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*Author of "His Family," "The Ghost of Silent Smith," etc.*

**S**OME men are like the throb of a kettledrum. Moisell was like that—high-strung, vivid, mysterious. His every word and gesture disclosed a certain emotion, a certain tensivity, that his friends found highly fascinating. Into the life of the club he came and went like a flash of color, radiating all the glamor of those silent, far-away places he inhabited. Short, lithe, well-groomed, he sparkled for a day or two and then dropped out of sight for months.

No one ever knew his destination. It was always a matter for conjecture. Occasionally we received hazy reports of his work in Africa, or Alaska, or innermost China. At other times we read brief newspaper extracts describing the bones, or eggs, or other fossilized deposits he had unearthed in Mexico, or Central America. And then, quite unexpectedly, he himself would bob up at the club and deliver a broadside of questions anent our own gray lives.

That was like Moisell. He was as talkative as any of the boys; but never about himself. Whenever the conversation drifted into the field of paleontology with its fantastic flying-lizards, dinosaurs and other prehistoric monsters, as our conversation invariably

did when Moisell was around, he always managed to steer it into other channels. . . . Imagine talking stocks and bonds and real estate with a man like that!

But five years ago—no, it was nearer six, I believe—Moisell let us have our way. He couldn't help it. At that time he was hobnobbing a lot with a fat, good-natured chap by the name of Bonner. Bonner was a botanist with quite a reputation and liked to talk "shop" almost as much as Moisell avoided it.

Young Donaldson, "Long Jim" Haney and myself were boring each other over a couple of highballs down in the grill of the Bachelors' Club, when Moisell and Bonner wandered in. Donaldson pounced upon the two immediately and dragged them across to our table. Their orders were taken and we all got settled comfortably. Moisell's face was beaming.

"This is—life!" he exclaimed with all the enthusiasm of a boy. "Friendship—talk—a bit to drink! Somehow or other, I don't get half as much of this sort of thing as I'd like to."

"You would soon tire of it," sighed "Long Jim." "Besides, you couldn't stand it. You're too much of a gipsy."

Moisell laughed.

"Even a gipsy has his band, Long Jim; some one he can talk to—some one he can smoke with—some one to clap him on the back and remind him of the sun. . . . Life without that would be—madness."

Moisell had a way of saying such things that made you wonder at his laughter.

"Just the same," put in the irrepressible Donaldson, tapping his glass, "I'll bet you get more kick out of a dead dinosaur than you could out of a dozen of these."

"Humph!" snorted Bonner disdainfully. "Dead ones, indeed!"

He glanced hurriedly around the room with an elaborate air of mystery and then leaned across the table as if about to divulge some momentous secret.

"How about the kick of a *live* one?" he whispered.

We all looked incredulous—all except Moisell.

"You mean a live—dinosaur?" inquired Donaldson, doubtfully.

"Maybe! Maybe something else; but it must be alive. Tell you better in—possibly a year from now."

"But—say! What's it all about?"

By this time young Donaldson was fairly radiating eagerness. Even "Long Jim" had straightened up.

"Down in Patagonia—of the upper plateau! Cold climate—hills—unexplored caves—peculiar flora—and all that!"

Bonner's voice was grave, but his eyes were twinkling.

"Tell them all about it, Moisell!"

Moisell pulled out a cigar and carefully clipped the end.

"Why—er—yes! Just so!"

He hesitated. Then he turned and smiled faintly upon Bonner—much like a tolerant father upon his son.

"Bonner and I have been planning a trip. The highlands of Patagonia

abound in a peculiar vegetation which Bonner wants to take a look at, while I—"

He paused and lit his cigar. Then he laughed a bit.

"It does seem absurd to think about it here where everything is so modern and cocksure; but I've got a theory that prehistoric life is not wholly extinct. That unexplored section of Patagonia is a likely place to look for it."

"You mean," ejaculated Donaldson, "that some of those high-soaring woppers are still flapping around down there?"

Moisell smiled faintly at this, but immediately grew serious.

"Dr. Johnson of Columbia says so," with a conclusive flirt of his hand. "In fact, he has written a thesis on the subject. Many other scientists hold to the same belief. We know nothing to the contrary."

Young Donaldson whistled softly.

"And you expect to camp right in their back yard!" with wholesouled admiration.

Moisell reddened under his tan at the frankness of this hero-worship and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"If I thought Moisell were right, I'd never leave New York," laughed Bonner frankly. "But it's hard to believe—and besides, there's that peculiar vegetation. I've been wanting to poke around down there for years."

"Just what kind of life have you in mind?" I inquired of Moisell. Surely, if he entertained the idea, there must be something to it.

"Dinosaurs," was Moisell's prompt reply and his earnestness was profound. He studied his cigar for a moment before continuing. "Perhaps it were better to say the descendants of those mammoth reptiles. You must remember that the reconstructions in our museums represent life as it existed millions of years ago. It is reasonable to suppose that that

life has been modified to some extent by the change in surface and atmospheric conditions of the earth."

"I should think," reflected "Long Jim," "that the very change you speak of would tend to wipe out all such life."

"And so it has," nodded Moissell, "in most portions of the globe. But in certain unexplored sections there still exists that strange vegetation which—as even our friend Bonner will admit—many botanists trace back to the reptilian age. The inference is that animal life has survived in those sections along with their native vegetation."

"Then you are liable to encounter almost—anything," exploded "Long Jim" eagerly. "Perhaps something we never dreamed of. Surely, our knowledge does not cover all the queer life of that era."

A strange, haunted gleam entered Moissell's eyes.

"It does not," he agreed, with passionate conviction. "I've thought about it often. One runs across some mighty peculiar things—out there."

The sweep of his arm was all-embracing.

"In the Gobi desert I've examined tracks that no living animal I know of could possibly make. Along the upper Amazon I've heard the most unearthly roar imaginable. Down in the African jungle I've touched a spongy, quivering mass that looked like—a rock."

He paused suddenly and looked around as if to apologize for his lengthy outburst.

"Good Lord!" gasped young Donaldson.

And we all fell silent.

One could almost see the mountain and the stars when he gazed upon Moissell. For a minute or two he puffed slowly on his weed, immersed in thought. Then he lifted his eyes and the spell was broken.

"I know I'm only boring you with my fancies," he smiled. "What say you to another little drink?"

Poor chap! As if we flabby stay-at-homes preferred a drink to talk like that! But nothing more could be gotten out of Moissell that night.

An hour later he was gone:

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A YEAR elapsed and my business interests took me to Buenos Aires. On the return trip, I booked passage on the steamer *Southern Star*, bound for Panama. The first night at sea we ran into a heavy mist that slowed our progress and set the foghorn booming dismally. Then it was that I again laid eyes on my friend, Moissell.

I was groping my way through the wetness of the upper deck toward my cabin, when a blurry figure darted by and sent me reeling. Somewhere along the passage a door banged shut. Mentally I cursed the fellow for an idiot and stumbled along.

I remembered that my own stateroom was located about halfway down the passage, and presently paused. I found a knob and flung the door wide open. A flood of light poured out and with it came a cry of horror—a hoarse, throaty cry that set my blood a-tingling.

With a queer sense of impending tragedy I blinked into the sudden glare and discovered my error. The room was not my own. I started to back away when my eyes lighted on the strange figure of a man cowering in a far corner. He was alone and plainly terror-stricken. His eyes were wild and sunken, his cheeks and lips bloodless. I could see him trembling in the greatcoat that enveloped him. Even as I stared, he uttered a piercing scream, which trailed off into a moan.

Something about the cowering creature made me think of Moissell. I

quickly stepped inside and locked the door.

"Moisell!" I cried.

He shrank farther into the corner. His fingers were playing nervously at his throat, while from his lips there came a blubbing, incoherent sound. His face was unshaven—probably had been for weeks; but I recognized my friend, Moisell.

"This is Hunter," said I, trying to hide my amazement.

"Hunter?" he quavered. And again: "Hunter?"

Some of the wildness left his eyes. He stared at me as if gazing upon some long-forgotten dream; but he refused to come out to greet me.

I moved toward him.

"Surely, this is no way to receive an old-time friend," I chided with the best of intention. "Moisell, you *do* remember Hunter—from the club!"

Gently I took his arm and pulled him erect. The action seemed to stir his memory. For a moment he stared into my eyes and then uttered a cry of recognition. I led him to a chair across the room and he sank weakly between its arms, sobbing like a child.

My heart ached at the sight. I had always thought of Moisell as a bar of well-tempered steel—flexible, but unbreakable. And I found him a bundle of shattered nerves—a pitiable wreck. The thing was staggering, unbelievable.

Suddenly he raised his head and his fear-haunted eyes glared past me.

"Moisell, what is it?" I asked. "Are you in danger?"

He raised a quivering hand and pointed wildly.

"There," he whispered. "See! It breathes. It lives. It's crawling—in. . . ."

With a moan he huddled behind the crook of his arm as if to shut out some maddening sight. The man was in dire agony.

I turned and found nothing but an open porthole through which could be seen the gray swirl of the fog. This I closed and adjusted the curtain. Moisell was breathing rapidly behind me.

I made him swallow some whisky from the ever ready flask I carried and gave him a cigar. His eyes took on a greater sanity as I settled down before him on the bed.

"Forgive me—Hunter," he stammered. "I—I'm not—myself."

"Moisell, what is it?" I insisted.

His answer came in a queer, low-pitched, jerky tone.

"Fog!"

The revelation was dumfounding. I stared at him. His overcoat was gaping open and for the first time I noticed that he was still in working togs—a soft-collared shirt, corduroy suit and high-laced boots. Here and there a peculiar, grayish substance clung to his garments—smearcd on like grease.

Suddenly his body jerked and a weary sort of sob escaped him.

"I tried to—fight it, Hunter," said he in the same low tone. "Up on the deck. It almost smothered me. . . . Sometimes I think I'm going—mad!"

I struck a match and lit his cigar. He inhaled the smoke in deep, quivering waves and seemed to grow calmer.

"Suppose you tell me all about it," I suggested gently. "Maybe I can help."

He gave me a quick, searching look. The glint in his eyes was unfathomable. For a time he puffed fitfully on his weed, now and then casting a furtive glance around the cabin. The booming of the vessel's fog-horn up above seemed to play upon his nerves.

"The door, Hunter," he murmured uneasily. "It is—locked?"

I crossed the room and tried the knob to reassure him. His eyes followed closely my every movement. I returned to the bed and for a moment

or two he smoked rapidly, eyes half-closed like one trying to piece together stray bits of thought. Finally, in a low, tense voice, he started speaking.

"I FELT the breath of the foggy beast, but Bonner only laughed. Now Bonner is—dead. . . ."

He shuddered.

"A very brave man was Bonner. He cut the rope. . . . No one else saw it. No one else knows. But Bonner and I found life. Damnable life! A hideous survival of those ancient times when life first oozed up from the bottom of the sea.

"It was right at the other end of the cavern. A swift current ran straight through the mountain. Bonner wanted to explore the place and I agreed. . . ."

Moisell paused and nursed his cigar into a glow. Then he continued and the words seemed to flow more freely.

"The place was dark. So we tied a rope around our waists with about five yards of it between us—much like Alpine climbers. We carried only our rifles, knives and pocket-torches. A fine mist was falling when we entered the cavern and we soon lost sight of the opening.

"It was like stepping into some vast cathedral. The air was damp and chilly. Except for the soft purr of the stream and our own footsteps, the place was silent. Our torches did not penetrate very far in the gloom, so we hugged the stream closely. It was our only guide.

"We had not gone very far in the darkness when I became conscious of a strange, nauseating odor. It grew more obnoxious as we advanced and at times was almost unbearable. I could liken it to nothing I had ever experienced before excepting, possibly, the evil-smelling seum over a sun-baked mud-hole.

"I was trying to account for the sickening odor when Bonner in front

paused suddenly. 'Hello!' he exclaimed. His voice fell with a hollow, echoing sound upon my ears. 'Some one has been here before us. Take a look at this, Moisell.'

"I stepped forward. Within the glowing circle of his torch lay a man's dead body—part skeleton and part flesh, but still clothed. I believe it was a white man. The body was entirely covered by a sort of gray mold. I touched the stuff. It was moist and sticky and undoubtedly the source of that acrid stench. 'Now what do you make of that?' mused Bonner. I had no explanation to offer—unless

Moisell's voice trailed away and for a moment he gazed thoughtfully across the cabin. The talk seemed to have a soothing effect on him. More closely I examined the gray daubs on his own garments and wondered; but I made no comment. He continued, slowly:

"Somewhere in the African jungle I once saw a gray, spongelike mass that lived and might have spewed such a substance. I told Bonner so. He only chuckled. 'Moisell,' said he, 'you travel too much alone. It's probably nothing more than some unknown fungus, much like the moss we are familiar with. See—there is more of it! And he swept his torch around. The ground, as far as we could see, was spread with the stuff. We were treading in it.

"I let Bonner have his way and we set out again. But the discovery had kindled new thoughts. I strained my ears and gradually became conscious of a steadily swishing sound behind us. At first it was scarcely perceptible, but as I listened the sound increased—like some unwieldy body laboring along in the stream. I stopped and Bonner in front brought up with a jerk. 'What now?' he boomed.

"Without answering I flashed my torch to the rear and peered into the

gloom. The swishing sound ceased; but the dead silence that ensued was even more ominous than the sound itself. About thirty yards away I thought I detected a stealthy movement along the bank.

"See anything?" asked Bonner, coming back. Even as he spoke a blast of icy air struck us and froze its way in to the bone. Bonner gasped and clutched my arm like a vise.

"As if paralyzed we stood staring into the darkness. My flesh was creeping at the thought of our utter helplessness. 'Do you see it, Bonner?' I whispered. 'Along the bank?'

"And Bonner laughed. . . . God! I can hear him yet. It was forced. 'Imagination, Moise! The place is getting on your nerves. Let's go!'

"We did—and again came that swishing sound — cumbersome, stealthy, insistent—like some enormous beast stalking its prey. Bonner must have heard it too, for he quickened his pace. But we could not shake it off. It stopped when we stopped, and when we got going again it came swishing out of the darkness with maddening persistency. It clung to our heels with almost human intelligence—and gained steadily. I could feel its cold breath on my neck.

"Then, with startling abruptness, a tremendous long-drawn hiss swelled through the cavern. All about us there fell an icy spray. In the light of our torches it descended like fog and settled without dissolution. From it arose a pungent, fishlike stench that was almost overpowering.

"**T**HAT settled all doubts. Our retreat was cut off and the realization unnerved me. If I could only see! Trained in the darkness by some inconceivable monster and unable to fight back was too much for the human brain. For a moment I believe I went—mad. Without reasoning I

stopped long enough to empty my rifle into the gloom, and then we stumbled along like drunken men.

"The enraged thing behind us hissed and spewed its suffocating fog until the light of our torches was only a blur. I could feel my senses swimming as I gasped for air. Once I tottered on the very edge of the stream and would have gone over had it not been for the rope around me. Bonner shouted something; but I could not see him.

"Hunter, it's the mysteries of life that drive men mad. The hidden things! I was trembling like a child. That hissing monster was almost upon us. I could feel its colossal presence—and it was cold—cold. In a frenzy of terror I dragged myself along. Bonner was at my side. I could feel his life-giving clutch on my arm.

"How we ever found the outlet I do not know; but suddenly we emerged into something bordering more on sanity. A heavy fog had descended and things were only dimly visible. We could faintly trace the winding course of the stream and the yawning mouth of the cavern. Beyond that hung the fog, like a curtain of gray.

"Bonner was for laughing it all away. A nightmare, he called it. A weird product of the imagination. But I was as sure as I am now that we had come in contact with primeval life—in some form."

Moise! paused and eyed me steadily for a moment. His face was haggard and drawn as if, with the telling, he were reliving the terrifying experience; but I thought I detected in his manner a flash of his former self.

"The death of Bonner is my proof," he added simply. "Even as Bonner laughed at my assertion, an enormous shadow loomed in the mouth of the cavern. Gray, shapeless and scarcely definable, it seemed a part of the fog itself. Like a huge puff of smoke it came rolling out of its lair



and spread. I could hear the water churn with its motion. Before we could think it was upon us.

"We made a frantic effort to evade its spread. It was useless. Its power of expansion and contraction seemed tremendous. With an unearthly hiss it swirled about us and held us, struggling madly, in its icy embrace.

"As if in a cloud I could still make out Bonner's form. He was moving slowly, laboriously, as one does under water—or in a dream. He shouted something that sounded strangely like 'quicksand' and seemed to be making a desperate effort to wield his knife. . . . I believe Bonner was mad. . . . That stifling ooze around us seemed to be pulling him down—down—and me with him. I could feel the rope which bound us digging in at my waist.

"With a last, merciful effort Bonner's knife found the rope and severed it. He sank quickly. For a moment his hand only was visible. I tried with all my strength to reach him; but the next second—he was gone. . . . I never saw Bonner again.

"Alone in the clutch of that nameless thing, I struggled madly for freedom. I could feel it pulling and pressing all about me, slowly working me downward—the way that Bonner had gone. Almost blinded and scarcely able to breathe, I hacked away with my knife, trying to dig a way through the pasty mass. I was like one fighting in delirium. For one agonizing moment I was conscious of a dull roar in my ears and then—

"I must have fainted. With the coming of light I was lying face down-

ward on the ground half way up the slope. My arms were wrapped tightly around the trunk of a tree. A fine rain was falling.

"In a daze I fled without a backward glance and stopped only when I fell exhausted. How I managed to make the coast—I do not know . . . I—I—"

Wearily Moissell passed a hand across his eyes as if to brush away a memory and slumped motionless in his chair. Up above, the fog-horn was still booming its dismal warning. I gazed upon his tragic figure, and it seemed like a living proof of the statement that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

Still, there was Bonner's last word—and Moissell had seen him sink.

"There may have been a quicksand bed," I suggested thoughtfully.

Moissell did not move.

"Imagination and fog may have done the rest," I added.

At this Moissell sprang to his feet with such ferocity that I recoiled before him. His eyes were blazing; his body trembled.

"I told you Bonner went mad," he rasped.

Then he laughed—a weird, cackling laugh.

"Imagination?" he croaked. "Then where did I get—this?" triumphantly.

From a pocket he hauled a small, oblong box and threw it on the bed. I opened it and stared at the contents with sinking heart. Moissell, my friend, was mad. On the bottom lay a lump of putty!

