I fancy. Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows. And we, in our rashness, had dared to invade it, even to make use of it! Something more than the power of its mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars. For the last time I rose to get firewood.

“When this has burnt up,” I said firmly, “I shall turn in,” and my companion watched me lazily as I moved off into the surrounding shadows.

For an unimaginative man I thought he seemed unusually receptive that night, unusually open to suggestion of things other than sensory. He too was touched by the beauty and loneliness of the place. I was not altogether pleased, I remember, to recognise this slight change in him, and instead of immediately collecting sticks, I made my way to the far point of the island where the moonlight on plain and river could be seen to better advantage. The desire to be alone had come suddenly upon me; my former dread returned in force; there was a vague feeling in me I wished to face and probe to the bottom.

When I reached the point of sand jutting out among the waves, the spell of the place descended upon me with a positive shock. No mere “scenery” could have produced such an effect. There was something more here, something to alarm.

I gazed across the waste of wild waters; I watched the whispering willows; I heard the ceaseless beating of the tireless wind; and, one and all, each in its own way, stirred in me this sensation of a strange distress. But the willows especially: for ever they went on chattering and talking among themselves, laughing a little, shrilly crying out, sometimes sighing—but what it was they made so much to-do about belonged to the secret life of the great plain they inhabited. And it was utterly alien to the world I knew, or to that of the wild yet kindly elements. They made me think of a host of beings from another plane of life, another evolution altogether, perhaps, all discussing a mystery known only to themselves. I watched them moving busily together, oddly shaking their big bushy heads, twirling their myriad leaves even when there was no wind. They moved of their own will as though alive, and they touched, by some incalculable method, my own keen sense of the *horrible*.

There they stood in the moonlight, like a vast army surrounding our camp, shaking their innumerable silver spears defiantly, formed all ready for an attack.

The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid; for the wanderer, especially, camps have their “note” either of welcome or rejection. At first it may not always be apparent, because the busy preparations of tent and cooking prevent, but with the first pause—after supper usually—it comes and announces itself. And the note of this willow-camp now became unmistakably plain to me: we were interlopers, trespassers; we were not welcomed. The sense of unfamiliarity grew upon me as I stood there watching. We touched the frontier of a region where our presence was resented. For a night’s lodging we might perhaps be tolerated; but for a prolonged and inquisitive stay—No! by all the gods of the trees and the wilderness, no! We were the first human influences upon this island, and we were not wanted. *The willows were against us.*

Strange thoughts like these, bizarre fancies, borne I know not whence, found lodgment in my mind as I stood listening. What, I thought, if, after all, these crouching willows proved to be alive; if suddenly they should rise up, like a swarm of living creatures, marshalled by the gods whose territory we had invaded, sweep towards us off the vast swamps, booming overhead in the night—and then *settle down!* As I looked it was so easy to imagine they actually moved, crept nearer, retreated a little, huddled together in masses, hostile, waiting for the great wind that should finally start them a-running. I could have sworn their aspect changed a little, and their ranks deepened and pressed more closely together.

The melancholy shrill cry of a night-bird sounded overhead, and suddenly I nearly lost my balance as the piece of bank I stood upon fell with a great splash into the river, undermined by the flood. I stepped back just in time, and went on hunting for firewood again, half laughing at the odd fancies that crowded so thickly into my mind and cast their spell upon me. I recalled the Swede’s remark about moving on next day, and I was just thinking that I fully agreed with him, when I turned with a start and saw the subject of my thoughts standing immediately in front of me. He was quite close. The roar of the elements had covered his approach.

“You’ve been gone so long,” he shouted above the wind, “I thought something must have happened to you.”

But there was that in his tone, and a certain look in his face as well, that

conveyed to me more than his actual words, and in a flash I understood the real reason for his coming. It was because the spell of the place had entered his soul too, and he did not like being alone.

“River still rising,” he cried, pointing to the flood in the moonlight, “and the wind’s simply awful.”

He always said the same things, but it was the cry for companionship that gave the real importance to his words.

“Lucky,” I cried back, “our tent’s in the hollow. I think it’ll hold all right.” I added something about the difficulty of finding wood, in order to explain my absence, but the wind caught my words and flung them across the river, so that he did not hear, but just looked at me through the branches, nodding his head.

“Lucky if we get away without disaster!” he shouted, or words to that effect; and I remember feeling half angry with him for putting the thought into words, for it was exactly what I felt myself. There was disaster impending somewhere, and the sense of presentiment lay unpleasantly upon me.

We went back to the fire and made a final blaze, poking it up with our feet. We took a last look round. But for the wind the heat would have been unpleasant. I put this thought into words, and I remember my friend’s reply struck me oddly: that he would rather have the heat, the ordinary July weather, than this “diabolical wind.”

Everything was snug for the night; the canoe lying turned over beside the tent, with both yellow paddles beneath her; the provision sack hanging from a willow-stem, and the washed-up dishes removed to a safe distance from the fire, all ready for the morning meal.

We smothered the embers of the fire with sand, and then turned in. The flap of the tent door was up, and I saw the branches and the stars and the white moonlight. The shaking willows and the heavy buffetings of the wind against our taut little house were the last things I remembered as sleep came down and covered all with its soft and delicious forgetfulness.

Suddenly I found myself lying awake, peering from my sandy mattress through the door of the tent. I looked at my watch pinned against the canvas,

and saw by the bright moonlight that it was past twelve o'clock—the threshold of a new day—and I had therefore slept a couple of hours. The Swede was asleep still beside me; the wind howled as before; something plucked at my heart and made me feel afraid. There was a sense of disturbance in my immediate neighbourhood.

I sat up quickly and looked out. The trees were swaying violently to and fro as the gusts smote them, but our little bit of green canvas lay snugly safe in the hollow, for the wind passed over it without meeting enough resistance to make it vicious. The feeling of disquietude did not pass, however, and I crawled quietly out of the tent to see if our belongings were safe. I moved carefully so as not to waken my companion. A curious excitement was on me.

I was half-way out, kneeling on all fours, when my eye first took in that the tops of the bushes opposite, with their moving tracery of leaves, made shapes against the sky. I sat back on my haunches and stared. It was incredible, surely, but there, opposite and slightly above me, were shapes of some indeterminate sort among the willows, and as the branches swayed in the wind they seemed to group themselves about these shapes, forming a series of monstrous outlines that shifted rapidly beneath the moon. Close, about fifty feet in front of me, I saw these things.

My first instinct was to waken my companion, that he too might see them, but something made me hesitate—the sudden realisation, probably, that I should not welcome corroboration; and meanwhile I crouched there staring in amazement with smarting eyes. I was wide awake. I remember saying to myself that I was *not* dreaming.

They first became properly visible, these huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes—immense, bronze-coloured, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches. I saw them plainly and noted, now I came to examine them more calmly, that they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be not human at all. Certainly they were not merely the moving tracery of the branches against the moonlight. They shifted independently. They rose upwards in a continuous stream from earth to sky, vanishing utterly as soon as they reached the dark of the sky. They were interlaced one with another, making a great column, and I saw their limbs and huge bodies melting in and out of each other, forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally with the contortions of the wind-tossed trees. They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes,

within the leaves almost—rising up in a living column into the heavens. Their faces I never could see. Unceasingly they poured upwards, swaying in great bending curves, with a hue of dull bronze upon their skins.

I stared, trying to force every atom of vision from my eyes. For a long time I thought they *must* every moment disappear and resolve themselves into the movements of the branches and prove to be an optical illusion. I searched everywhere for a proof of reality, when all the while I understood quite well that the standard of reality had changed. For the longer I looked the more certain I became that these figures were real and living, though perhaps not according to the standards that the camera and the biologist would insist upon.

Far from feeling fear, I was possessed with a sense of awe and wonder such as I have never known. I seemed to be gazing at the personified elemental forces of this haunted and primeval region. Our intrusion had stirred the powers of the place into activity. It was we who were the cause of the disturbance, and my brain filled to bursting with stories and legends of the spirits and deities of places that have been acknowledged and worshipped by men in all ages of the world's history. But, before I could arrive at any possible explanation, something impelled me to go farther out, and I crept forward on to the sand and stood upright. I felt the ground still warm under my bare feet; the wind tore at my hair and face; and the sound of the river burst upon my ears with a sudden roar. These things, I knew, were real, and proved that my senses were acting normally. Yet the figures still rose from earth to heaven, silent, majestically, in a great spiral of grace and strength that overwhelmed me at length with a genuine deep emotion of worship. I felt that I must fall down and worship—absolutely worship.

Perhaps in another minute I might have done so, when a gust of wind swept against me with such force that it blew me sideways, and I nearly stumbled and fell. It seemed to shake the dream violently out of me. At least it gave me another point of view somehow. The figures still remained, still ascended into heaven from the heart of the night, but my reason at last began to assert itself. It must be a subjective experience, I argued—none the less real for that, but still subjective. The moonlight and the branches combined to work out these pictures upon the mirror of my imagination, and for some reason I projected them outwards and made them appear objective. I knew this must be the case, of course. I was the subject of a vivid and interesting hallucination. I took courage, and began to move forward across the open patches of sand. By Jove, though, was it all hallucination? Was it merely subjective? Did not my

reason argue in the old futile way from the little standard of the known?

I only know that great column of figures ascended darkly into the sky for what seemed a very long period of time, and with a very complete measure of reality as most men are accustomed to gauge reality. Then suddenly they were gone!

And, once they were gone and the immediate wonder of their great presence had passed, fear came down upon me with a cold rush. The esoteric meaning of this lonely and haunted region suddenly flamed up within me, and I began to tremble dreadfully. I took a quick look round—a look of horror that came near to panic—calculating vainly ways of escape; and then, realising how helpless I was to achieve anything really effective, I crept back silently into the tent and lay down again upon my sandy mattress, first lowering the door-curtain to shut out the sight of the willows in the moonlight, and then burying my head as deeply as possible beneath the blankets to deaden the sound of the terrifying wind.

As though further to convince me that I had not been dreaming, I remember that it was a long time before I fell again into a troubled and restless sleep; and even then only the upper crust of me slept, and underneath there was something that never quite lost consciousness, but lay alert and on the watch.

But this second time I jumped up with a genuine start of terror. It was neither the wind nor the river that woke me, but the slow approach of something that caused the sleeping portion of me to grow smaller and smaller till at last it vanished altogether, and I found myself sitting bolt upright—listening.

Outside there was a sound of multitudinous little patterings. They had been coming, I was aware, for a long time, and in my sleep they had first become audible. I sat there nervously wide awake as though I had not slept at all. It seemed to me that my breathing came with difficulty, and that there was a great weight upon the surface of my body. In spite of the hot night, I felt clammy with cold and shivered. Something surely was pressing steadily against the sides of the tent and weighing down upon it from above. Was it the body of the wind? Was this the pattering rain, the dripping of the leaves? The spray blown from the river by the wind and gathering in big drops? I thought quickly of a dozen things.

Then suddenly the explanation leaped into my mind: a bough from the poplar, the only large tree on the island, had fallen with the wind. Still half

caught by the other branches, it would fall with the next gust and crush us, and meanwhile its leaves brushed and tapped upon the tight canvas surface of the tent. I raised the loose flap and rushed out, calling to the Swede to follow.

But when I got out and stood upright I saw that the tent was free. There was no hanging bough; there was no rain or spray; nothing approached.

A cold, grey light filtered down through the bushes and lay on the faintly gleaming sand. Stars still crowded the sky directly overhead, and the wind howled magnificently, but the fire no longer gave out any glow, and I saw the east reddening in streaks through the trees. Several hours must have passed since I stood there before watching the ascending figures, and the memory of it now came back to me horribly, like an evil dream. Oh, how tired it made me feel, that ceaseless raging wind! Yet, though the deep lassitude of a sleepless night was on me, my nerves were tingling with the activity of an equally tireless apprehension, and all idea of repose was out of the question. The river I saw had risen further. Its thunder filled the air, and a fine spray made itself felt through my thin sleeping shirt.

Yet nowhere did I discover the slightest evidences of anything to cause alarm. This deep, prolonged disturbance in my heart remained wholly unaccounted for.

My companion had not stirred when I called him, and there was no need to waken him now. I looked about me carefully, noting everything: the turned-over canoe; the yellow paddles—two of them, I'm certain; the provision sack and the extra lantern hanging together from the tree; and, crowding everywhere about me, enveloping all, the willows, those endless, shaking willows. A bird uttered its morning cry, and a string of duck passed with whirring flight overhead in the twilight. The sand whirled, dry and stinging, about my bare feet in the wind.

I walked round the tent and then went out a little way into the bush, so that I could see across the river to the farther landscape, and the same profound yet indefinable emotion of distress seized upon me again as I saw the interminable sea of bushes stretching to the horizon, looking ghostly and unreal in the wan light of dawn. I walked softly here and there, still puzzling over that odd sound of infinite pattering, and of that pressure upon the tent that had wakened me. It *must* have been the wind, I reflected—the wind beating upon the loose, hot sand, driving the dry particles smartly against the taut canvas—the wind dropping heavily upon our fragile roof.

Yet all the time my nervousness and malaise increased appreciably.

I crossed over to the farther shore and noted how the coast-line had altered in the night, and what masses of sand the river had torn away. I dipped my hands and feet into the cool turrent, and bathed my forehead. Already there was a glow of sunrise in the sky and the exquisite freshness of coming day. On my way back I passed purposely beneath the very bushes where I had seen the column of figures rising into the air, and midway among the clumps I suddenly found myself overtaken by a sense of vast terror. From the shadows a large figure went swiftly by. Someone passed me, as sure as ever man did....

It was a great staggering blow from the wind that helped me forward again, and once out in the more open space, the sense of terror diminished strangely. The winds were about and walking, I remember saying to myself; for the winds often move like great presences under the trees. And altogether the fear that hovered about me was such an unknown and immense kind of fear, so unlike anything I had ever felt before, that it woke a sense of awe and wonder in me that did much to counteract its worst effects, and when I reached a high point in the middle of the island from which I could see the wide stretch of river, crimson in the sunrise, the whole magical beauty of it all was so overpowering that a sort of wild yearning woke in me and almost brought a cry up into the throat.

But this cry found no expression, for as my eyes wandered from the plain beyond to the island round me and noted our little tent half hidden among the willows, a dreadful discovery leaped out at me, compared to which my terror of the walking winds seemed as nothing at all.

For a change, I thought, had somehow come about in the arrangement of the landscape. It was not that my point of vantage gave me a different view, hut that an alteration had apparently been effected in the relation of the tent to the willows, and of the willows to the tent. Surely the bushes now crowded much closer—unnecessarily, unpleasantly close. *They had moved nearer.*

Creeping with silent feet over the shifting sands, drawing imperceptibly nearer by soft, unhurried movements, the willows had come closer during the night. But had the wind moved them, or had they moved of themselves? I recalled the sound of infinite small patterings and the pressure upon the tent and upon my own heart that caused me to wake in terror. I swayed for a moment in the wind like a tree, finding it hard to keep my upright position on the sandy hillock. There was a suggestion here of personal agency, of deliberate intention, of aggressive hostility, and it terrified me into a sort of rigidity.

Then the reaction followed quickly. The idea was so bizarre, so absurd, that I felt inclined to laugh. But the laughter came no more readily than the cry, for the knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come, and was coming.

The wind buffeted me about, and, very quickly it seemed, the sun came up over the horizon, for it was after four o'clock, and I must have stood on that little pinnacle of sand longer than I knew, afraid to come down to close quarters with the willows. I returned quietly, creepily, to the tent, first taking another exhaustive look round and—yes, I confess it—making a few measurements. I paced out on the warm sand the distances between the willows and the tent, making a note of the shortest distance particularly.

I crawled stealthily into my blankets. My companion, to all appearances, still slept soundly, and I was glad that this was so. Provided my experiences were not corroborated, I could find strength somehow to deny them, perhaps. With the daylight I could persuade myself that it was all a subjective hallucination, a fantasy of the night, a projection of the excited imagination.

Nothing further came to disturb me, and I fell asleep almost at once, utterly exhausted, yet still in dread of hearing again that weird sound of multitudinous pattering, or of feeling the pressure upon my heart that had made it difficult to breathe.

The sun was high in the heavens when my companion woke me from a heavy sleep and announced that the porridge was cooked and there was just time to bathe. The grateful smell of frizzling bacon entered the tent door.

“River still rising,” he said, “and several islands out in mid-stream have disappeared altogether. Our own island’s much smaller.”

“Any wood left?” I asked sleepily.

“The wood and the island will finish to-morrow in a dead heat,” he laughed, “but there’s enough to last us till then.”

I plunged in from the point of the island, which had indeed altered a lot in size and shape during the night, and was swept down in a moment to the

landing-place opposite the tent. The water was icy, and the banks flew by like the country from an express train. Bathing under such conditions was an exhilarating operation, and the terror of the night seemed cleansed out of me by a process of evaporation in the brain. The sun was blazing hot; not a cloud showed itself anywhere; the wind, however, had not abated one little jot.

Quite suddenly then the implied meaning of the Swede's words flashed across me, showing that he no longer wished to leave post-haste, and had changed his mind. "Enough to last till to-morrow"—he assumed we should stay on the island another night. It struck me as odd. The night before he was so positive the other way. How had the change come about?

Great crumbings of the banks occurred at breakfast, with heavy splashings and clouds of spray which the wind brought into our frying-pan, and my fellow-traveller talked incessantly about the difficulty the Vienna-Pesth steamers must have to find the channel in flood. But the state of his mind interested and impressed me far more than the state of the river or the difficulties of the steamers. He had changed somehow since the evening before. His manner was different—a trifle excited, a trifle shy, with a sort of suspicion about his voice and gestures. I hardly know how to describe it now in cold blood, but at the time I remember being quite certain of one thing—that he had become frightened?

He ate very little breakfast, and for once omitted to smoke his pipe. He had the map spread open beside him, and kept studying its markings.

"We'd better get off sharp in an hour," I said presently, feeling for an opening that must bring him indirectly to a partial confession at any rate. And his answer puzzled me uncomfortably: "Rather! If they'll let us."

"Who'll let us? The elements?" I asked quickly, with affected indifference.

"The powers of this awful place, whoever they are," he replied, keeping his eyes on the map. "The gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world."

"The elements are always the true immortals," I replied laughing as naturally as I could manage, yet knowing quite well that my face reflected my true feelings when he looked up gravely at me and spoke across the smoke:

"We shall be fortunate if we get away without further disaster."

This was exactly what I had dreaded, and I screwed myself up to the point of the direct question. It was like agreeing to allow the dentist to extract the tooth; it *had* to come anyhow in the long run, and the rest was all pretence.

“Further disaster! Why, what’s happened?”

“For one thing—the steering paddle’s gone,” he said quietly.

“The steering paddle gone!” I repeated, greatly excited, for this was our rudder, and the Danube in flood without a rudder was suicide. “But what—”

“And there’s a tear in the bottom of the canoe,” he added, with a genuine little tremor in his voice.

I continued staring at him, able only to repeat the words in his face somewhat foolishly. There, in the heat of the sun, and on this burning sand, I was aware of a freezing atmosphere descending round us. I got up to follow him, for he merely nodded his head gravely and led the way towards the tent a few yards on the other side of the fireplace. The canoe still lay there as I had last seen her in the night, ribs uppermost, the paddles, or rather, the paddle, on the sand beside her.

“There’s only one,” he said, stooping to pick it up. “And here’s the rent in the base-board.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I had clearly noticed two paddles a few hours before, but a second impulse made me think better of it, and I said nothing. I approached to see.

There was a long, finely-made tear in the bottom of the canoe where a little slither of wood had been neatly taken clean out; it looked as if the tooth of a sharp rock or snag had eaten down her length, and investigation showed that the hole went through. Had we launched out in her without observing it we must inevitably have foundered. At first the water would have made the wood swell so as to close the hole, but once out in mid-stream the water must have poured in, and the canoe, never more than two inches above the surface, would have filled and sunk very rapidly.

“There, you see an attempt to prepare a victim for the sacrifice,” I heard him saying, more to himself than to me, “two victims rather,” he added as he bent over and ran his fingers along the slit.

I began to whistle—a thing I always do unconsciously when utterly nonplussed—and purposely paid no attention to his words. I was determined to consider them foolish.

“It wasn’t there last night,” he said presently, straightening up from his examination and looking anywhere but at me.

“We must have scratched her in landing, of course,” I stopped whistling to say. “The stones are very sharp—”

I stopped abruptly, for at that moment he turned round and met my eye squarely. I knew just as well as he did how impossible my explanation was. There were no stones, to begin with.

“And then there’s this to explain too,” he added quietly, handing me the paddle and pointing to the blade.

A new and curious emotion spread freezingly over me as I took and examined it. The blade was scraped down all over, beautifully scraped, as though someone had sandpapered it with care, making it so thin that the first vigorous stroke must have snapped it off at the elbow.

“One of us walked in his sleep and did this thing,” I said feebly, “or—or it has been filed by the constant stream of sand particles blown against it by the wind, perhaps.”

“Ah,” said the Swede, turning away, laughing a little, “you can explain everything!”

“The same wind that cat-gut the steering paddle and flung it so near the bank that it fell in with the next lump that crumbled,” I called out after him, absolutely determined to find an explanation for everything he showed me.

“I see,” he shouted back, turning his head to look at me before disappearing among the willow bushes.

Once alone with these perplexing evidences of personal agency, I think my first thought took the form of “One of us must have done this thing, and it certainly was not I.” But my second thought decided how impossible it was to suppose, under all the circumstances, that either of us had done it. That my companion, the trusted friend of a dozen similar expeditions, could have

knowingly had a hand in it, was a suggestion not to be entertained for a moment. Equally absurd seemed the explanation that this imperturbable and densely practical nature had suddenly become insane and was busied with insane purposes.

Yet the fact remained that what disturbed me most, and kept my fear actively alive even in this blaze of sunshine and wild beauty, was the clear certainty that some curious alteration had come about in his *mind*—that he was nervous, timid, suspicious, aware of goings on he did not speak about, watching a series of secret and hitherto unmentionable events—waiting, in a word, for a climax that he expected, and, I thought, expected very soon. This grew up in my mind intuitively—I hardly knew how.

I made a hurried examination of the tent and its surroundings, but the measurements of the night remained the same. There were deep hollows formed in the sand I now noticed for the first time, basin-shaped and of various depths and sizes, varying from that of a tea-cup to a large bowl.

The wind, no doubt, was responsible for these miniature craters, just as it was for lifting the paddle and tossing it towards the water. The rent in the canoe was the only thing that seemed quite inexplicable; and, after all, it was conceivable that a sharp point had caught it when we landed. The examination I made of the shore did not assist this theory, but all the same I clung to it with that diminishing portion of my intelligence which I called my “reason.” An explanation of some kind was an absolute necessity, just as some working explanation of the universe is necessary—however absurd—to the happiness of every individual who seeks to do his duty in the world and face the problems of life. The simile seemed to me at the time an exact parallel.

I at once set the pitch melting, and presently the Swede joined me at the work, though under the best conditions in the world the canoe could not be safe for travelling till the following day. I drew his attention casually to the hollows in the sand.

“Yes,” he said, “I know. They’re all over the island. But you can explain them, no doubt!”

“Wind, of course,” I answered without hesitation. “Have you never watched those little whirlwinds in the street that twist and twirl everything into a circle? This sand’s loose enough to yield, that’s all.”

He made no reply, and we worked on in silence for a bit. I watched him surreptitiously all the time, and I had an idea he was watching me. He seemed, too, to be always listening attentively to something I could not hear, or perhaps for something that he expected to hear, for he kept turning about and staring into the bushes, and up into the sky, and out across the water where it was visible through the openings among the willows. Sometimes he even put his hand to his ear and held it there for several minutes. He said nothing to me, however, about it, and I asked no questions. And meanwhile, as he mended that torn canoe with the skill and address of a red Indian, I was glad to notice his absorption in the work, for there was a vague dread in my heart that he would speak of the changed aspect of the willows. And, if he had noticed *that*, my imagination could no longer be held a sufficient explanation of it.

At length, after a long pause, he began to talk.

“Queer thing,” he added in a hurried sort of voice, as though he wanted to say something and get it over. “Queer thing, I mean, about that otter last night.”

I had expected something so totally different that he caught me with surprise, and I looked up sharply.

“Shows how lonely this place is. Otters are awfully shy things—”

“I don’t mean that, of course,” he interrupted. “I mean—do you think—did you think it really *was* an otter?”

“What else, in the name of Heaven, what else?”

“You know, I saw it before you did, and at first it seemed—so *much* bigger than an otter.”

“The sunset as you looked up-stream magnified it, or something,” I replied.

He looked at me absently a moment, as though his mind were busy with other thoughts.

“It had such extraordinary yellow eyes,” he went on half to himself.

“That was the sun too,” I laughed, a trifle boisterously. “I suppose you’ll wonder next if that fellow in the boat—”

I suddenly decided not to finish the sentence. He was in the act again of listening, turning his head to the wind, and something in the expression of his face made me halt. The subject dropped, and we went on with our caulking. Apparently he had not noticed my unfinished sentence. Five minutes, later, however, he looked at me across the canoe, the smoking pitch in his hand, his face exceedingly grave.

“I *did* rather wonder, if you want to know,” he said slowly, “what that thing in the boat was. I remember thinking at the time it was not a man. The whole business seemed to rise quite suddenly out of the water.”

I laughed again boisterously in his face, but this time there was impatience, and a strain of anger too, in my feeling.

“Look here now,” I cried, “this place is quite queer enough without going out of our way to imagine things! That boat was an ordinary boat, and the man in it was an ordinary man, and they were both going down-stream as fast as they could lick. And that otter *was* an otter, so don’t let’s play the fool about it!”

He looked steadily at me with the same grave expression. He was not in the least annoyed. I took courage from his silence.

“And, for Heaven’s sake,” I went on, “don’t keep pretending you hear things, because it only gives me the jumps, and there’s nothing to hear but the river and this cursed old thundering wind.”

“You *fool!*” he answered in a low, shocked voice, “you utter fool. That’s just the way all victims talk. As if you didn’t understand just as well as I do!” he sneered with scorn in his voice, and a sort of resignation. “The best thing you can do is to keep quiet and try to hold your mind as firm as possible. This feeble attempt at self-deception only makes the truth harder when you’re forced to meet it.”

My little effort was over, and I found nothing more to say, for I knew quite well his words were true, and that I was the fool, not *he*. Up to a certain stage in the adventure he kept ahead of me easily, and I think I felt annoyed to be out of it, to be thus proved less psychic, less sensitive than himself to these extraordinary happenings, and half ignorant all the time of what was going on under my very nose. *He knew* from the very beginning, apparently. But at the moment I wholly missed the point of his words about the necessity of there being a

victim, and that we ourselves were destined to satisfy the want. I dropped all pretence thenceforward, but thenceforward likewise my fear increased steadily to the climax.

“But you’re quite right about one thing,” he added, before the subject passed, “and that is that we’re wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one *thinks* finds expression in words, and what one says, happens.”

That afternoon, while the canoe dried and hardened, we spent trying to fish, testing the leak, collecting wood, and watching the enormous flood of rising water. Masses of driftwood swept near our shores sometimes, and we fished for them with long willow branches. The island grew perceptibly smaller as the banks were torn away with great gulps and splashes. The weather kept brilliantly fine till about four o’clock, and then for the first time for three days the wind showed signs of abating. Clouds began to gather in the south-west, spreading thence slowly over the sky.

This lessening of the wind came as a great relief, for the incessant roaring, banging, and thundering had irritated our nerves. Yet the silence that came about five o’clock with its sudden cessation was in a manner quite as oppressive. The booming of the river had everything in its own way then: it filled the air with deep murmurs, more musical than the wind noises, but infinitely more monotonous. The wind held many notes, rising, falling, always beating out some sort of great elemental tune; whereas the river’s song lay between three notes at most—dull pedal notes, that held a lugubrious quality foreign to the wind, and somehow seemed to me, in my then nervous state, to sound wonderfully well the music of doom.

It was extraordinary, too, how the withdrawal suddenly of bright sunlight took everything out of the landscape that made for cheerfulness, and since this particular landscape had already managed to convey the suggestion of something sinister, the change of course was all the more unwelcome and noticeable. For me, I know, the darkening outlook became distinctly more alarming, and I found myself more than once calculating how soon after sunset the full moon would get up in the east, and whether the gathering clouds would greatly interfere with her lighting of the little island.

With this general hush of the wind—though it still indulged in occasional brief gusts—the river seemed to me to grow blacker, the willows to stand more densely together. The latter, too kept up a sort of independent movement of

their own, rustling among themselves when no wind stirred, and shaking oddly from the roots upwards. When common objects in this way become charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance; and these bushes, crowding huddled about us, assumed for me in the darkness a bizarre *grotesquerie* of appearance that lent to them somehow the aspect of purposeful and living creatures. Their very ordinariness, I felt, masked what was malignant and hostile to us. The forces of the region drew nearer with the coming of night. They were focusing upon our island, and more particularly upon ourselves. For thus, somehow, in the terms of the imagination, did my really indescribable sensations in this extraordinary place present themselves.

I had slept a good deal in the early afternoon, and had thus recovered somewhat from the exhaustion of a disturbed night, but this only served apparently to render me more susceptible than before to the obsessing spell of the haunting. I fought against it, laughing at my feelings as absurd and childish, with very obvious physiological explanations, yet, in spite of every effort, they gained in strength upon me so that I dreaded the night as a child lost in a forest must dread the approach of darkness.

The canoe we had carefully covered with a waterproof sheet during the day, and the one remaining paddle had been securely tied by the Swede to the base of a tree, lest the wind should rob us of that too. From five o'clock onwards I busied myself with the stew-pot and preparations for dinner, it being my turn to cook that night. We had potatoes, onions, bits of bacon fat to add flavour, and a general thick residue from former stews at the bottom of the pot; with black bread broken up into it the result was most excellent, and it was followed by a stew of plums with sugar and a brew of strong tea with dried milk. A good pile of wood lay close at hand, and the absence of wind made my duties easy. My companion sat lazily watching me, dividing his attentions between cleaning his pipe and giving useless advice—an admitted privilege of the off-duty man. He had been very quiet all the afternoon, engaged in re-caulking the canoe, strengthening the tent ropes, and fishing for driftwood while I slept. No more talk about undesirable things had passed between us, and I think his only remarks had to do with the gradual destruction of the island, which he declared was now fully a third smaller than when we first landed.

The pot had just begun to bubble when I heard his voice calling to me from the bank, where he had wandered away without my noticing. I ran up.

“Come and listen,” he said, “and see what you make of it.” He held his hand cupwise to his ear, as so often before.

“Now do you hear anything?” he asked, watching me curiously.

We stood there, listening attentively together. At first I heard only the deep note of the water and the hissings rising from its turbulent surface. The willows, for once, were motionless and silent. Then a sound began to reach my ears faintly, a peculiar sound—something like the humming of a distant gong. It seemed to come across to us in the darkness from the waste of swamps and willows opposite. It was repeated at regular intervals, but it was certainly neither the sound of a bell nor the hooting of a distant steamer. I can liken it to nothing so much as to the sound of an immense gong, suspended far up in the sky, repeating incessantly its muffled metallic note, soft and musical, as it was repeatedly struck. My heart quickened as I listened.

“I’ve heard it all day,” said my companion. “While you slept this afternoon it came all round the island. I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see—to localise it correctly. Sometimes it was overhead, and sometimes it seemed under the water. Once or twice, too, I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but *within myself*—you know—the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come.”

I was too much puzzled to pay much attention to his words. I listened carefully, striving to associate it with any known familiar sound I could think of, but without success. It changed in the direction, too, coming nearer, and then sinking utterly away into remote distance. I cannot say that it was ominous in quality, because to me it seemed distinctly musical, yet I must admit it set going a distressing feeling that made me wish I had never heard it.

“The wind blowing in those sand-funnels,” I said determined to find an explanation, “or the bushes rubbing together after the storm perhaps.”

“It comes off the whole swamp,” my friend answered. “It comes from everywhere at once.” He ignored my explanations. “It comes from the willow bushes somehow—”

“But now the wind has dropped,” I objected. “The willows can hardly make a noise by themselves, can they?”

His answer frightened me, first because I had dreaded it, and secondly, because I knew intuitively it was true.

“It is *because* the wind has dropped we now hear it. It was drowned before. It is the cry, I believe, of the—”

I dashed back to my fire, warned by a sound of bubbling that the stew was in danger, but determined at the same time to escape further conversation. I was resolute, if possible, to avoid the exchanging of views. I dreaded, too, that he would begin about the gods, or the elemental forces, or something else disquieting, and I wanted to keep myself well in hand for what might happen later. There was another night to be faced before we escaped from this distressing place, and there was no knowing yet what it might bring forth.

“Come and cut up bread for the pot,” I called to him vigorously stirring the appetising mixture. That stew-pot held sanity for us both, and the thought made me laugh.

He came over slowly and took the provision sack from the tree, fumbling in its mysterious depths, and then emptying the entire contents upon the ground-sheet at his feet.

“Hurry up!” I cried; “it’s boiling.”

The Swede burst out into a roar of laughter that startled me. It was forced laughter, not artificial exactly, but mirthless.

“There’s nothing here!” he shouted, holding his sides.

“Bread, I mean.”

“It’s gone. There is no bread. They’ve taken it!”

I dropped the long spoon and ran up. Everything the sack had contained lay upon the ground-sheet, but there was no loaf.

The whole dead weight of my growing fear fell upon me and shook me. Then I burst out laughing too. It was the only thing to do: and the sound of my laughter also made me understand his. The stain of psychological pressure caused it—this explosion of unnatural laughter in both of us; it was an effort of repressed

forces to seek relief; it was a temporary safety-valve. And with both of us it ceased quite suddenly.

“How criminally stupid of me!” I cried, still determined to be consistent and find an explanation. “I clean forgot to buy a loaf at Pressburg. That chattering woman put everything out of my head, and I must have left it lying on the counter or—”

“The oatmeal, too, is much less than it was this morning,” the Swede interrupted.

Why in the world need he draw attention to it? I thought angrily.

“There’s enough for to-morrow,” I said, stirring vigorously, “and we can get lots more at Komorn or Gran. In twenty-four hours we shall be miles from here.”

“I hope so—to God,” he muttered, putting the things back into the sack, “unless we’re claimed first as victims for the sacrifice,” he added with a foolish laugh. He dragged the sack into the tent, for safety’s sake, I suppose, and I heard him mumbling on to himself, but so indistinctly that it seemed quite natural for me to ignore his words.

Our meal was beyond question a gloomy one, and we ate it almost in silence, avoiding one another’s eyes, and keeping the fire bright. Then we washed up and prepared for the night, and, once smoking, our minds unoccupied with any definite duties, the apprehension I had felt all day long became more and more acute. It was not then active fear, I think, but the very vagueness of its origin distressed me far more than if I had been able to ticket and face it squarely. The curious sound I have likened to the note of a gong became now almost incessant, and filled the stillness of the night with a faint, continuous ringing rather than a series of distinct notes. At one time it was behind and at another time in front of us. Sometimes I fancied it came from the bushes on our left, and then again from the clumps on our right. More often it hovered directly overhead like the whirring of wings. It was really everywhere at once, behind, in front, at our sides and over our heads, completely surrounding us. The sound really defies description. But nothing within my knowledge is like that ceaseless muffled humming rising off the deserted world of swamps and willows.

We sat smoking in comparative silence, the strain growing every minute

greater. The worst feature of the situation seemed to me that we did not know what to expect, and could therefore make no sort of preparation by way of defence. We could anticipate nothing. My explanations made in the sunshine, moreover, now came to haunt me with their foolish and wholly unsatisfactory nature, and it was more and more clear to us that some kind of plain talk with my companion was inevitable, whether I liked it or not. After all, we had to spend the night together, and to sleep in the same tent side by side. I saw that I could not get along much longer without the support of his mind, and for that, of course, plain talk was imperative. As long as possible, however, I postponed this little climax, and tried to ignore or laugh at the occasional sentences he flung into the emptiness.

Some of these sentences, moreover, were confoundingly disquieting to me, coming as they did to corroborate much that I felt myself: corroboration, too—which made it so much more convincing—from a totally different point of view. He composed such curious sentences, and hurled them at me in such an inconsequential sort of way, as though his main line of thought was secret to himself, and these fragments were bits he found it impossible to digest. He got rid of them by uttering them. Speech relieved him. It was like being sick.

“There are things about us, I’m sure, that make for disorder, disintegration, destruction, *our* destruction,” he said once, while the fire blazed between us. “We’ve strayed out of a safe line somewhere.”

And another time, when the gong sounds had come nearer, ringing much louder than before, and directly over our heads, he said as though talking to himself:

“I don’t think a gramophone would show any record of that. The sound doesn’t come to me by the ears at all. The vibrations reach me in another manner altogether, and seem to be within me, which is precisely how a fourth dimensional sound might be supposed to make itself heard.”

I purposely made no reply to this, but I sat up a little closer to the fire and peered about me into the darkness. The clouds were massed all over the sky, and no trace of moonlight came through. Very still, too, everything was, so that the river and the frogs had things all their own way.

“It has that about it,” he went on, “which is utterly out of common experience. It is *unknown*. Only one thing describes it really: it is a non-human sound; I mean a sound outside humanity.”

Having rid himself of this indigestible morsel, he lay quiet for a time; but he had so admirably expressed my own feeling that it was a relief to have the thought out, and to have confined it by the limitation of words from dangerous wandering to and fro in the mind.

The solitude of that Danube camping-place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet! My thoughts ran incessantly upon cities and the haunts of men. I would have given my soul, as the saying is, for the “feel” of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces: peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome.

Yet what I felt of dread was no ordinary ghostly fear. It was infinitely greater, stranger, and seemed to arise from some dim ancestral sense of terror more profoundly disturbing than anything I had known or dreamed of. We had “strayed,” as the Swede put it, into some region or some set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us; where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us. It was a spot held by the dwellers in some outer space, a sort of peep-hole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen, a point where the veil between had worn a little thin. As the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should be carried over the border and deprived of what we called “our lives,” yet by mental, not physical, processes. In that sense, as he said, we should be the victims of our adventure—a sacrifice.

It took us in different fashion, each according to the measure of his sensitiveness and powers of resistance. I translated it vaguely into a personification of the mightily disturbed elements, investing them with the horror of a deliberate and malefic purpose, resentful of our audacious intrusion into their breeding-place; whereas my friend threw it into the unoriginal form at first of a trespass on some ancient shrine, some place where the old gods still held sway, where the emotional forces of former worshippers still clung, and the ancestral portion of him yielded to the old pagan spell.

At any rate, here was a place unpolluted by men, kept clean by the winds from coarsening human influences, a place where spiritual agencies were within reach and aggressive. Never, before or since, have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a “beyond region,” of another scheme of life, another revolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would

succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into *their* world.

Small things testified to the amazing influence of the place, and now in the silence round the fire they allowed themselves to be noted by the mind. The very atmosphere had proved itself a magnifying medium to distort every indication: the otter rolling in the current, the hurrying boatman making signs, the shifting willows, one and all had been robbed of its natural character, and revealed in something of its other aspect—as it existed across the border in that other region. And this changed aspect I felt was new not merely to me, but to the race. The whole experience whose verge we touched was unknown to humanity at all. It was a new order of experience, and in the true sense of the word *unearthly*.

“It’s the deliberate, calculating purpose that reduces one’s courage to zero,” the Swede said suddenly, as if he had been actually following my thoughts. “Otherwise imagination might count for much. But the paddle, the canoe, the lessening food—”

“Haven’t I explained all that once? “ I interrupted viciously.

“You have,” he answered dryly; “you have indeed.”

He made other remarks too, as usual, about what he called the “plain determination to provide a victim”; but, having now arranged my thoughts better, I recognised that this was simply the cry of his frightened soul against the knowledge that he was being attacked in a vital part, and that he would be somehow taken or destroyed. The situation called for a courage and calmness of reasoning that neither of us could compass, and I have never before been so clearly conscious of two persons in me—the one that explained everything, and the other that laughed at such foolish explanations, yet was horribly afraid.

Meanwhile, in the pitchy night the fire died down and the wood pile grew small. Neither of us moved to replenish the stock, and the darkness consequently came up very close to our faces. A few feet beyond the circle of firelight it was inky black. Occasionally a stray puff of wind set the willows shivering about us, but apart from this not very welcome sound a deep and depressing silence reigned, broken only by the gurgling of the river and the humming in the air overhead.

We both missed, I think, the shouting company of the winds.

At length, at a moment when a stray puff prolonged itself as though the wind were about to rise again, I reached the point for me of saturation, the point where it was absolutely necessary to find relief in plain speech, or else to betray myself by some hysterical extravagance that must have been far worse in its effect upon both of us. I kicked the fire into a blaze, and turned to my companion abruptly. He looked up with a start.

“I can’t disguise it any longer,” I said; “I don’t like this place, and the darkness, and the noises, and the awful feelings I get. There’s something here that beats me utterly. I’m in a blue funk, and that’s the plain truth. If the other shore was—different, I swear I’d be inclined to swim for it!”

The Swede’s face turned very white beneath the deep tan of sun and wind. He stared straight at me and answered quietly, but his voice betrayed his huge excitement by its unnatural calmness. For the moment, at any rate, he was the strong man of the two. He was more phlegmatic, for one thing.

“It’s not a physical condition we can escape from by running away,” he replied, in the tone of a doctor diagnosing some grave disease; “we must sit tight and wait. There are forces close here that could kill a herd of elephants in a second as easily as you or I could squash a fly. Our only chance is to keep perfectly still. Our insignificance perhaps may save us.”

I put a dozen questions into my expression of face, but found no words. It was precisely like listening to an accurate description of a disease whose symptoms had puzzled me.

“I mean that so far, although aware of our disturbing presence, they have not found us—not ‘located’ us, as the Americans say,” he went on. “They’re blundering about like men hunting for a leak of gas. The paddle and canoe and provisions prove that. I think they feel us, but cannot actually see us. We must keep our minds quiet—it’s our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it’s all up with us.”

“Death, you mean?” I stammered, icy with the horror of his suggestion.

“Worse—by far,” he said. “Death, according to one’s belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no

change of character. *You* don't suddenly alter just because the body's gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation. We happen to have camped in a spot where their region touches ours, where the veil between has worn thin”—horrors! he was using my very own phrase, my actual words— “so that they are aware of our being in their neighbourhood.”

“But *who* are aware?” I asked.

I forgot the shaking of the willows in the windless calm, the humming overhead, everything except that I was waiting for an answer that I dreaded more than I can possibly explain.

He lowered his voice at once to reply, leaning forward a little over the fire, an indefinable change in his face that made me avoid his eyes and look down upon the ground.

“All my life,” he said, “I have been strangely, vividly conscious of another region—not far removed from our own world in one sense, yet wholly different in kind—where great things go on unceasingly, where immense and terrible personalities hurry by, intent on vast purposes compared to which earthly affairs, the rise and fall of nations, the destinies of empires, the fate of armies and continents, are all as dust in the balance; vast purposes, I mean, that deal directly with the soul, and not indirectly with mere expressions of the soul—”

“I suggest just now—” I began, seeking to stop him, feeling as though I was face to face with a madman. But he instantly overbore me with his torrent that *had* to come.

“You think,” he said, “It is the spirits of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is—*neither*. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own.”

The mere conception, which his words somehow made so convincing, as I listened to them there in the dark stillness of that lonely island, set me shaking a little all over. I found it impossible to control my movements.

“And what do you propose?” I began again.

“A sacrifice, a victim, might save us by distracting them until we could get away,” he went on, “just as the wolves stop to devour the dogs and give the sleigh another start. But I see no chance of any other victim now.”

I stared blankly at him. The gleam in his eyes was dreadful. Presently he continued.

“It’s the willows, of course. The willows *mask* the others, but the others are feeling about for us. If we let our minds betray our fear, we’re lost, lost utterly.” He looked at me with an expression so calm, so determined, so sincere, that I no longer had any doubts as to his sanity. He was as sane as any man ever was. “If we can hold out through the night,” he added, “we may get off in the daylight unnoticed, or rather, *undiscovered*.”

“But you really think a sacrifice would—”

That gong-like humming came down very close over our heads as I spoke, but it was my friend’s scared face that really stopped my mouth.

“Hush!” he whispered, holding up his hand. “Do not mention them more than you can help. Do not refer to them *by name*. To name is to reveal: it is the inevitable clue, and our only hope lies in ignoring them, in order that they may ignore us.”

“Even in thought?” He was extraordinarily agitated.

“Especially in thought. Our thoughts make spirals in their world. We must keep them *out of our minds* at all costs if possible.”

I raked the fire together to prevent the darkness having everything its own way. I never longed for the sun as I longed for it then in the awful blackness of that summer night.

“Were you awake all last night?” he went on suddenly.

“I slept badly a little after dawn,” I replied evasively, trying to follow his instructions, which I knew instinctively were true, “but the wind, of course—”

“I know. But the wind won’t account for all the noises.”

“Then you heard it too?”

“The multiplying countless little footsteps I heard,” he said, adding, after a moment’s hesitation, “and that other sound—”

“You mean above the tent, and the pressing down upon us of something tremendous, gigantic?”

He nodded significantly.

“It was like the beginning of a sort of inner suffocation?” I said.

“Partly, yes. It seemed to me that the weight of the atmosphere had been altered—had increased enormously, so that we should be crushed.”

“And that,” I went on, determined to have it all out, pointing upwards where the gong-like note hummed ceaselessly, rising and falling like wind. “What do you make of—”

“It’s *their* sound,” he whispered gravely. “It’s the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you’ll find it’s not above so much as around us. It’s in the willows. It’s the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us.”

I could not follow exactly what he meant by this, yet the thought and idea in my mind were beyond question the thought and idea in his. I realised what he realised, only with less power of analysis than his. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him at last about my hallucination of the ascending figures and the moving bushes, when he suddenly thrust his face again close into mine across the firelight and began to speak in a very earnest whisper. He amazed me by his calmness and pluck, his apparent control of the situation. This man I had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid!

“Now listen,” he said. “The only thing for us to do is to go on as though nothing had happened, follow our usual habits, go to bed, and so forth; pretend we feel nothing and notice nothing. It is a question wholly of the mind, and the less we think about them the better our chance of escape. Above all, don’t *think*, for what you think happens!”

“All right,” I managed to reply, simply breathless with his words and the strangeness of it all; “all right, I’ll try, but tell me one thing more first. Tell me what you make of those hollows in the ground all about us, those sand-funnels?”

“No!” he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. “I dare not, simply dare not, put the thought into words. If you have not guessed I am glad. Don’t try to. *They* have put it into my mind; try your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours.”

He sank his voice again to a whisper before he finished, and I did not press him to explain. There was already just about as much horror in me as I could hold. The conversation came to an end, and we smoked our pipes busily in silence.

Then something happened, something unimportant apparently, as the way is when the nerves are in a very great state of tension, and this small thing for a brief space gave me an entirely different point of view. I chanced to look down at my sand-shoe—the sort we used for the canoe—and something to do with the hole at the toe suddenly recalled to me the London shop where I had bought them, the difficulty the man had in fitting me, and other details of the uninteresting but practical operation. At once, in its train, followed a wholesome view of the modern sceptical world I was accustomed to move in at home. I thought of roast beef and ale, motor-cars, policemen, brass bands, and a dozen other things that proclaimed the soul of ordinariness or utility. The effect was immediate and astonishing even to myself. Psychologically, I suppose, it was simply a sudden and violent reaction after the strain of living in an atmosphere of things that to the normal consciousness must seem impossible and incredible. But, whatever the cause, it momentarily lifted the spell from my heart, and left me for the short space of a minute feeling free and utterly unafraid. I looked up at my friend opposite.

“You damned old pagan!” I cried, laughing aloud in his face. “You imaginative idiot! You superstitious idolator! You—”

I stopped in the middle, seized anew by the old horror. I tried to smother the sound of my voice as something sacrilegious. The Swede, of course, heard it too—the strange cry overhead in the darkness—and that sudden drop in the air as though something had come nearer.

He had turned ashen white under the tan. He stood bolt upright in front of the fire, stiff as a rod, staring at me.

“After that,” he said in a sort of helpless, frantic way, “we must go! We can’t stay now; we must strike camp this very instant and go on—down the river.”

He was talking, I saw, quite wildly, his words dictated by abject terror—the terror he had resisted so long, but which had caught him at last.

“In the dark?” I exclaimed, shaking with fear after my hysterical outburst, but still realising our position better than he did. “Sheer madness! The river’s in flood, and we’ve only got a single paddle. Besides, we only go deeper into their country! There’s nothing ahead for fifty miles but willows, willows, willows!”

He sat down again in a state of semi-collapse. The positions, by one of those kaleidoscopic changes nature loves, were suddenly reversed, and the control of our forces passed over into my hands. His mind at last had reached the point where it was beginning to weaken.

“What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?” he whispered with the awe of genuine terror in his voice and face.

I crossed round to his side of the fire. I took both his hands in mine, kneeling down beside him and looking straight into his frightened eyes.

“We’ll make one more blaze,” I said firmly, “and then turn in for the night. At sunrise we’ll be off full speed for Komorn. Now, pull yourself together a bit, and remember your own advice about *not thinking fear!*”

He said no more, and I saw that he would agree and obey. In some measure, too, it was a sort of relief to get up and make an excursion into the darkness for more wood. We kept close together, almost touching, groping among the bushes and along the bank. The humming overhead never ceased, but seemed to me to grow louder as we increased our distance from the fire. It was shivery work!

We were grubbing away in the middle of a thickish clump of willows where some driftwood from a former flood had caught high among the branches, when my body was seized in a grip that made me half drop upon the sand. It was the Swede. He had fallen against me, and was clutching me for support. I heard his breath coming and going in short gasps.

“Look! By my soul!” he whispered, and for the first time in my experience I

knew what it was to hear tears of terror in a human voice. He was pointing to the fire, some fifty feet away. I followed the direction of his finger, and I swear my heart missed a beat.

There, in front of the dim glow, *something was moving*.

I saw it through a veil that hung before my eyes like the gauze drop-curtain used at the back of a theatre—hazily a little. It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface— “coiling upon itself like smoke,” he said afterwards.

“I watched it settle downwards through the bushes,” he sobbed at me. “Look, by God! It’s coming this way! Oh, oh!”—he gave a kind of whistling cry. “*They’ve found us.*”

I gave one terrified glance, which just enabled me to see that the shadowy form was swinging towards us through the bushes, and then I collapsed backwards with a crash into the branches. These failed, of course, to support my weight, so that with the Swede on the top of me we fell in a struggling heap upon the sand. I really hardly knew what was happening. I was conscious only of a sort of enveloping sensation of icy fear that plucked the nerves out of their fleshly covering, twisted them this way and that, and replaced them quivering. My eyes were tightly shut; something in my throat choked me; a feeling that my consciousness was expanding, extending out into space, swiftly gave way to another feeling that I was losing it altogether, and about to die.

An acute spasm of pain passed through me, and I was aware that the Swede had hold of me in such a way that he hurt me abominably. It was the way he caught at me in falling.

But it was the pain, he declared afterwards, that saved me: it caused me to *forget them* and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me. He himself, he says, actually swooned at the same moment, and that was what saved him.

I only know that at a later date, how long or short is impossible to say, I found myself scrambling up out of the slippery network of willow branches, and saw my companion standing in front of me holding out a hand to assist me. I stared at him in a dazed way, rubbing the arm he had twisted for me. Nothing came to me to say, somehow.

“I lost consciousness for a moment or two,” I heard him say. “That’s what saved me. It made me stop thinking about them.”

“You nearly broke my arm in two,” I said, uttering my only connected thought at the moment. A numbness came over me.

“That’s what saved *you!*” he replied. “Between us, we’ve managed to set them off on a false tack somewhere. The humming has ceased. It’s gone—for the moment at any rate!”

A wave of hysterical laughter seized me again, and this time spread to my friend too—great healing gusts of shaking laughter that brought a tremendous sense of relief in their train. We made our way back to the fire and put the wood on so that it blazed at once. Then we saw that the tent had fallen over and lay in a tangled heap upon the ground.

We picked it up, and during the process tripped more than once and caught our feet in sand.

“It’s those sand-funnels,” exclaimed the Swede, when the tent was up again and the firelight lit up the ground for several yards about us. “And look at the size of them!”

All round the tent and about the fireplace where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hollows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my foot and leg.

Neither of us said a word. We both knew that sleep was the safest thing we could do, and to bed we went accordingly without further delay, having first thrown sand on the fire and taken the provision sack and the paddle inside the tent with us. The canoe, too, we propped in such a way at the end of the tent that our feet touched it, and the least motion would disturb and wake us.

In case of emergency, too, we again went to bed in our clothes, ready for a sudden start.

It was my firm intention to lie awake all night and watch, but the exhaustion of nerves and body decreed otherwise, and sleep after a while came over me with a welcome blanket of oblivion. The fact that my companion also slept quickened its approach. At first he fidgeted and constantly sat up, asking me if I “heard this” or “heard that.” He tossed about on his cork mattress, and said the tent was moving and the river had risen over the point of the island; but each time I went out to look I returned with the report that all was well, and finally he grew calmer and lay still. Then at length his breathing became regular and I heard unmistakable sounds of snoring—the first and only time in my life when snoring has been a welcome and calming influence.

This, I remember, was the last thought in my mind before dozing off.

A difficulty in breathing woke me, and I found the blanket over my face. But something else besides the blanket was pressing upon me, and my first thought was that my companion had rolled off his mattress on to my own in his sleep. I called to him and sat up, and at the same moment it came to me that the tent was surrounded. That sound of multitudinous soft pattering was again audible outside, filling the night with horror.

I called again to him, louder than before. He did not answer, but I missed the sound of his snoring, and also noticed that the flap of the tent door was down. This was the unpardonable sin. I crawled out in the darkness to hook it back securely, and it was then for the first time I realised positively that the Swede was not there. He had gone.

I dashed out in a mad run, seized by a dreadful agitation, and the moment I was out I plunged into a sort of torrent of humming that surrounded me completely and came out of every quarter of the heavens at once. It was that same familiar humming—gone mad! A swarm of great invisible bees might have been about me in the air. The sound seemed to thicken the very atmosphere, and I felt that my lungs worked with difficulty.

But my friend was in danger, and I could not hesitate.

The dawn was just about to break, and a faint whitish light spread upwards

over the clouds from a thin strip of clear horizon. No wind stirred. I could just make out the bushes and river beyond, and the pale sandy patches. In my excitement I ran frantically to and fro about the island, calling him by name, shouting at the top of my voice the first words that came into my head. But the willows smothered my voice, and the humming muffled it, so that the sound only travelled a few feet round me. I plunged among the bushes, tripping headlong, tumbling over roots, and scraping my face as I tore this way and that among the preventing branches.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I came out upon the island's point and saw a dark figure outlined between the water and the sky. It was the Swede. And already he had one foot in the river! A moment more and he would have taken the plunge.

I threw myself upon him, flinging my arms about his waist and dragging him shorewards with all my strength. Of course he struggled furiously, making a noise all the time just like that cursed humming, and using the most outlandish phrases in his anger about "going *inside* to Them," and "taking the way of the water and the wind," and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but which turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened. But in the end I managed to get him into the comparative safety of the tent, and flung him breathless and cursing upon the mattress where I held him until the fit had passed.

I think the suddenness with which it all went and he grew calm, coinciding as it did with the equally abrupt cessation of the humming and pattering outside—I think this was almost the strangest part of the whole business perhaps. For he just opened his eyes and turned his tired face up to me so that the dawn threw a pale light upon it through the doorway, and said, for all the world just like a frightened child:

"My life, old man—it's my life I owe you. But it's all over now anyhow. They've found a victim in our place!"

Then he dropped back upon his blankets and went to sleep literally under my eyes. He simply collapsed, and began to snore again as healthily as though nothing had happened and he had never tried to offer his own life as a sacrifice by drowning. And when the sunlight woke him three hours later—hours of ceaseless vigil for me—it became so clear to me that he remembered absolutely nothing of what he had attempted to do, that I deemed it wise to hold my peace and ask no dangerous questions.

He woke naturally and easily, as I have said, when the sun was already high in a windless hot sky, and he at once got up and set about the preparation of the fire for breakfast. I followed him anxiously at bathing, but he did not attempt to plunge in, merely dipping his head and making some remark about the extra coldness of the water.

“River’s falling at last,” he said, “and I’m glad of it.”

“The humming has stopped too,” I said.

He looked up at me quietly with his normal expression. Evidently he remembered everything except his own attempt at suicide.

“Everything has stopped,” he said, “because—”

He hesitated. But I knew some reference to that remark he had made just before he fainted was in his mind, and I was determined to know it.

“Because ‘They’ve found another victim?’” I said, forcing a little laugh.

“Exactly,” he answered, “exactly! I feel as positive of it as though—as though—I feel quite safe again, I mean,” he finished.

He began to look curiously about him. The sunlight lay in hot patches on the sand. There was no wind. The willows were motionless. He slowly rose to feet.

“Come,” he said; “I think if we look, we shall find it.”

He started off on a run, and I followed him. He kept to the banks, poking with a stick among the sandy bays and caves and little back-waters, myself always close on his heels.

“Ah!” he exclaimed presently, “ah!”

The tone of his voice somehow brought back to me a vivid sense of the horror of the last twenty-four hours, and I hurried up to join him. He was pointing with his stick at a large black object that lay half in the water and half on the sand. It appeared to be caught by some twisted willow roots so that the river could not sweep it away. A few hours before the spot must have been under water.

“See,” he said quietly, “the victim that made our escape possible!”

And when I peered across his shoulder I saw that his stick rested on the body of a man. He turned it over. It was the corpse of a peasant, and the face was hidden in the sand. Clearly the man had been drowned, but a few hours before, and his body must have been swept down upon our island somewhere about the hour of the dawn—*at the very time the fit had passed.*

“We must give it a decent burial, you know.”

“I suppose so,” I replied. I shuddered a little in spite of myself, for there was something about the appearance of that poor drowned man that turned me cold.

The Swede glanced up sharply at me, an undecipherable expression on his face, and began clambering down the bank. I followed him more leisurely. The current, I noticed, had torn away much of the clothing from the body, so that the neck and part of the chest lay bare.

Half-way down the bank my companion suddenly stopped and held up his hand in warning; but either my foot slipped, or I had gained too much momentum to bring myself quickly to a halt, for I bumped into him and sent him forward with a sort of leap to save himself. We tumbled together on to the hard sand so that our feet splashed into the water. And, before anything could be done, we had collided a little heavily against the corpse.

The Swede uttered a sharp cry. And I sprang back as if I had been shot.

At the moment we touched the body there rose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work.

My companion clutched me, and I think I clutched him, but before either of us had time properly to recover from the unexpected shock, we saw that a movement of the current was turning the corpse round so that it became released from the grip of the willow roots. A moment later it had turned completely over, the dead face uppermost, staring at the sky. It lay on the edge of the main stream. In another moment it would be swept away.

The Swede started to save it, shouting again something I did not catch about a “proper burial”—and then abruptly dropped upon his knees on the sand and covered his eyes with his hands. I was beside him in an instant.

I saw what he had seen.

For just as the body swung round to the current the face and the exposed chest turned full towards us, and showed plainly how the skin and flesh were indented with small hollows, beautifully formed, and exactly similar in shape and kind to the sand-funnels that we had found all over the island.

“Their mark!” I heard my companion mutter under his breath. “Their awful mark!”

And when I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done its work, and the body had been swept away into mid-stream and was already beyond our reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter.

The Hodag

Lake Shore Kearney

Far up in the north woods, among the silvery lakes, there once was a region of tall, swaying pine and evergreen. The people who inhabited this region were sturdy woodsmen type, men who lived hard and loved the great outdoors with its primitive life, close to nature.

The chief beast of burden in this land of primeval timber was the humble ox. Slowly and patiently, treading heavily through the growth of underbrush, over great carpets of pine needles, he conveyed the huge logs out of the forest to a convenient landing place at the side of some stream.

His drivers represented several nationalities, so the patient ox had to accustom himself to the different characteristics of his various drivers. Life for him was truly one of oppression. It would be a difficult task to know which of the two, the driver or the ox, had the larger amount of gray matter. In most instances, a close observer would have said the latter was favored.

The manner of driving the ox was with considerable persuasion, and at the point of a three and one half foot goad stick. At that time, there was no restriction by legislatures regarding the length of the stick. The ox skinner was noted for his unlimited vocabulary, which consisted of a smattering of the English language together with the extensive use of the profane. The poor ox, not being related to Balaam's ass, had no defence.

So, on each succeeding winter, there were ox skimmers of Irish, French and Scandinavian, depending upon the nationality of the man who happened to be the driver at that time. Each, in his turn, goaded and cursed in his native tongue, using the blasphemy characteristic of his nationality. The hide of the ox was reputed to be proof against the elements, but not invulnerable against the profanity of the several drivers. "Curses come home to roost," and "a constant dripping will wear away stone." Such was the case of the ox, whose life under favorable conditions, did not usually exceed six years. Thus, merciful Providence intervened and took him from his toil.

The customary burial ceremony of the ox was cremation, so a huge pile of brush was usually gathered and the remains of the ox placed carefully in the

center. The belief of those sturdy woodsmen was that seven years of continuous fire was necessary to exterminate the profanity which had accumulated in the body of the ox during his life. Accordingly, the brush pile was very frequently replenished, the fire at times leaping high, while at other times, it smoldered fitfully.

It was at the end of the seventh year of the cremation of an ox which had led an unusually hard life that an event was to happen, which would cast in shadow upon every man who witnessed it. As the fire died down, there slowly issued from the great pile of ashes, a mystical animal, later to be known as the hodag.

On this particular day, just at twilight, Eugene Shepherd, a naturalist of the north woods, taking his customary quiet stroll into the forest, strode down a favorite trail, breathing the fragrance of the tall pines and hemlocks. Suddenly, he became aware of an unusual odor in the air, which aroused his curiosity. On looking further through the depths of the foliage, he discovered a strange creature, so unlike anything he had ever seen before, that it was beyond description. Though a student of woodlore and of both prehistoric and other wild animals, Mr. Shepherd could not classify the monstrosity, which was gazing at him with glowing, green eyes and sniffing from nostrils of flaming hue.

The animal's back resembled that of a dinosaur, and his tail, which extended to an enormous length, had a spearlike end. Sharp spines, one and a half feet apart, lined the spinal column. The legs were short and massive and the claws were thick and curved, denoting great strength. The broad, furrowed forehead was covered with coarse, shaggy hair and bore two large horns. From the broad, muscular mouth, sharp, glistening white teeth protruded.

This strange animal of the woods had an alert movement and the swish of his tail made the earth tremble. When he exhaled, an obnoxious odor penetrated the atmosphere for some distance. Mr. Shepherd was trembling and speechless as he gazed on this horror of the forest. The great naturalist who had conquered all before, was at his wit's end. Ruminating on a plan by which he might capture this animal, he hastened to the nearby village and disclosed his startling information to the Ancient Order of the Reveeting Society.

In the ancient text of this mysterious order of the Reveeting Society, behind the closed flap, he related his experience, to those great, world renowned men, selected from the farthest corners of the earth, men of great courage and chivalry. They were men, who in the rough and tumble fight with a bear, would toss

their guns into the brush, stick their bowie knives into a nearby tree and give the big bruin both underholts, in their desire not to take advantage of the beast. This was the type of men he selected to help him capture this formidable nondescript.

While planning the capture of his mysterious discovery, Mr. Shepherd spent much time in contemplation of the beast's origin. Millions of years ago, in the antedeluvian period, many ages before the creation of man, this animal may have been the missing link between the ichthyosaurus and the mylodoan. One reason that Mr. Shepherd arrived at this conclusion was because the ichthyosaurus attained a length of one hundred feet and a height of twenty. It had a wonderfully formed eye, which could be adjusted at will so that the animal could see objects some distance away as well as those nearby. Its principal diet was blue mud and it was able, at some seasons of the year, to devour a hill of considerable size in a week. In this connection, it is interesting to note that a parchment found in King Tut's sarcophagus, written by one of his hunters in the dead language, called it selblatkey, translated by a reporter on the staff of the New North as meaning, "Hodag." The Mylodoan was an animal of prehistoric times, so powerful that he could pull down large trees to get the foliage and limbs growing at the tops.

How to capture the hodag was a real man sized job, and none realized it more fully than the heroic Mr. Shepherd. He ordered a crew of men to dig a large pit, several miles from the point where he had first sighted the animal. This huge excavation, which was fifty feet in diameter and thirty feet deep, was covered with poles thrown across the opening. The trap was successfully hidden by limbs and grass, laid carefully across the poles.

Well pleased with his strategy, Mr. Shepherd selected a man from the north woods to help with this daring adventure of capturing the hodag. A young man of Marathon fame and a noted ski jumper, with many honors and medals, was considered to be the person most capable of engaging in the exploit. (By request, his name is not mentioned because modesty as well as bravery was one of his outstanding characteristics.)

Because the hodag relished beef on the hoof more than any other food, the ox was to serve mankind in a new way for scientific futurity. The hero led the ox through the dense forest until he came in sight of the monster. Then came a growl so deep, loud and sepulchral, that it fairly shook the earth, causing a vibration so great that it started a great shower of leaves and limbs from the

giant trees. The ox became frantic, but his brave leader steered him along the blazed trail with greater force than before. On they went towards the pit, while traveling towards them was the hodag, bent upon capturing his prey! Though the beast's powerful legs were short, he covered the ground with unbelievable swiftness, tearing out trees and the heavy growth of underbrush and leaving in his wake, great gashes in the earth itself. At intervals, one could hear an indescribable growl and with each breath, the beast emitted an odor that baffled description! Finally, only one hundred yards separated the great animal from his prey, then forty, and then twenty yards. At the crucial moment, one could hear the rasping teeth of the pursuing beast coming together as he opened and closed his ugly jaws.

The leader directed the ox in such a manner that he avoided the pit, but the impetus of the great hodag carried him forward over the mass of branches and grass, which covered the trap. In he crashed, emitting a roar that could be heard for miles, as he struggled to extricate himself. Friendly hands led the hero away, and the ox, with tongue hanging from his mouth, was rewarded with a good bed and plenty to eat that night.

The men who had planned this hazardous feat, knew to a certainty that there were no sloping foreheads or receding chins in their group. They lost no time in going to the private tent to confer with that mysterious man, Arthur Koenitzer, a brother in good standing in their Order of the Reveeting Society. This man with protruding forehead, known as a mastermind, (he never could be accused of being so effeminate as to have pink lace on his underwear), quickly pointed out a way in which Mr. Shepherd could exhibit his recently acquired wild animal with safety.

This, dear reader, is the true and authentic account of the hodag's capture. Further on in this volume will be found details of its eggs, their size and color and means of hatching. In case any reader should want a setting of the eggs, he is not under any obligation to the writer for the address of a gentleman by the name of Mike Essex of Siberia, Wisconsin, who will be glad to make the shipment. The side hill, where Mr. Essex keeps the hodag is an ideal spot equipped with a powerful derrick capable of handling those precious eggs.

Water Kelpie

Rev. Dr. Jamieson

Aft, owre the bent, with heather blent,
 And throw the forest brown,
I tread the path to yon green strath,
 Quhare brae-born Esk rins down.
Its banks alang, quhilk hazels thrang,
 Quhare sweet-sair'd hawthorns blow,
I lufe to stray, and view the play
 Of fleckit scules below.

Ae summer e'en, upon the green,
 I laid me down to gaze;
The place right nigh, quhare Carity
 His humble tribute pays:
And Prosen proud, with rippet loud,
 Cums ravin' frae his glen;
As gin he micht auld Esk affricht,
 And drive him back agen.

An ancient tour appear't to lour
 Athort the neighbourin plain
Quhais chieftain bauld, in times of auld,
 The kintrie call't his ain.
Its honours cow't, it's now forhow't,
 And left the houlat's prey;
Its skuggin' wude, aboon the flude,
 With gloom owrespreads the day.

A dreary shade the castle spread,
 And mirker grew the lift;
The croonin' kie the byre drew nigh,
 The darger left his thrift.
The lavrock shill on erd was still,
 The westlin wind fell loun;
The fisher's houp forgat to loup,
 And aw for rest made boun.

I seem't to sloom, quham throw the gloom
I saw the river shak,
And heard a whush alangis it rush,
Gart aw my members quak;
Syne, in a stound, the pool profound
To cleave in twain appear'd:
And huly throw the frichtsom how
His form a gaist uprear'd.

He rashes bare, and seggs, for hair,
Quhare ramper-eels entwined;
Of filthy gar his ee-brees war,
With esks and horse-gells lined.
And for his een, with dowie sheen,
Twa huge horse-mussels glared:
From his wide mow a torrent flow,
And soupt his reedy beard.

Twa slauky stanes seemit his spule-banes;
His briskit braid, a whin;
Ilk rib sae bare, a skelvy skair;
Ilk arm a monstrous fin.
He frae the wame a fish became,
With shells aw coverit owre:
And for his tail, the grislie whale
Could nevir match its pow'r.

With dreddour I, quhan he drew nigh,
Had maistly swarfit outricht:
Less fleyit, at lenth I gatherit strenth,
And speirit quhat was this wicht.
Syne thrice he shook his fearsom bouk,
And thrice he snockerit loud;
From ilka ee the fire-flauchts flee,
And flash alangis the flude.

Quhan words he found, their elritch sound
Was like the norlan blast,
Frae yon deep glack, at Catla's back,
That skeegs the dark-brown waste.
The troublit pool conveyit the gowl
Down to yon echoin rock;
And to his maik, with wilsum skraik,
Ilk bird its terror spoke.

The trout, the par, now here, now thare,
As in a widdrim bang;
The gerron gend gaif sic a stend,
As on the yird him flang:
And down the stream, like levin's gleam,
The fleggit salmond flew;
The ottar yap his prey let drap,
And to his hiddils drew.

"Vile droich," he said, "art nocht afraid
Thy mortal life to tyne ?
How dar'st thou seik with me till speik,
Sae far aboon thy line?
Yet sen thou hast thai limits past,
That sinder sprites frae men,
Thy life I'll spare, and aw declare,
That worms like thee may ken.

"In kintries nar, and distant far,
Is my renoun propall't;
As is the leid, my name ye'll reid,
But here I'm Kelpie call't.
The strypes and burns, throw aw their turns,
As weel's the waters wide,
My laws obey, their spring-heads frae,
Doun till the salt sea tide.

“Like some wild staig, I aft stravaig,
And scamper on the wave:
Quha with a bit my mow can fit,
May gar me be his slave.
To him I’ll wirk, baith morn and mirk,
Quhile he has wark to do,
Gin tent he tak I do nae shak
His bridle frae my mow.

“Quhan Murphy’s laird his biggin rear’d,
I carryit aw the stanes;
And mony a chiell has heard me squeal
For sair-brizz’d back and banes.
Within flude-mark, I aft do wark
Gudewillit, quhan I please;
In quarries deep, quhile uthers sleep,
Greit blocks I win with ease.

“Yon bonny brig quhan folk wald big,
To gar my stream look braw;
A sair-toil’d wicht was I be nicht;
I did mair than thaim aw,
And weel thai kent quhat help I lent,
For thai yon image fram’t,
Aboon the pend whilk I defend;
And it thai Kelpie nam’t.

“Quhan lads and lasses wauk the clais,
Narby yon whinny hicht,
The sound of me their daffin lays;
Thai dare na mudge for fricht.
Now in the midst of them I scream,
Quhan toozlin’ on the haugh;
Than quihher by thaim down the stream,
Loud nickerin in a lauch.

“Sicklike’s my fun, of wark quhan run:
But I do meikle mair;
In pool or ford can nane be smur’d
Gin Kelpie be nae there.
Fow lang, I wat, I ken the spat,
Quhair ane sall meet his deid:
Nor wit nor pow’r put aff the hour,
For his wanweird decreed.

“For oulks befoir, alangis the shoir,
Or dancin’ down the stream,
My lights are seen to blaze at e’en,
With wull wanerthly gleam.
The hind cums in, gif haim he win,
And cries, as he war wod;
‘Sum ane sall soon be carryit down
By that wanchancy flude.

“The taiken leil thai ken fow weel,
On water-sides quha won;
And aw but thai, quha’s weird I spae,
Fast frae the danger run.
But fremmit fouk I thus provoke
To meit the fate thai flee:
To wilderit wichts thai’re waefow lights,
But lights of joy to me.

“With ruefow cries, that rend the skies,
Thair fate I seem to mourn,
Like crocodile, on banks of Nile;
For I still do the turn.
Douce, cautious men aft fey are seen;
Thai rin as thai war heyrt,
Despise all rede, and court their dede:
By me are thai inspir’t.

“Yestreen the water was in spate,
The stanners aw war cur’d:
A man, nae stranger to the gate,
Raid up to tak the ford.
The haill town sware it wadna ride;
And Kelpie had been heard:
But nae a gliffin wad he bide,
His shroud I had prepared.

“The human schaip I sometimes aip:
As Prosenhaugh raid haim,
Ae starnless nicht, he gat a fricht,
Maist crackt his bustuous frame.
I, in a glint, lap on ahint,
And in my arms him fang’t;
To his dore-cheik I kept the cleik:
The carle was sair bemang’t.

“My name itsell wirks like a spell,
And quiet the house can keep;
Quhan greits the wean, the nurse in vain,
Thoch tyke-tyrit, tries to sleip.
But gin scho say, ‘Lie still, ye skrae,
There’s Water Kelpie’s chap’;
It’s fleyit to wink, and in a blink
It sleips as sound’s a tap.”

He said, and thrice he rais’t his voice,
And gaif a horrid gowl:
Thrice with his tail, as with a flail,
He struck the flying pool.
A thunderclap seem’t ilka wap,
Resoundin’ throw the wude:
The fire thrice flash’t; syne in he plash’t,
And sunk beneath the flude.

The Habitants of Middle Islet

William Hope Hodgson

“That’s ‘er,” exclaimed the old whaler to my friend Trenhern, as the yacht coasted slowly around Nightingale Island. The old fellow was pointing with the stump of a blackened clay pipe to a small islet on our starboard bow.

“That’s ‘er, Sir,” he repeated. “Middle Islet, an’ we’ll open out ther cove in er bit. Mind you, Sir, I don’t say as ther ship is still there, an’ if she is, you’ll bear in mind as I told you all erlong as there weren’t one in ‘er when we went aboard.” He replaced his pipe, and took a couple of slow draws, while Trenhern and I scrutinized the little island through our glasses.

We were in the South Atlantic. Far away to the north showed dimly the grim, weather-beaten peak of the Island of Tristan, the largest of the Da Cunha group; while on the horizon to the Westward we could make out indistinctly Inaccessible Island. Both of these, however, held little interest for us. It was on Middle Islet off the coast of Nightingale Island that our attention was fixed.

There was little wind, and the yacht forged but slowly through the deep-tinted water. My friend, I could see, was tortured by impatience to know whether the cove still held the wreck of the vessel that had carried his sweetheart. On my part, though greatly curious, my mind was not sufficiently occupied to exclude a half-conscious wonder at the strange coincidence that had led to our present search. For six long months my friend had waited in vain for news of the *Happy Return* in which his sweetheart had sailed for Australia on a voyage in search of health. Yet nothing had been heard, and she was given up for lost; but Trenhern, desperate, had made a last effort. He had sent advertisements to all the largest papers of the world, and this measure had brought a certain degree of success in the shape of the old whaler alongside of him. This man, attracted by the reward offered, had volunteered information regarding a dismantled hulk, bearing the name of the *Happy Return* on her bows and stern, which he had come across during his last voyage, in a queer cove on the South side of Middle Islet. Yet he had been able to give no hope of my friend finding his lost love, or indeed anything living in her; for he had gone aboard with a boat’s crew, only to find her utterly deserted, and — as he told us — had stayed no time at all. I am inclined now to think that he must unconsciously have been impressed by the unutterable desolation, and atmosphere of the unknown, by which she

was pervaded, and of which we ourselves were so soon to be aware. Indeed, his very next remark went to prove that I was right in the above supposition.

“We none of us wanted to ‘ave much truck with ‘er. She ‘adn’t a comfortable feelin’ ‘bout ‘er. An’ she were too dam clean an’ tidy for my likin’.”

“How do you mean, too clean and tidy?” I inquired, puzzled at his way to putting it.

“Well,” he replied, “so she were. She sort of gave you ther feelin’ as ‘er crowd ‘ad only just left ‘er, an’ might be back any bloomin’ minnit. You’ll savvy wot I mean, Sir, when you gets aboard of ‘er.” He wagged his head wisely, and recommenced drawing at his pipe.

I looked at him a moment doubtfully; then I turned and glanced at Trenhern, but it was evident that he had not noticed these last remarks of the old seaman. He was far too busily engaged in staring through his telescope at the little island, to notice what was going on about him. Suddenly he gave a low cry, and turned to the old whaler.

“Quick, Williams!” he said, “is that the place?” He pointed with the telescope. Williams shaded his eyes, and stared.

“That’s it, Sir,” he replied after a moment’s pause.

“But—but where’s the ship?” inquired my friend in a trembling voice. “I see no sign of her.” He caught Williams by the arm, and shook it in sudden fright.

“It’s all right, Sir,” exclaimed Williams. “We ain’t far enuff to the Sutherd yet ter open out ther cove. It’s narrer at ther mouth, an’ she were right away up inside. You’ll see in er minnit.”

At that, Trenhern dropped his hand from the old fellow’s arm, his face clearing somewhat; yet greatly anxious. For a minute he held on to the rail as though for support; then he turned to me.

“Henshaw,” he said, “I feel all of a shake—I—I——”

“There, there, old chap,” I replied, and slipped my arm through his. Then, thinking to occupy his attention somewhat, I suggested to him that he should

order one of the boats to be got ready for lowering. This he did, and then for a little while further we scanned that narrow opening among the rocks. Gradually, as we drew more abreast of it, I realised that it ran a considerable depth in to the islet, and then at last something came into sight away up among the shadows within the cove. It was like the stern of a vessel projecting from behind the high walls of the rocky recess, and as I grasped the fact, I gave a little shout, pointing out to Trenhern with some considerable excitement.

The boat had been lowered, and Trenhern and I with the boat's crew, and the old whaler steering, were heading direct for that opening in the coast of Middle Islet.

Presently we were amongst the broad belt of kelp with which the islet was surrounded, and a few minutes later we slid into the clear, dark waters of the cove, with the rocks rising up in stark, inaccessible walls on each side of us until they seemed almost to meet in the heights far overhead.

A few seconds swept us through the passage and into a small circular sea enclosed by gaunt cliffs that shot up on all sides to a height of some hundred odd feet. It was as though we looked up from the bottom of a gigantic pit. Yet at the moment we noted little of this, for we were passing under the stern of a vessel, and looking upwards, I read in white letters *Happy Return*.

I turned to Trenhern. His face was white, and his fingers fumbled with the buttons of his jacket, while his breath came irregularly. The next instant, Williams had laid us alongside, and Trenhern and I were scrambling aboard. Williams followed, carrying up the painter; he made it fast to a cleet, and then turned to lead the way.

Upon the deck, as we walked, our feet beat with an empty sound that spelt out desolation; while our voices, when we spoke, seemed to echo back from the surrounding cliffs with a strange hollow ring that caused us at once to speak in whispers. And so I began to understand what Williams had meant when he said "She 'adn't a comfertable feelin' 'bout 'er."

"See," he said, stopping after a few paces, "'ow bloomin' clean an' tidy she is. It aren't nat'ral." He waved his hand towards the surrounding deck furniture. "Everythin' as if she was just goin' inter port, an' 'er a bloomin' wreck."

He resumed his walk aft, still keeping the lead. It was as he had said. Though

the vessel's masts and boats had gone, she was extraordinarily tidy and clean, the ropes — such as were left — being coiled up neatly upon the pins, and in no part of her decks could I discern any signs of disorder. Trenhern had grasped all this simultaneously with myself, and now he caught my shoulder with a quick nervous grasp.

“See her, Henshaw,” he said in an excited whisper, “this shows some of them were alive when she drove in here——” He paused as though seeking for breath. “They may be—they may be——” He stopped once more, and pointed mutely to the deck. He had gone past words.

“Down below?” I said, trying to speak brightly.

He nodded, his eyes searching my face as though he would seek in it fuel for the sudden hope that had sprung up within him. Then came Williams' voice; he was standing in the companionway.

“Come along, Sir. I aren't goin below 'ere by myself.”

“Yes, come along, Trenhern,” I cried. “We can't tell.”

We reached the companionway together, and he motioned me to go before him. He was all a-quiver. At the foot of the stairs, Williams paused a moment; then turned to the left and entered the saloon. As we came in through the doorway, I was again struck by the exceeding tidiness of the place. No signs of hurry or confusion; but everything in its place as though the steward had but the moment before tidied out the apartment and dusted the table and fittings. Yet to our knowledge she had lain here a dismasted hulk for at least five months.

“They must be here! They must be here!” I heard my friend mutter under his breath, and I — though bearing in mind that Williams had found her thus all those months gone — could scarcely but join in his belief.

Williams had gone across to the starboard side of the saloon, and I saw that he was fumbling at one of the doors. It opened under his hand, and he turned and beckoned to Trenhern.

“See 'ere, Sir,” he said. “This might be your young leddy's cabin; there's feemayles' things 'ung up, an' their sort of fixins on ther table——”

He did not finish; for Trenhern had made one spring across the saloon, and caught him by the neck and arm.

“How dare you—desecrate—” he almost shrieked, and forth with hauled him out from the little room. “How—how—” he gasped, and stooped to pick up a silver-backed brush which Williams had dropped at his unexpected onslaught.

“No offence, Mister,” replied the old whaler in a surprised voice, in which there was also some righteous anger. “No offence. I wern’t goin’ ter steal ther blooming’ thing.” He gave the sleeve of his jacket a brush with the palm of his hand, and glanced across at me, as though he would have me witness to the truth of his statement. Yet I scarcely noticed what it was that he said; for I heard my friend cry out from the interior of his sweetheart’s cabin, and in his voice there was blent a marvellous depth of hope and fear and bewilderment. An instant later he burst out into the saloon; in his hand he held something white. It was a calendar. He twisted it right way up to show the date at which it was set.

“See,” he cried, “read the date!”

As my eyes gathered the import of the few visible figures, I drew my breath swiftly and bent forward, staring. The calendar had been set for the date of that very day.

“Good God!” I muttered; and then:— “It’s a mistake! It’s just a chance!” And still I stared.

“It’s not,” answered Trenhern vehemently. “It’s been set this very day—” He broke off short for a moment. Then after a queer little pause he cried out “O, my God! grant I find her!”

He turned sharply to Williams.

“What was the date at which this was set?—Quick!” he almost shouted.

Williams stared at him blankly.

“Damnation!” shouted my friend, almost in a frenzy. “When you came aboard here before?”

“I never even seen ther blessed thing before, Sir,” he answered. “We didn’t stay no time aboard of ‘er.”

“My goodness, man!” cried Trenhern, “what a pity! O what a pity!” Then he turned and ran towards the saloon door.

In the doorway he looked back over his shoulder.

“Come on! Come on!” he called. “They’re somewhere about. They’re hiding—Search!”

And so we did; but though we went through the whole ship from stern to bow, there was nowhere any sign of life. Yet everywhere that extraordinary clean orderliness prevailed, instead of the wild disorder of an abandoned wreck; and always, as we went from place to place and cabin to cabin, there was upon me the feeling that they had but just been inhabited.

Presently, we had made an end to our search, and having found nothing of that for which we looked, were facing one another bewilderedly, though saying but little. It was Williams who first said anything intelligible.

“It’s as I said, Sir; there weren’t anythin’ livin’ aboard of ‘er.”

To this Trenhern replied nothing, and in a minute Williams spoke again.

“It aren’t far off dark, Sir, an’ we’ll ‘ave ter be gettin’ out of this place while there’s a bit of daylight.”

Instead of replying to this, Trenhern asked if any of the boats were there when he was aboard before, and on his answering in the negative, fell once more into his silent abstraction.

After a little, I ventured to draw his attention to what Williams had said about getting aboard the yacht before the light had all gone. At that, he gave an absent nod of assent, and walked towards the side, followed by Williams and myself. A minute later we were in the boat and heading out for the open sea.

During the night, there being no safe anchorage, the yacht was kept off, it being Trenhern’s intention to land upon Middle Islet and search for any trace of the lost crew of the *Happy Return*. If that produced nothing, he was going to

make a thorough exploration of Nightingale Island and the Islet of Stoltenkoff before abandoning all hopes.

The first portion of this plan he commenced to put into execution as soon as it was dawn; for his impatience was too great to allow of his waiting longer.

Yet before we landed on the Islet, he bade Williams take the boat into the cove. He had a belief, which affected me somewhat, that he might find the crew and his sweetheart returned to the vessel. He suggested to me — searching my face all the while for mutual hope — that they had been absent on the preceding day, perhaps on an expedition to the Island in search of vegetable food. And I (remembering the date of the calendar) was able to look at him encouragingly; though had it not been for that, I should have been helpless to aid his belief.

We entered through the passage into that great pit among the cliffs. The ship, as we ranged alongside of her, showed wan and unreal in the grey light of the mist-shrouded dawn; yet this we noticed little then, for Trenhern's visible excitement and hope was becoming infectious. It was he who now led the way down into the twilight of the saloon. Once there, Williams and I hesitated with a certain natural awe, whilst Trenhern walked across to the door of his sweetheart's room. He raised his hand and knocked, and in the succeeding stillness, I heard my heart beat loud and fast. There was no reply, and he again rapped with his knuckles on the panels, the sounds echoing hollowly through the empty saloon and cabins. I felt almost sick with the suspense of waiting, then abruptly, he seized the handle, turned it, and threw the door wide. I heard him give a sort of groan. The little cabin was empty. The next instant, he gave out a shout, and reappeared in the saloon holding the same little calendar. He ran to me and pushed it into my hands with an inarticulate cry. I looked at it. When Trenhern had shown it to me the preceding day it had been showing the date 27th.; *now it had been altered to the 28th.*

“What's it mean, Henshaw? what's it mean?” he asked helplessly.

I shook my head. “Sure you didn't alter it yesterday—by accident?”

“I'm quite sure!” he said.

“What are they playing at?” he went on. “There's no sense in it—” He paused a moment; then again:— “What's it mean?”

“God knows.” I muttered. “I’m stumped.”

“You mean sumone’s been in ‘ere since yesterday?” inquired Williams at this point.

I nodded.

“Be gum then, Sir,” he said, “it’s ghostses!”

“Hold your tongue, Williams!” cried my friend, turning savagely upon him.

Williams said nothing, but walked toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“On deck, Sir,” he replied. “I didn’t sign on for this ‘ere trip to ‘ave no truck with sperrets!” and he stumbled up the companion stairway.

Trenhern seemed to have taken to notice of these last remarks; for when next he spoke he appeared to be following out a train of thought.

“See here,” he said. “They’re not living aboard here at all. That’s plain. They’ve some reason for keeping away. They’re hiding somewhere—perhaps in a cave.”

“What about the calendar then. You think—?”

“Yes, I’ve an idea that they may come aboard here at night. There may be something that keeps them away during the daylight. Perhaps some wild beast, or something; and they would be seen in the daytime.”

I shook my head. It was all so improbable. If there was something that could get at them aboard the ship, lying as it did surrounded by the sea, at the bottom of the great pit among the cliffs, then it seemed to me that they would nowhere be safe; besides, they could stay below decks during the day, and I could conceive of nothing that could reach them there. A multitude of other objections rose in my mind. And then I knew perfectly well that there were no wild beasts of any description on the Islands. No! obviously it could not be explained in that manner. And yet — there was the unaccountable altering of the calendar. I ended my line of reasoning in a fog. It seemed useless to apply any ordinary sense to the problem, and I turned once more to Trenhern.

“Well,” I said, “there’s nothing here, and there may be something, after all, in what you say; though I’m hanged if I can make head or tail of anything.”

We left the saloon and went on deck. Here we walked forward and glanced into the fo’cas’le; but, as I had expected, found nothing. After that we bundled down into the boat, and proceeded to search Middle Islet. To do this, we had to pull out of the cove and round the coast a bit to find a suitable landing place.

As soon as we had landed, we pulled the boat up into a safe place, and arranged the order of the search. Williams and I were to take a couple of the men apiece, and go right round the coast in opposite directions until we met, examining on the way all the caves that we came across. Trenhern was to make a journey to the summit, and survey the Islet from there.

Williams and I accomplished our part, and met close to where we had hauled up the boat. He reported nothing, and so did I. Of Trenhern we could see no trace, and presently, as he did not appear, I told Williams to stay by the boat while I went up the height to look for him. Soon I reached the top and found that I was standing upon the brink of the great pit in which lay the wreck. I glanced round and there away to the left, I saw my friend lying on his stomach with his head over the edge of the chasm, evidently staring down at the hulk.

“Trenhern,” I called softly, not wanting to startle him.

He raised his head and looked in my direction; seeing me, he beckoned, and I hurried to his side.

“Bend down,” he said in a low voice. “I want you to look at something.”

As I got down beside him, I gave a quick glance at his face; it was very pale; then I had my face over the brink and was staring into the gloomy depth below.

“See what I mean?” he asked, still speaking scarcely above a whisper.

“No,” I said. “Where?”

“There,” he answered, pointing. “In the water on the starboard side of the *Happy Return*.”

Looking in the direction indicated, I now made out in the water close alongside the wreck several pale, oval-shaped objects.

“Fish,” I said. “What queer ones!”

“No!” he replied. “Faces!”

“What!”

“Faces!”

I got up on to my knees and looked at him.

“My dear Trenhern, you’re letting this matter affect you too deeply—You know you have my deepest sympathy. But—”

“See,” he interrupted, “they’re moving, they’re watching us!” He spoke quietly, utterly ignoring my protest.

I bent forward again and looked. As he had said, they were moving, and as I peered, a sudden idea came to me. I stood up abruptly.

“I have it!” I cried excitedly. “If I’m right it may account for their leaving the ship. I wonder we never thought of it before!”

“What?” he asked in a weary voice, and without raising his face.

“Well, in the first place, old man, those are not faces, as you very well know; but I’ll tell you what they very likely are, they’re the tentacles of some sort of sea monster, Kraken, of devil-fish—something of that sort. I can quite imagine a creature of the kind haunting that place down there, and I can equally well understand that if your sweetheart and the crew of the *Happy Return* are alive, they’ll be inclined to give their old packet a pretty wide berth if I am right—eh?”

By the time I had finished explaining my solution of the mystery, Trenhern was upon his feet. The sanity had returned to his eyes, and there was a flush of half-suppressed excitement on his hitherto pale cheeks.

“But—but—but—the calendar?” he breathed.

“Well, they may venture aboard at night, or in certain states of the tides, when, perhaps they have found there is little danger. Of course, I can’t say; but it seems probable, and what more natural than that they should keep count of

the days, or it may have just been put forward thoughtlessly in passing. It may even be your sweetheart counting the days since she was parted from you.”

I turned and peered once more over the edge of the cliff; the floating shapes had vanished. Then Trenhern was pulling at my arm.

“Come along, Henshaw, come along. We’ll go right back to the yacht and get some weapons. I’m going to slaughter that brute if he shows up.”

An hour later we were back with a couple of the yacht’s boats and their crews, the men being armed with cutlasses, harpoons, pistols and axes. Trenhern and I had each chosen a heavy shellgun.

The boats were left alongside, and the men ordered aboard the wreck, and there, having brought sufficient food, they picnicked for the rest of the day, keeping a keen watch for signs of anything.

Yet when the night drew near, they manifested considerable uneasiness; finally sending the old whaler aft to tell Trenhern that they would not stay aboard the *Happy Return* after dark; they would obey any order he chose to give in the yacht; but they had not signed on to stay aboard of a ghost-ridden craft at night.

Having heard Williams out, my friend told him to take the men off to the yacht; but to come back in one of the boats with some bedding, as he and I were going to stay the night aboard the hulk. This was the first I had heard on the matter; but when I remonstrated with him, he told me I was at perfect liberty to return to the yacht. For his part he had determined to stay and see if anyone came.

Of course after that, I had to stay. Presently they returned with the bedding, and having received orders from my friend to come for us at day-break, they left us there alone for the night.

We carried down our bedding and made it up on the saloon table; then we went on deck and paced the poop, smoking and talking earnestly — anon listening; but nothing came to our ears save the low voice of the sea beyond the kelp-belts. We carried our guns; for we had no knowledge but that they might be needed. Yet the time passed quietly, except once when Trenhern dropped the butt of his weapon upon the deck somewhat heavily. Then indeed, from all the cliffs around us, there came back a low hollow boom that

was frightening. It was like the growl of a great beast. At the bottom of that tremendous pit it presently became exceedingly dark. So far as I could judge, a mist had come down upon the Islet and formed a sort of huge lid to the pit. It was about twelve o'clock that we went below. I think by that time even Trenhern had begun to realise that there was a certain rashness in our having stayed; and below, at least, if we were attacked, we would be better able to hold our own. Somehow such vague fear as I had was not induced by the thought of the great monster I believed I had seen close to the vessel during the day; but rather by an unnameable something in the very air, as though the atmosphere of the place were a medium of terror. Yet — calming myself with an effort — I put down this feeling to my nerves being at tension; so that presently, Trenhern offering to take the first watch, I fell asleep on the saloon table, leaving him sitting beside me with his gun across his knees.

Then as I slept, a dream came to me — so extraordinarily vivid was it that it seemed almost I was awake. I dreamt that all of a sudden Trenhern gave a little gasp and leapt to his feet. In the same moment, I heard a soft voice call “Tren! Tren!” It came from the direction of the saloon doorway, and — in my dream — I turned and saw a most beautiful face, containing great wondrous eyes. “An angel!” I whispered to myself; then I knew that I was mistaken and that it was the face of Trenhern’s sweetheart. I had seen her once just before she sailed. From her, my gaze wandered to Trenhern. He had laid his gun upon the table, and now his arms were extended towards her. I heard her whisper “Come!” and then he was beside her. Her arms went about him, and then, together, they passed out through the doorway. I heard his feet upon the stairs, and after that my sleep became a blank, dreamless rest.

I was aroused by a terrible scream, so dreadful that I seemed to wake rather to death than life. For perhaps the half of a minute I sat up upon my bedding, motionless in a very frost of fear; but no further sound came to me, and so my blood ran warm once more, and I reached out my hand for my gun. I grasped it, shook the clothes from me and sprang to the floor. The saloon was filled with a faint gray light which filtered in through the skylight overhead. It was just sufficient to show me that Trenhern was not present, and that his gun was upon the table, just where I had seen him place it in my dream. At that, I called his name quickly; but the only answer I received was a hollow, ghostly echo from the surrounding empty cabins. Then I ran for the door, and so up the stairs on to the deck. Here, in the gloomy twilight, I glanced along the bare decks; but he was nowhere visible. I raised my voice and shouted. The grim, circling cliffs caught up the name and echoed it a thousand times, until it seemed

that a multitude of demons shouted “Trenhern! Trenhern! Trenhern!” from the surrounding gloom. I ran to the port side and glanced over — Nothing! I flew to starboard; my eyes caught something — many things that floated apparently just below the surface of the water. I stared, and my heart seemed suddenly quiet in my bosom. I was looking at a score of pale, unearthly faces, that stared back at me with sad eyes. They appeared to sway and quiver in the water; but otherwise there was no movement. I must have stood thus for many minutes; for, abruptly, I heard the sound of oars, and then round the quarter of the vessel swept the boat from the yacht.

“In bow, there,” I heard Williams shout. “‘Ere we are, Sir!” The boat grated against the side.

“‘Ow ‘ave—” Williams began; but it seemed to me that I had seen something coming to me along the deck, and I gave out one scream and leapt for the boat. I landed on a thwart.

“Push off! Push off!” I yelled, and seized an oar to help.

“Mr. Tren’ern, Sir?” interjected Williams.

“He’s dead!” I shouted. “Push her off! Push her off!” and the men, infected by my fear, pushed and rowed until, in a few moments we were a score of yards distant from her. Here there was an instant’s pause.

“Take her out, Williams!” I called, crazy with the thing upon which I had stumbled. “Take her out!” And at that, he steered for the passage into the open sea. This took us close past the stern of the wreck, and as we passed beneath, I looked up at the overhanging mass. As I did so, a dim, beauteous face came over the taffrail, and looked at me with great sorrowful eyes. She stretched out her arms to me, and I screamed aloud; for her hands were like unto the talons of a wild beast.

As I fell fainting, William’s voice came to me in a hoarse bellow of sheer terror. He was shouting to the men:

“Pull! *Pull!* *Pull!*”

St. George and the Dragon

Retold by Agnes Grozier Herbertson

The King of Selene, a city in Libya, had one daughter, named Cleodolinda.

Cleodolinda was a sweet maid, moving gently, and thinking gentle thoughts. Her form was fair, her eyes were clear and lustrous, and her heart was pure. She was as sweet as a summer morning, and as brave as a winter sun. Wherever she went she was welcome, for she carried joy with her. It seemed as if the earth were fairer where her shadow fell.

The King loved this Princess with a love that filled his whole heart with gladness. He knew her thoughts, felt her emotions, and shared her griefs. She was dearer to him than aught else in the world.

When Cleodolinda was fourteen years of age, the King thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than she. On that day he said to one of his courtiers: "Of all men on earth I am most happy. My country is at peace, the Queen my consort is amiable, and my daughter is as fair as she is good. I have nothing left to desire."

The courtier replied: "Sire, so gracious a monarch deserves only happiness."

But as the words were spoken a shadow fell, none knew whence, and encircled the King. And looking upon it, he replied, though fearing nothing: "There is none so gracious that grief may not fall upon him, and I know not why I have been more blest than other men."

That night, as the watchman went round the walls of Selene, he felt upon the air a most poisonous vapour that came from without the walls. And even as he wondered, the fumes of the poison became too much for him, and he fell over, and in a little time expired.

Now he had not long been lying there when a knight passed that way, and he had gone but a short distance beyond the spot where the body of the watchman lay, when he felt upon the air an odour most subtle and unpleasant. And it seemed to him that it came from without the city walls, where lay bogs and marshes and damp grounds. But even as the thought passed through his

brain, the poisonous fumes became too much for him, and he, too, fell to the ground.

And in the morning another watchman, making his round, found his fellow dead beside the city wall, and, a little distance from him, the dead knight. And upon the air was a faint odour that was unpleasant to the nostrils.

Then the watchman scaled the wall, and, having glanced over, he perceived a huge beast which crawled away from the city and toward the marshes. As it crawled it flapped two great black wings, and from its nostrils belched out a black flame which contained those poisonous fumes of which the watchman felt the trace. Its body was covered with scales, so strong and smooth that they were like a knight's armour; and in shape it was half crawling beast, half loathsome bird. As the watchman observed it, the dragon crawled into the farther part of the marshes, and lay still.

Then the watchman hurried him to those in authority to report this affair; and when the matter came to the King's ears, he was greatly disturbed, for he remembered the shadow that had fallen upon him, and, despite himself, he was filled with fears. Yet the fears were not for his own safety.

And he roused himself to give orders that none should go outside the city walls till the dragon had gone back whence it came.

So the long day through no man went outside the city walls, but many adventurous persons, having gained a perch upon the walls, observed the dragon, which had come into the sunlight, and could be seen lying there.

These saw when, in the evening, the dragon roused itself, and rolling over its loathsome body, started to crawl toward the city. It crawled on four twisted feet, and pushed itself with its wings; and its eyes shone like red flames. As this vile creature approached, the people were afraid, and retreated into the city, for they knew not for what purpose the dragon came.

When it had reached the gates of the city, it took up a position close to them; and from its nostrils it poured terrible fumes, so that the people were like to die.

Then the King called together his knights, and one, who was braver than any other, declared that he would discover from the dragon its purpose in so haunting the city. And having entreated the dragon to cease casting out its

poison while he spake with it, he approached and asked for what purpose it had come to the gates of Selene.

The dragon replied, by signs and hoarse noises, that it would only depart from the city gates and cease troubling the people of Selene with its poison if it were granted a meal of two sheep a day.

When the King heard of this reply, he ordered that two sheep should be set aside every day for the dragon, and put without the city walls.

And when the dragon had on that day received two sheep, it devoured them, and crawled back to its lair.

But it remained in the marshes, and not far from the city, so that none might enter the city or come out of it for fear of the dragon. And every day it roused itself, and crawled to the gates to receive its meal of two sheep.

But after a time the sheep became few in number, so that there would not long be enough to feed the dragon; and the people were possessed with fear.

Then came to the King the bravest knights of Selene, praying him that he would allow them to go out and do battle with the dragon.

“For the sheep are few in number,” said they; “and what is to be the fate of the people of Selene when they have nothing with which to feed the dragon?”

The King replied: “My brave knights, I fear me that ye go to your deaths. Yet can I neither forbid nor dissuade ye, for the fate of my people lies heavy in my heart.”

Having so spoken he became silent, for the foreboding was upon him that darker trouble was to come upon the people of Selene.

Then went out the knights to do battle with the dragon. And when it perceived them issue from the city gates, it forsook its lair and ran toward them with a most incredible speed, resting partly upon its body, and partly upon its wings. And, having come near, it fell upon them, breathing out its terrible poison, and lashing them with its wings. And, since the knights could neither pierce the scales with which its body was covered, nor stun the creature with the hardest blow, they were speedily overcome by the fumes that emanated from it. And they perished, one and all.

Then there was weeping in Selene for the fate of the bravest of her knights. And while the people wept, they trembled, for the sheep that remained were few.

When there was no longer one left to offer to the dragon, it lay again by the city gates, and threw its poison into the city.

And the King, moving as one moves in an evil dream, facing a horror only half understood, went to the gates of the city, and called upon the dragon to cease its poison for a time since he would talk with it.

And he asked of it why it had come to torment the people of Selene. But to that the dragon would answer nothing.

Then said the King: "Our sheep are all finished, and indeed there is little food of any kind in Selene. Since this be so, wilt not thou leave our gates, and return to thine own place?"

But the dragon, lifting its loathly head, made answer, by signs and noises: "I will not return to it. Let me be granted one child a day for my meal, and I will not molest the people of Selene."

And it would say no more.

Then the King went back the way he had come, and he walked heavily, for in his breast his heart was turned to stone. And he was filled with one great fear.

Cried the people of Selene: "We care no longer to live, since our children are to be taken from us!"

Nevertheless, because the poison from the dragon was reaching everywhere, so that none could escape, they promised, with bitter weeping, to offer up one child a day, hoping that the dragon would return to its home ere all the children were devoured.

And every day lots were cast. And upon whom fell the lot, a child of his was delivered to the dragon. And any child was sacrificed who was not yet fifteen years of age.

The Princess Cleodolinda was aged fourteen. Every day her eyes were dim

with tears for the child who was that day sacrificed. But her father, the King, never wept. His eyes were dry, and his face pale. For his heart contained but one fear.

Then came a day when the lot fell upon the Princess Cleodolinda, and she must be delivered to the dragon.

The King's fear was fulfilled, yet he could not weep. And flinging out his hands he cried: "The Princess shall not be sacrificed! I will yield to ye everything, my wealth, my possessions, myself—but not my daughter."

But the people replied, yet without anger: "Have not we yielded our children, whom we loved; and shalt thou do less than we, O King?"

And the King could not answer.

But after a while he said: "Ye will grant to me eight days to mourn for her, and to learn by heart her beauty, for I have loved her passing well."

The people replied: "We will sacrifice our own children for eight days."

Thus for eight days the King mourned his daughter Cleodolinda, whom he loved beyond aught else in the world; and the people mourned for him, for she was well beloved. But the Princess would not weep. For she said: "I am ashamed to weep for myself, I who am a King's daughter; and I die gladly for the people of Selene."

When the eight days were over, women clad the Princess in white garments, and she was placed outside the city wall to await the coming of the dragon.

Then, to still her heart's loud beating, she crossed her hands upon her breast; and to keep her eyes from wavering, she bent them upon the ground; and she thought of the people of Selene, for whom she was to die.

Now she had been standing thus but a short time, when she heard upon the ground the noise of a horse's hoofs, and looked up to see who it was that approached so near to the city of Selene.

And, having looked, her heart was filled with fear, for she beheld a knight of a fairer presence than any she had seen, and of a wondrous gentleness; and she perceived that he knew not of the dragon.

This knight was a soldier of the Emperor Diocletian, one who had risen to high honour in the army, and who was passing through Libya to join his men. When he perceived the Princess, standing pale and trembling outside the walls of the city, he paused on his way, to ask what was her distress.

But the Princess, in a great agitation, replied: "Ah, sir, do not wait to question me, but press on they way! For know, in yon marshes lurks a fearful dragon who has been the death of many a noble knight. Press on, I beseech thee, ere it issue from its lair."

But the knight replied: "I cannot press on and leave thee unprotected against the dragon."

And at that moment the dragon bestirred itself, and began to crawl from its hiding-place.

"Alas," cried Cleodolinda, "the dragon is upon us! I beseech thee, Sir Knight, leave me before it be too late!"

But the knight, turning him about, bade her remain where she was, and went out to meet the dragon.

When it observed him approach, the beast was struck with amazement, and, having paused for but a moment, it ran toward the knight with a great swiftness, and beating its dark wings upon the ground as it ran.

When it drew near to him, it puffed out from its nostrils a smoke so dense that the knight was enveloped in it as in a cloud; and darted hot flames from its eyes. Rearing its horrid body, it beat against the knight, dealing him fearful blows; but he, bending, thrust his spear against it, and caught the blows upon his shield.

And having cast all his strength into it, he dealt the dragon a deadly thrust; but the spear glanced aside, for the scales of the beast were like steel plates, and withstood the blow. Then the dragon, infuriated by the thrust, lashed itself against the knight and his horse, and threw out a vapour deadlier than before, and cast lightnings upon him from its eyes. And it writhed, an evil thing, about him, so that one would have said he must have been crushed; and wherever he thrust at it, that part was as if it had been clad in mail.

The fight lasted a long time, and the knight grew weary, though he fought

with as great an ardour as at first. Through the deadly fumes that issued from the dragon the Princess could see his face shine out, and she saw that it was pale, yet lighted up by some radiance that shone from within. As he thrust at the dragon, this radiance grew greater, so that at last it was like the light of the sun.

But the dragon looped itself about the knight, and its poison was heavy upon him, so that to breathe was almost more pain than he could bear. Then he perceived that, no matter how the dragon writhed, it sought always to protect one place in its body—that place which lay beneath its left wing. And, nerving himself for a great blow, the knight bent himself downward, and thrust his spear with a turn into that place.

So great was the strength required for the thrust that the knight left the spear in the wound for weariness; and as he raised himself he felt the dragon's clasp upon him loosen. Then the smoke ceased to belch from its nostrils, and the great beast fell to the ground.

Perceiving that the dragon was now helpless, though not dead, the knight called joyfully to the Princess; and he bade her that she should loosen her girdle, and give it to him. When this was done, the knight bound it about the neck of the dragon, and gave the girdle ends into the hand of the Princess that she might lead the dragon toward the city.

Thereafter, when they had reached the city gates, these were opened to them with great joy by the people of Selene, who had watched from the city this great fight; and all were astonished to behold the loathsome dragon so guided by the Princess.

With his sword, and in the presence of all people, the knight despatched the dragon; and when this was done, he would have gone on his way.

But the King said: "What shall be given to this brave knight, who hath so rid us of our enemy, and hath restored to us the Princess Cleodolinda, and saved our children?"

And the people cried of honours, and wealth, that should be given to the knight.

But he, when all had finished, thus replied: "I desire only that ye believe in the God who strengthened my hand to gain this victory, and be baptised."

And when he had baptised the city into the Christian faith, he went on his way.