

Weird Tales

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Cover by Lee Brown Coye

NOVELETTES

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Pete Larsen knew well enough that air personnel had often been forced to land on remote tropical islands. But he hadn't thought to ask if any of them were haunted.

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Such a process must inevitably be slow and gradual; inland areas will change first, then eventually the seas themselves will be attacked—life as we know it will vanish.

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A strange humming, bestial note, a growling sound, issued from the lips of a normal, healthy—and happy—young woman. . . .

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Church in the Jungles

BY ARTHUR J. BURKS

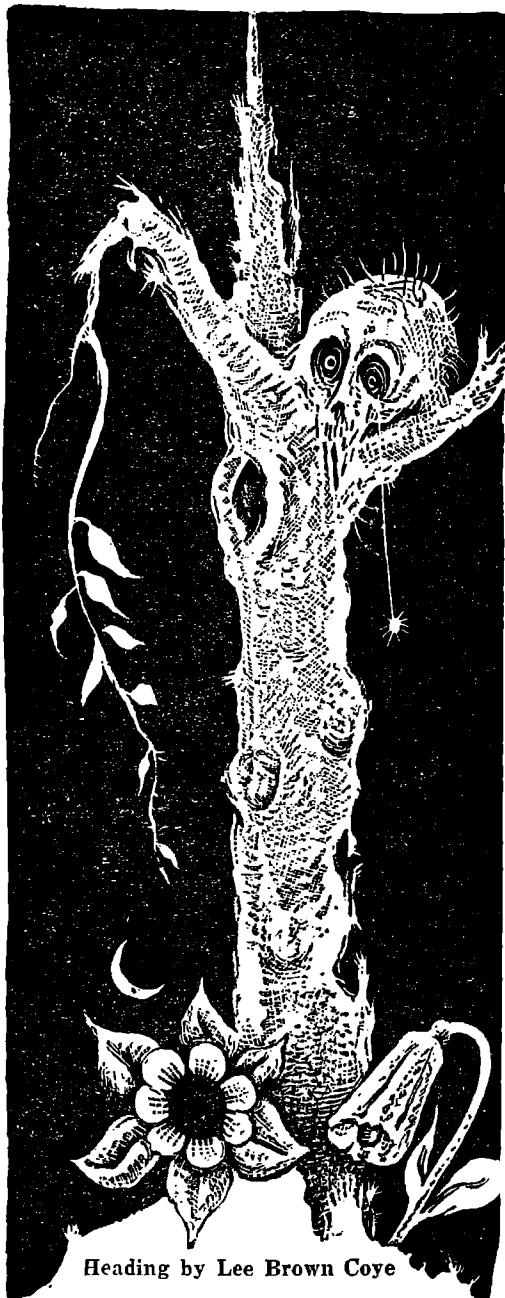
I HARBORED no fear of the supernatural. There was more than enough Nature around me of which to be afraid. I had roamed into the Central Brazilian jungles south of Belterra that morning. I had lost my party. I had played the fool as so many adventurers did. I had left my outfit to search the woods myself. They were all armed; I was not. I did not believe in firearms. I didn't even carry a stick to smash snakes. I knew it was possible, even with a compass, to lose myself within a hundred yards of the camp. I did just that.

When darkness fell terror rode me. I was not afraid of animals, particularly. There was a possibility of being bitten by snakes, and I had had narrow escapes; but the balance of chance was against it. The other animals of the forest, the jaguar, ocelot, the great otter, gave man a wide berth. Other men had vanished into the jungles, to be seen no more, but I felt pretty sure that one of two things had happened to them: they had been shot by Indians, or stepped into holes.

There was one other possibility; animals sometimes broke off tops of shrubs, leaving spine-sharp points which hardened to rock-like consistency. If one fell on one of those points it would be like Saul falling upon his sword.

There were no Indians anywhere near Belterra that one needed to fear, hadn't been for fifty years, maybe longer.

My dread was holes. The jungles were filled with them. When it rained heavily, water stood in low places. Then the bottom fell out of such pools, literally. I had almost stepped into holes ten, twelve, fifteen feet deep. And every one had been man-size. A man could step in, but without help he



Heading by Lee Brown Coye

*How had I got out to my refuge
in the darkness of the night?*

would never be able to get out of the hole.

That was my principal dread when night caught me. I yelled. I was too far away even

for the dogs to hear me. I yelled myself hoarse. I knew that the wise thing was to sit down and wait for morning. My comrades would expect me to do that. Then I'd be trailed and collected. I did sit down for a few minutes, but it takes a man with grim determination to sit quietly through the hours in the Brazilian jungles. So many things crawl, sniff, rattle the leaves, chitter, twitter, flutter invisible wings. Limbs break with sounds like pistol shots; it *could* be jaguar, tapir, the great otter. That sound could be the *sucuriá*, the python, creeping up to drop coils around one.

No, the holes were preferable. Besides, walking in the dark, one could always slide the feet, test each spot before setting the foot down. In any case one *moved*.

I walked, sometimes bumping into the thick trees, sometimes putting my extended hands against spined palms. Occasionally, a hundred feet aloft, a star peered through a space in the wind-whispering crown to see how I was making out.

I yelled again.

Nobody answered, but shortly after that I saw the lantern. It gave me a queer feeling, for we had no lantern with us. Back at camp there was just the usual fire to keep off the jaguar, or to keep him warm if he wasn't afraid of fire.

I don't believe in the supernatural, but I was thrilled a little, anyway. I knew, if my Brazilian friends spoke truly, that there was nobody in our strip of jungle but us.

I moved slowly, carefully, sliding my feet, toward the lantern. As I went I remembered a tale told last night, of a haunted jungle church occasionally reported by wanderers down the centuries. It wasn't in any given place. It just appeared when a wanderer was afraid, or approaching dangerous trouble, and somehow *saved* him. A ghostly priest, the tale said, signaled the wanderer with a swinging lantern!

THAT lantern was real enough. I stepped into mud over my shoetops. I moved to the right, then to the left. I was on the edge of a swamp, I decided, and the lantern was out in it somewhere. That was really odd; it carried coincidence a bit further than most

people would accept, for the "ghost church" always appeared on some safe, sound high place in a swamp!

There would be a way out to the lantern, a causeway of some kind. That's what the tale said, and common sense seemed to indicate the possibility. Ghost or real, the lantern swinger had got out there somehow. I found the causeway, a natural series of hummocks, grown together, angling, twisting out into the swamp. There was no doubt now about it being swamp. I heard alligators grunt, lash their tails on the water. I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry I could not see. I *did* see red eyes, two by two, watching me. Some of them came close, paralleling my course. But the causeway rose beyond their reach. I could see a priest, now, holding the lantern high. I called to him, and he made some sort of answer which I could hear, but not understand. I saw a building behind him. I could see its door, and well inside the door, candles.

I reached the priest, scarcely knowing whether to laugh hysterically or take this all as a matter of course. I put forth my hand to grasp his, but whether by accident or design, he evaded my handshake, bowing slightly. He wasn't Brazilian, but German, I thought, or maybe American. There were German and American Franciscans in the valley of the Tapajos River, of which this uninhabited area was part. The priest indicated that I was to pass through the door. I understood then why speech was taboo; some sort of ritual was in progress, solemn devotions. The priest signaled me to benches to my right as I entered. There were other men there, Brazilian and Indian. None of my people were here, however, and nobody turned to look at me. The priest who had signaled me to safety went forward. Two other priests murmured in Latin at two altars to right and left, behind the communion railing. The priest who had awaited my coming proceeded to the higher, central altar.

Mass was being read here by three priests. Odd, I thought; down here I had never participated in night mass except at Christmas, but always early in the morning. But I knew little of the priestly craft, though I was not irreligious.

The priests were cowled. There were kneeling women behind the benches to the left. Several of them were nuns in black, with black bonnets covering, or at least hiding, their faces. I knelt, too, thankful I had escaped, until devotions were ended.

SLOWLY nuns and two of the priests whom I had not met, rose and left the church, hands clasped before them, not looking at me. They had no interest in me. I could not see them *too* well, for I had been watching the flickering candles which had almost blinded me.

The priest who had doubtless saved my life was the only one left. He stood before me, smiling. His face was white, beautiful, his teeth perfect. He held the lantern so that I could see his face. He wore brown habit, I noticed, the only one of which I was sure.

"We are sorry we have no accommodations for travelers," the priest said to me in amazingly correct English, slowly and precisely, as if he first interpreted from some other language. "There are only our cells. The sisters have a building out there," he moved his head to indicate outside, to the right, "and we have a building on the other side of *Igreja Perdida*. But you may use my favorite place. Come!"

I got a slight bang out of his use of the words *Igreja Perdida*, for that had been the name of the "ghost" church my comrades had talked about around the campfire last night. Lost Church!

The priest—he never gave me his name—led me to a place in the wall of the church where a tree grew right through, or where the church had been built around the tree. Two huge limbs divided there to form an area, bed-size, shoulder-high, that did look inviting.

"I often meditate there," the priest said. "When there is no sound, alligators sometimes wander into the church. It is also not unknown to the python, but you will be quite safe. We are so poor, there won't even be coffee in the morning. . . ."

"I'll be fine," I said. I saw one of the nuns, now snuffing the candles. I supposed she was the sacristan. "A night's sleep and I'll be swell!"

He stood until I climbed up, sighed, straightened out. He stood until the candles were all snuffed and darkness was complete save for his lantern. I didn't see what became of the nun. The priest went to the door by which I had entered, raised the lantern, snicked up the chimney, blew out the flame. Utter darkness descended. I had the vaguest idea of the church. Big, I thought, big, old, falling apart. It had a musty smell.

I slept like a log.

I wakened with the sun in my face. I sat up in my big crotch of tree, looked around me. There was swamp everywhere. The snouts of many alligators rested on the water, beady eyes watching me, waiting for me to fall. I almost did, when I realized that there was no church, had therefore been no priest, lantern, nuns, candles, altars, incense or mass. But could I ever be sure of that?

How had I got out to my refuge in the blackness of night? That's what my friends asked me when, an hour after dawn, I heard their shouts, answered them and they came to the edge of the swamp. I could find no way to get out of the swamp; it was two hours before they found a way in. Even then I had great difficulty jumping from hummock to hummock behind them, going out.

"How did you get out there?" they asked.

"Jumped from back to back of the alligators!" I said.

"Nonsense!"

"Well, then, you remember that story you told me about *Igreja Perdida*? I saw a lantern. A priest was waving it. I simply followed it."

I told them exactly what had happened to me. They didn't believe a word of it. It sounded too much like the "ghost" church tale they had told me the night before. I knew no way to change the story, however.