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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Forest of Evil

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

*A story of many thrills—a tale of weird adventures and dire perils
in the Dead Forest of Sanaala*

JUNE 23.—There may not be much point in my trying to keep this diary. Our chances of returning alive from this mad expedition are not at all good. Probably it is the instinct of the professional newspaper man that leads me to keep a record of the trip. My old boss on the *Chronicle* used to say that on the Day of Judgment a good reporter would be taking notes on the ceremonies and trying to interview the angel with the trumpet.

It all started when Clive Mason came back after five years in Central Asia. He sat sprawled by my fireplace, his lean face strangely somber: Suddenly he said:

"I think I'm going into the Devil's own back-yard, Jim, and I want company. There's a fortune in it—for those who live."

"What kind of a fortune?" I asked him.

He took a chamois bag from his pocket and tossed two small objects on the table. "Diamonds, Jim. Uncut diamonds. Those two were in Tommy Reardon's pockets when he died. Did you ever hear of the Dead Forest of Sanaala?"

"Never."

"I thought not. Few people outside of Central Asia ever heard of it, and most of them think it's a myth. I happen to *know* that it exists."

"Is that where the diamonds came from?" I asked.

Clive's eyes took on a haunted expression, the look of a man who thinks of things not pleasant to remember.

"It's where I think they came from. The Forest of Sanaala lies deep in Central Asia, beyond the desert, between two of the spurs of the Kurugh Khan mountains. It is the bare and long-dead skeleton of what was once a fertile belt of woodland. The desert nomads believe it to be terribly haunted. Haunted—probably not! But I have reason to believe there may be something there more horrible than anything we have ever known."

"Why?"

"Because young Tommy Reardon went into Sanaala. I know that for a fact. And I saw him when he turned up in Changor three months later. God knows how he got there, for Changor lies across the

mountains, which are unscalable. That was queer, but his condition was stranger. For one thing, he was blind."

"Blind?" I asked.

"Stone-blind. His eyeballs were completely rotted away, and the flesh around the sockets seemed to have been burned by acid. He was absolutely mad, poor devil, raving mad. He died a few hours later. So that was the end of Tommy Reardon—and God alone knows what happened to him, or how he got over the mountains."

There was a lot more to the yarn, of course. Clive hoped that a larger party

might get through, that we would find more diamonds, and so on. I thought about it for several days before I decided to go. Now I am writing this in the vermin-ridden main room of an inn in the small and filthy Chinese city of Weh-Li, half across the world from home. The expedition is well under way.

JUNE 24.—Tomorrow we strike out into the desert! We are all ready to leave Weh-Li, five white men and a girl and some twenty Mongol bearers. The girl, Clarice Saunders, should never be with us, but it can't be helped now. She



"The trunk curled back as if in pain."

is the daughter of Peter Saunders, who is second in command of the expedition. He had left her with friends in Shensi province, but she showed up in Weh-li alone this morning and now we have to take her along. At least she's very far from being the helpless type.

Pete Saunders, by the way, happens to be a pretty well known scientist but he is lean and gray and looks more like a soldier of fortune. The other two members of the party are about my own age. Ed Powell is Saunders' assistant, and Larry O'Neill is a young Irishman that Clive picked up in Shanghai because he liked his grin. Larry's idea of heaven would probably be ten drinks, ten fights and ten women every day. Sort of a disturbing element in a civilized place, but likely to come in handy on this journey.

Later in the day—To the list of the obstacles in our way we can evidently add the name of Doctor Paul Schweitzer. He is a big, paunchy man with thick glasses and an arrogant face. Wears faded khaki and a huge sun helmet. He came striding into our inn this afternoon, kicked one of our bearers out of his path, and then stood with his thumbs in his belt and looked us all over. At last he stabbed a thick finger in Clive's direction.

"You are Clive Mason?" he rumbled.

Clive smiled faintly, but did not get up from where he sat on a pile of boxes.

"That is my impression," he drawled.

"I hear that you plan to go to Sanaala. Do not do so! I am on my way there, I have planned this trek for some time, and I do not want you in my way."

"Know any more good jokes?" Clive asked, his drawl more pronounced than ever.

Schweitzer's wide face began to flush.

"*Donnerwetter*, you force me to speak plainly. Keep out of my way, you damned *Schwein!*"

He was really funny, and most of us

laughed. I don't know what Clive might have done next, but O'Neill took matters in his own hands. He said something under his breath and heaved his big bulk upright, and then hit Schweitzer squarely on the point of the jaw. Larry caught him as he fell and heaved him out into the muck of the courtyard.

"Shall I sock him again when he recovers?" he asked eagerly.

Clive shook his head. "You've done enough already. I've heard of Schweitzer, and he's a bad actor."

JUNE 25.—Tonight we lie camped in a sandstone depression on the edge of the desert, with our sentry standing silhouetted against the sky above us. I am writing this by the embers of our fire, while most of the rest of the party are asleep. There is our little cluster of tents, and then our twenty bearers sleeping around us in a circle.

These bearers were the only ones we could get who were not afraid to head for Sanaala. They belong to some nomad Mongol tribe and look like bandits, but they'll probably be all right. As a matter of fact, none of them even speaks Chinese except their leader. He is a big Manchu named Lao who looks like an unhung murderer but seems to be a pretty good sort.

The desert nights are cold. Our sentry is keeping himself awake by whistling some plaintive, endless tune with only three notes in it.

Tomorrow we leave all regular caravan routes and plunge into the unknown, an unknown so strange that probably no living man has yet penetrated it and lived to tell the tale.

JUNE 27.—Yesterday was uneventful, but there was some trouble just after we woke up this morning. I heard loud voices, and stuck my head out of the tent

just as Pete Saunders was crawling out of his.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I don't know yet. Look at Lao!"

The big Manchu was in a rage, swearing at two of our bearers in a guttural jargon neither Clive nor Pete could understand. Lao was waving his arms, and then he pointed at the ground. As we crowded around then, we saw what it was.

Footprints! All around and through our camp were strange footprints, the marks of bare feet. In the sand they were not noticeable, but on some patches of crumbling sandstone they were well preserved. Saunders and Lao began to talk in clicking Mandarin, and after a while Pete shrugged and turned away.

"Lao claims the men on guard must have slept during the night," he said, "and that there have been strangers in camp. Let's look over the supplies."

A careful check-up showed that nothing was missing. Clive sat back on his heels and scratched his head.

"It's beyond me," he said. "Those bare footprints were never made by any of our men, but nothing has been taken. Well—the guards will keep awake after this. We'll split the night up into two-hour watches for ourselves, and not trust the bearers alone."

"Think Schweitzer had a hand in this?" I asked.

"Perhaps."

June 28.—I'm too tired to write anything, but there isn't much to put down anyway. We marched and made camp, we ate and we slept. We all took turns standing guard. Clarice Saunders claims she should stand watch also—she's really quite a girl. Stronger than she looks. She hasn't held us up any so far.

We are all on strict water rations, for our route is off all regular trails and God knows when we'll find any wells.

June 29.—Same as yesterday—no excitement. It was hot as the hinges of hell all day. Wish we had more water!

We were sitting around the fire tonight, all smoking and not saying much, when Clarice Saunders turned to Clive.

"Just what do you expect to find, anyway?" she asked. "Diamonds, I know, and perhaps something of scientific value—but what else? What do you think lies behind the Dead Forest?"

Clive hesitated a long time, pulling on his pipe and staring into the embers of the fire. At last he shrugged.

"I don't really know what I expect," he said at last. "I'm thinking of Tommy Reardon's ravings just before he died, but all that may have simply been madness. But it's possible that somewhere nature may be perverted, that strange and terrible forms of life exist. We may find something very queer behind Sanaala."

JUNE 30.—We made an extra long march today, and will probably do the same tomorrow, now that we have become accustomed to the trek. The sooner we reach the Dead Forest the better, for the lonely Kurugh Khan mountains are beginning to bulk along the horizon. There should be water there. We have a very good supply, but still we all feel a little nervous about it.

The camp is a peaceful place at the moment. Our miniature army of bearers sits cross-legged about the embers of their own cook-fire, while one of them plays some sort of funny instrument with only one string. Pete is going over to the guarded pile of water-skins with some sort of purifying powder. He filtered the water carefully before we left, but it was probably none too good at the start. Typhoid or dysentery would be fatal to our—

Later.—Something disastrous has happened. Or rather, we have only just dis-

covered a thing that was done some days ago. Now we know why there were footprints around our camp after that first night!

Pete was busy with the water-skins when I suddenly heard him call for Clive. Something in his voice, a certain harshness, made me walk over also. Pete was holding an open water-skin, and he looked at us with an expressionless face.

"Smell!" he said.

We both sniffed at the open mouth of the skin, and found an acrid vapor that nearly choked us. Clive and Pete simply looked at each other.

"Chlorine!" Pete said at last, "liberated from the water by the powder I just added to purify it. The chlorine comes from salt!"

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean that our water has been salted?"

Pete nodded slowly, his gaunt face suddenly deeply lined.

"Right! Now we know why somebody was prowling around our camp that first night."

"Schweitzer!" Clive said with a grim snap of his jaws. "It must have been one of his men. Don't let the bearers know about this, yet. Let's see how many of the skins are still good—if any."

We found that four of the remaining skins have not been tampered with. Perhaps the intruder was scared off before he finished his work. Anyway, we still have four good skins of water.

"Enough to take us back safely to Weh-Li," Peter Saunders said slowly. "Or enough—used carefully—to carry us about eight days farther. That should take us to the mountains—if we go on."

"We're going on!" Clive said grimly, and his face was harsh.

I think the terrible weight of that decision struck the three of us, for we turned in silence to look at the rest of our party. Clarice Saunders was chatting gay-

ly with Ed Powell as they sat on the sand. The slant-eyed faces of our bearers were contented as they squatted in their customary circle. Larry O'Neill was cleaning his rifle with meticulous care. In all, there were twenty-six people whose fate was affected by Clive Mason's decision. I wonder how many of us will leave our bones here to whiten in the desert!

JULY 1.—As I sit here writing this morning, I can see that a crisis is near. The salted water was discarded before we started this morning, and the moral effect on the bearers was instant and disastrous. Most of them refuse to believe that any ordinary men could have salted our water. We got them going at last, but they were sullen and stubborn and we made poor progress.

There is no chatter, no gambling, no joking in camp tonight. For the most part the bearers sit in sullen silence with their weapons across their knees. A few are talking in undertones and casting occasional glances in our direction. One scar-faced man with one eye is staring fixedly at me. If it comes to a rush, they are four to one against us.

July 2. Morning.—The crisis is here. Now! The bearers have refused to take up their packs, and have gathered in a compact group. Lao is talking to them. Clive has just come back for a minute, and told me:

"You and Powell stay here with the girl, Jim. Keep your guns ready. If they are set on turning back, it may mean a fight for the water. Lao is trying to convince them that the best chance is to push ahead."

Clarice is crouching behind a pack with her rifle ready. She's a cool one, that girl! Lao's talk seems to be falling on deaf ears. O'Neill is trying to bully—

That evening.—Camp is very different tonight. In the first place we have no

light, for our water supply is so desperately low that we dare spare none for our acetylene lamps. Also, we now have only four bearers instead of twenty.

O'Neill tried to browbeat the bearers into resuming the march this morning, which was very foolish. These bandits are not the ordinary coolie. Larry lost his head and poked the nearest man with his rifle butt, and the bearer went for his gun. Larry was a split second quicker.

I still don't know why it didn't start a general scrap, right then. It looked bad, with the bearer dead on the sand and his comrades gathering for a rush.

It finally worked out that Lao and three others have agreed to go on with us. The others have turned back toward Weh-Li, which they will probably never see. We shared our water equally with the deserters, over Larry O'Neill's violent protest. But it was the only way to avoid a pitched battle.

It was nearly ten before we got started this morning, for we had to unpack all our duffle and re-sort it into the number of loads we can now carry. A lot of valuable equipment lies behind us on the desert, but it can't be helped. We have cut everything to a minimum. We are due for a short, sharp race against thirst! I am sorry for Clarice Saunders.

July 4.—Three tortured days lie behind us, as well as a good many more leagues of desert. God—but we are thirsty! We still have a little water left, but we dare not use it up. Still we have found no water, even though one spur of the Kurugh Khan is quite close.

This is being written by moonlight, as we lie on the sand close to the edge of the Dead Forest of Sanaala. We have at least reached the first fringe of our goal, but we dare not enter it until tomorrow. Perhaps it's just overwrought nerves, but the forest that lies ahead of us seems evil

and foreboding. Well—daylight will tell us more.

JULY 5.—The desert lies behind us at last, but this place to which we have come is even worse. Now, in the twilight, there is a desolation that depresses us all. We are well into the Dead Forest of Sanaala.

The branches of many trees are silhouetted against the sunset sky, but there are no leaves to give them body. The gaunt tracery of branches is black against the sky, like the ribs of a skeleton. This place is dead. Dead! Even the motionless, musty air seems of the grave.

Everything here has been dead for a long, long time. The trees and bushes have not lived for years—perhaps centuries. The wood is soft and crumbly with dry rot. The ground is covered by a fine brown dust that is almost the consistency of ashes. Probably it was formed by the decay of the leaves that once clothed these bare skeletons. The winds that swirl across the outer Gobi do not seem to touch this forgotten corner between the two ranges.

Our four loyal bearers sit in a huddled group, talking in low tones. On their slant-eyed Mongol faces sits a nameless fear. They stare at the shadows gathering around us as though they expect to see the ghostly retinue of the great Genghis Khan ride out from amid the dead trees. No man knows where he lies buried with the sacred yak's tail standard above his grave. Clarice, poor child, has laid aside her head scarf and is combing her hair, which has turned dry and dull. There are deep circles under her eyes.

July 6.—Another day gone, and the dead forest still surrounds us on all sides. There cannot actually be much more of it, but the place seems interminable. Our remaining water-skin is almost flat, and Clive never lets it out of his hands.

Tonight we held a conference—a bunch of unshaven scarecrows and a haggard girl. Our voices are all dry and croaking.

"We have a short water ration for tomorrow," Clive said, "and that's all. After that—God knows!"

"Tell us something new!" O'Neill snarled, his head in his hands.

Pete turned to Clive.

"Every pound we have to carry makes it harder," he said. "Why not cut our load down to a minimum."

Ed Powell nodded agreement, but Clive looked puzzled.

"We already have done that," he said. "Even our ammunition is down as low as we dare go."

"What about those heavy canvas suits you made us bring along?" Pete snapped.

With his gray hair standing on end and his skin stretched tightly over his bones he looked like a caricature.

"We don't dare abandon those," Clive said slowly.

Pete's voice rose sharply. "Why not? You never did say what they are for?"

"Don't forget that I examined the body of Tommy Reardon, who once went through here before us. There were strange scars on his body that I can't account for. I have a theory, but it's only a guess. The point is that something sinister lies ahead of us if we live to reach it. We must take that canvas armor along."

JULY 7. *Next morning.*—This will probably be the last entry ever made in this notebook. That is why I am hastily writing it now, in the pale light of dawn, while the others make up the loads and Clarice fixes the bandage on the shoulder of Chang—one of the bearers. Poor devil! This will be a bad day for him.

Disaster came to us in the night, and tragedy is close at hand. The others are silent at their work. We all know that we

are entering on the last stages of one of the most horrible of deaths—death by thirst.

Sometime during the night Chang, who was on guard, suddenly shouted and we all jumped up. Dim shapes were moving about the camp. We fired a few shots, there was a little confusion, and the intruders ran. But Chang leaned against a tree-trunk with an ugly knife wound in his shoulder.

That was bad enough, but a little later we discovered something worse. Our remaining water-skin lay flat and empty. It had been slit with a knife!

"One more move for Schweitzer," Clive said wearily. "We owe our jovial friend a lot if we ever meet up with him."

We are ready to start. It seems hopeless, for we are already nearly mad from thirst, but we may as well push on as stay here to die.

July 11.—Things looked very hopeless that morning a few days ago. With scarcely a word to each other, through lips that were dry and cracked, we picked up our packs and started.

Hour by hour we plodded forward, while the sun rose high and the still air of the Dead Forest became suffocatingly hot. The ashy dust raised by our passing was a choking cloud. Clive plodded in the lead, occasionally glancing at his compass, and the rest of us straggled after him. The wounded Chang lurched along between Lao and O'Neill, his eyes dim and emotionless.

We halted for rest every hour, stretched headlong in the dust, sprawled in whatever positions we fell on halting. Chang died half-way through the morning, so we simply left him lying there and went on.

Near sunset the end came. We had paused for one of our halts, and at last Clive stood up. He spoke to us, a mean-

ingless sound that rasped in his dry throat, but I knew it was the signal to go on. Painfully I dragged myself upright. A few yards away was Larry O'Neill, standing with his thick legs wide apart and his head hunched wearily forward. We were the only ones. The others had reached the end of their trail.

Clarice made two feeble attempts to rise and then fell back. Her father seemed to be in a stupor, and Ed Powell was muttering incoherently to himself. Lao and the two remaining bearers had obviously not the slightest intention of moving. The thing seemed hopeless. Clive stood leaning on his rifle like some gaunt scarecrow, staring ahead with haggard eyes.

To the west the sky was reddening, glowing behind the branches of the dead trees like a fire in a grate. The trees ahead seemed to be thinning out a bit, and as I stared I saw a stone tower standing above them. Of light gray stone, touched with crimson by the setting sun, it could not have been more than a mile away. I pointed, and tried to shout, though the best I could do was a faint croaking.

It was a journey of nearly a mile out through the fringes of the Dead Forest, across some bare fields and up to the stone tower and well that stood beyond. It was unquestionably the worst mile I have ever covered. Larry and I carried Clarice, who had lost consciousness, and the others managed to stagger along. I think we were all afraid that the tower would turn out to be just a mirage.

Those last few events are dim as a nightmare. I vaguely recall that Clive broke out a canvas bucket and lowered it into the well. I know that the water tasted better than anything in my life. We doled it out slowly, a swallow at a time. Then we all rolled up in our blankets

right there beside the well and went instantly to sleep.

Later in the day.—I was interrupted by Ed Powell's shout to come and eat. We have stayed here resting for a few days, but will probably push on again tomorrow. This little stone tower beside the well makes a good halting-place.

None of us has been able to figure out who dug this well and built this tower. Its ancient walls are carved with the face of some forgotten god. Pete Saunders thinks it must be the work of some offshoot of the Kmers who built Angkor-Thom, in spite of the distance from Cambodia.

It is near sunset, and I am writing this sitting on the ground with my back against the westward wall of the tower. Before me lies the unknown into which we must plunge tomorrow. The twin ranges of the Kurugh-Khan, visible like gigantic ramparts on either side, seem to merge into each other somewhere far off in the heart of the sunset. The valley between them must be triangular in shape. There is a patch of good vegetation here, and then an expanse of bare rock that drops sharply for perhaps a half-mile. Beyond lie dense woodlands.

The desolation that rules in the Dead Forest does not hold in the valley ahead. It is fertile—but there is something very strange about it. Ed Powell has just raised the same thought.

"Those woods look queer," he said, "sort of unnatural."

Clive, stretching his long legs by walking up and down beside us, nodded slowly. "They look abnormal to me, too. The green is strangely bright."

That is true. There is something quieting and unhealthy about that lush forest below us. We can see not merely green, but other bright colors as well among the trees, and they don't look

quite right either. Remind me of the colors of toadstools.

Pete has been peering ahead through his binoculars.

"I'm no tree expert, but I'll swear there are some new kinds of trees ahead," he said. "This will be interesting."

"Hope it's not *too* interesting," Clive said grimly.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean. I'm simply remembering what happened to Tommy Reardon."

It all makes me think of what I saw last night when I looked down toward that valley just before turning in. The forest below was alive with lights. White and green, constantly in slow movement, they kept up a sort of endless dance. There was no sound on the still air, but the movement of the lights was ceaseless. Pete tried to tell us they were giant fire-flies, but I doubt it.

JULY 12.—We are camped in one of the strangest places on earth. We have been through some experiences that make us begin to understand why Tommy Reardon went mad.

Soon after sunrise we gathered our things together and started west, climbing laboriously down over that long and uneven slope of rock. As we neared the edge of the jungle the queer character of the vegetation became more and more evident. We began to notice a peculiar smell. It was something like the stink of kennels on a damp day, like the smell of a hot-house, like the odor of a menagerie—yet it wasn't quite like any of them.

As we got near enough to see what the trees were like, we were even more puzzled. Their bark ranged from an unhealthy light brown to a sort of dirty pink, and on closer look the bark was somehow gruesome. It was more like the skin of an animal than the bark of a

tree. It reminded me of the flesh of a corpse—bloated, and soft with an unhealthy softness. The leaves were bright and thick. But the strangest thing of all was this: all the branches of all the trees were in motion, *but there was no wind!*

Those branches seemed to move as though they were searching for something. They were lazy and sinuous, like the tentacles of a drowsy devil-fish. The trees nearest to us were in the most violent motion. Perhaps violent is not the word, for the movement was at all times easy. What I mean is that the nearest trees seemed to *grope* for us with their branches! These devil-trees had personality! We cursed under our breath, and carefully picked our path so that we avoided contact with them. Clarice had gone very pale.

Little by little we came to realize that these *things*—I cannot really call them trees—were conscious of our presence. They did not seem to have any eyes, but they somehow perceived that we were there. It was horrible!

Ed Powell was the first to speak.

"Do you see them too?" he asked.

"We see them, all right," Larry O'Neill muttered. "I've heard of the Devil's garden, but I never thought to be in it this way."

"This is interesting as all hell," Pete said. "In this isolated valley evolution has followed a course only hinted at in the outside world. The animal and vegetable kingdoms have been crossed. These things are as much one as the other. Notice that a few of the branches are shaped like antennæ with round knobs on the end? They are probably phosphorescent, the lights we saw last night."

"Do you mean those hellish creatures can see?" O'Neill asked.

"I think so, in some way. Look there!"

As he spoke, a flock of birds came by, probably flying over from one of the

mountain ranges. They were low, just above the tops of the trees. As we watched, a branch suddenly shot up in the air and caught an unwary bird that had been a little lower than the rest of the flock. One of the big leaves closed like a fist around the bird, which fluttered helplessly. The branch curved down and thrust its prey into an opening that suddenly appeared near the top of the trunk. The jaws, if you can call them that, closed again with a snap.

Clarice Saunders gasped. "Horrible!" she said.

Clive dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground.

"I've heard of giant fly-trap plants," he said, "but these are far worse. Well—we might as well go on. But first we'll all put on these heavy canvas suits that we've carried with us. I had a hunch of something of this sort after I saw the scars on his body and listened to his ravings. Poor devil, he must have had a tough time getting through here!"

We put on the canvas suits, looking something like aviators. We slung our rifles, which probably wouldn't be much good against creatures with the disseminated nervous systems the tree-animals must have, and instead we drew the heavy machetes we had brought along to cut brush. God knows we never expected to have to use them as weapons against such weird opponents!

Then we started forward in a compact group. Clive went first, then Pete and I with Clarice between us, while Lao and the two remaining bearers brought up the rear. Powell and O'Neill acted as flankers. As the tree-animals were only about twelve or fourteen feet tall, there was plenty of sunlight. Now and then we passed scattered clumps of ordinary trees, mostly conifers. They looked very friendly and normal and home-like!

Though the underbrush was pretty

dense, the tree-animals were far enough apart so that it was not too hard to keep out of their reach. We drove steadily forward. The branches of the *things* broke into violent motion as we passed, and the central trunks with their blotchy skin swayed toward us. There were plenty of traces of small game, and we forded several streams.

THE tragedy came swiftly. We were passing through a clump of strange red fungi when Ed Powell tripped over a creeper and fell. His face landed squarely on one of the big red fungi that looked something like giant toadstools, and the thing seemed to explode. The next instant Ed had commenced to scream horribly and was rolling over and over on the ground. Even as I jumped to help him, he rolled within reach of one of the tree-animals, and a pair of branches reached down to seize him by the legs.

With a swing of my machete I slashed off one of the branches. The stump curled back as though in pain, and a viscous yellow liquid gushed out like blood. Another branch grabbed at me, the spines on its flat leaves catching in my canvas armor. I slashed out furiously with shortened blade, at the same time seizing Powell around the waist. Then the others arrived, and we dragged him clear. It took two of us to get his hands down from his face.

The poor devil's eyes are entirely gone, eaten away! Evidently the fungus on which he fell contained some very powerful acid. His whole face is terribly burned as well. Clive did what he could to ease the pain, and gave him a stiff injection of morphine from our medicine kit, but it was horrible. The rest of the day Ed staggered along between Pete and me, partly supported by us.

We are now camped for the night in the center of a small grove of conifers. It

is pleasant to smell their faint fragrance, and to touch the rough and friendly bark! It helps our sanity in this mad place. As the embers of our small fire fade out, the evil lights on the tree-animals all around us seem to grow brighter. Attached to each of the things is a pair of gleaming globes that move slowly, like giant fire-flies. There is something terrifying about being thus surrounded by thousands of strange creatures, knowing that they are watching us through the darkness with their sleepless eyes and always waiting for us to come within their reach.

July 13. Morning.—Ed Powell is gone. He vanished in the night. We do not know what happened. We can only guess.

Lao was on guard at the time Powell disappeared, and he swears that he heard nothing and saw nothing. Most likely he had dozed off for a while. We do not know whether Ed wandered away, driven crazy by the pain of his wounds, or whether something took him. Perhaps, back of his disappearance, there may lie some nameless horror yet unguessed. We can only go on.

Evening.—Another night surrounded by the tree-animals. We must be getting near the head of the valley now, but there is no trace of the diamonds. The normal life of the past has taken on all the unreality of a dream. So long ago! It is hard to believe that there ever was any other life than this of peril and danger and endless pushing on.

We passed the body of a man today, or rather part of what had once been a man. The gruesome thing lay at the foot of a tree-animal which had probably eaten the rest.

"Probably one of Schweitzer's men," Clive muttered. "The thing must have caught him and torn him in half."

JULY 14. *Morning.*—There are only seven of us left now, for one of our bearers was taken during the night. Probably the same thing happened to Powell the night before. But even though we saw this man go, we are still unable to explain it.

I was on guard. The fire had died from lack of fuel, for there is little real wood in this ghastly place, but there was a fair amount of moonlight. The phosphor-lights of the tree-animals were, of course, all around us. Suddenly I experienced an unpleasant sensation of being watched. I stood up and looked around, but there was nothing in sight. I started to take a slow walk around the borders of the camp.

It was just as I was completing the circuit that I saw the *thing*. It had lingered for an instant in a belt of moonlight. Gross, misshapen, a mass of tentacles surrounding a stumpy body, it was like a shadow from a madman's dream. Unreal and horrible. For a moment I stared, then shouted an alarm. At the same moment I flung up my rifle and fired.

I must have hit the thing, for it gave a sudden yelp. Then, moving with incredible speed, the monster bounded across the camp and seized the nearest sleeper, who happened to be one of the bearers. It vanished in the shadows. We could hear Fan-Kee's screams dying away in the distance, and then they ended with a gruesome abruptness.

There was no more sleep for the rest of the night. A brief attempt to follow the trail of the thing that had taken Fan-Kee was hopeless. We threw what wood was left on the fire, and gathered close around it.

"What do you suppose it was?" O'Neill asked with awe in his voice.

"God knows," Clive answered wearily. "Ask Jim. He's the only one who saw it clearly."

"Well," I told them at last, "the nearest I can say is that it looked like a cross between an octopus and a cactus plant pulled up by the roots—if you get what I mean."

"Probably the final stage in this strange laboratory of perverted evolution," Pete said slowly. "These other things around us are still more plant than animal, but this new thing is evidently more on the animal side—particularly since it cried out when you shot it. It should be interesting to examine one closely."

"I only hope I never come within a mile of one again," I told him sullenly.

JULY 15.—We should sleep tonight. We are camped on a sandy point running out into a broad lake. The neck of land connecting us with the shore is very narrow, and one man can easily guard it against even such foes as we have here. We now know what our enemies look like. In fact, there are two of them drinking from the lake not two hundred yards away at this moment.

They stand perhaps five feet tall, with a round misshapen body and a dozen legs that are tentacles as well. They look something like octopi, or giant spiders. Dark brown hair covers body and tentacles, but it is not a real animal hair so much as fuzz, such as you find on a root freshly pulled from the ground. They have a head equipped with a sort of beak, and a pair of round cold eyes, and a cluster of leaves on top. When crouching down with tentacles folded they look like a pile of rocks and earth covered with vines or creepers. Yet they are capable of great speed.

Behind us the lake—we have christened it Lake Reardon in memory of the poor devil who was here before us—stretches smooth and cool to the base of the sheer ranges that close the valley. The rock seems to rise straight from the

water at all points. Those silent peaks still hold the secret of how Tommy Reardon managed to cross them when alone and injured. We have seen no sign of Schweitzer.

Through the glasses we can see an outcropping of broken rock half a mile along the shore of the lake. It looks like a promising spot for our diamonds.

July 19.—We have been having another quiet interlude. We have built a barricade of rocks across the narrow neck that connects us with shore, but so far it hasn't been necessary. Some of the tentacle creatures often browse near by, but they do not bother us. Most of the trees along the shore are ordinary pines and cedars, perhaps because the sandy soil is unfavorable to the tree-animals.

These tentacle-creatures seem to be just half-way between the plant and the animal. Though carnivorous and free-moving, they will stand for hours with their tentacles thrust deep in the moist ground. The head and eyes are animal, the coating of leaves is entirely vegetable. If I have any nightmares for the next twenty years, those damn things will be in them!

JULY 21.—Well—we're all rich men. And we're likely to die here without a chance to enjoy our fortunes. I suppose it's funny—but I don't feel like laughing.

Among the broken rock of an outcropping on the beach we found volcanic pipes filled with blue clay. In them were plenty of uncut diamonds. It must be the place where Tommy Reardon found his stones, for the initials T. R. were scratched on a smooth slab of rock. We have plenty of diamonds for all of us, but the trouble is to find our way back to civilization.

I have a feeling we could never get back the way we came. The now aroused tentacle-creatures would make our passage back through the jungle far more difficult.

Every day they come in increasing numbers to watch us. They seem very curious. They particularly gather at twilight, squatting along the edge of the jungle and watching us with their cold eyes.

The things seem to be simply curious—not hostile—but we remember the fate of Ed Powell and Fan-Kee. Our policy is one of watchful waiting, for we fear they are not highly vulnerable. We dare not provoke an attack by trying to kill them, yet our passive attitude seems to increase their confidence. They come nearer every day, and we are getting nervous.

No one else has expressed the opinions I have written above, but I think they all share them. They all agreed very promptly to my proposal to build a raft to examine at close range the cliffs surrounding the lake. Shadows are gathering—and we may as well try what we can.

JULY 22.—There came an interruption just as I was writing the above last night. A tall man, who looked like some wild prophet with his black beard and fanatical eyes, stalked out of the woods and walked toward our peninsula. It was Schweitzer. Behind him were half a dozen Chinese with rifles slung on their backs.

We dropped down behind the barricade and leveled our rifles. Schweitzer halted and held up his hand.

"I come in peace," he boomed. "Let us have a friendly talk."

"Come up to the barricade alone," Clive told him, "but tell your men to stay where they are and keep their rifles slung."

Schweitzer leaned on his rifle and grinned at us wolfishly across our low barricade of rock. He was thin and worn, and through his torn clothes we could see ugly red scars on his body. If the six men with him were all he had left, his party must have suffered even worse than

ours in the jungle. Probably it was the canvas armor that saved us, for time and again we had been touched by a long branch of one of the tree-animals as we tried to thread our way among them.

Schweitzer was as arrogant and overbearing as ever. The pride of Lucifer burns in that man, and I think he would try to dictate to the Devil at the gates of hell. Clive stood up to talk to him.

"I come as your friend," Schweitzer announced in his deep voice.

Clive's smile was wintry. "We've seen a lot of that in the past," he said.

Schweitzer gestured impatiently. "That was nothing. Mere measures of war. Now the time has come when it is in both our interests to work together. I have found some fossils of great scientific value. You have found — I noticed through the glasses — some diamonds. Either party is probably too weak to win out of this place alone, but we might do it together. What do you say?"

I wondered what Clive would answer. For myself, I was remembering how Schweitzer's men had destroyed our water supply in the midst of the Dead Forest. Beside me, Larry O'Neill was muttering obscene insults under his breath. Then Clive smiled thinly.

"I'll give you one minute to get off this peninsula and take your men back in the woods. Then we open fire."

Schweitzer's face became dark with rage, but he picked up his rifle and turned away.

"You are a pack of swine!" he shouted over his shoulder. "We have more food and can wait. Stay here till you starve."

With his men at his heels, he strode off into the woods and disappeared. We all relaxed, and Larry muttered gloomily:

"I should have shot that baboon as he walked away."

"Might not have been a bad idea," Clive said grimly, rubbing the unshaven

stubble on his chin. "We must raise the barricade higher and keep behind it. When our friend gets a little desperate he may try to pot us from the shelter of the woods. And we must rush building the raft — it's our only chance now that Schweitzer blocks escape through the woods."

"We have quite a number of trees cut already," I pointed out.

"Exactly. We'll work all night till we get enough."

We have raised the barricade higher, and are waiting until after sunset to work on the raft. It seems wiser to wait till darkness will screen us from Schweitzer.

JULY 23.—Things are happening fast, and our sands seem to be running low. It is probably foolish to bother to write this journal any further, but there is a lull at the moment and it is a good way to kill time.

At sunset last night we went to work on the raft. Clarice and Lao stood guard with rifles, while the rest of us felled half a dozen of the medium-sized evergreens nearest the shoreline and began to strip them of branches. Though we could see the phosphor-lights of the tree-animals dancing their bacchanale a little way back in the jungle, we were working in almost complete darkness. We did not dare risk a light. It would have made too good a target if Schweitzer were near.

When the logs were trimmed, we dragged them out into the lake to be pulled to the end of the peninsula. We were standing waist-deep in cold water. Then we came back ashore and cut some saplings to make into rough oars. Clarice and Lao stood together, talking in low tones and leaning on their rifles.

Suddenly dark figures materialized around us. They had slipped up unseen from the forest. Lao flung up his rifle and fired. One of the converging shad-

ows faltered in midstride and went sprawling on the sand, but venomous tongues of yellow flame stabbed out as the others fired. Lao's rifle dropped from his hands, and the big Manchu sagged. A moment later he had fallen forward on his face.

We were completely taken by surprise, and the thing was over in an instant. Schweitzer had disarmed Clarice, and the rest of us had laid aside our weapons when we waded into the water. Now we were helpless under the guns of the others.

"I offered you peace, my hot-headed friends," Schweitzer rumbled with a sort of heavy geniality, "but you chose war. So be it! Now we will take your diamonds, and your canvas suits which we have seen. But first we will secure you against foolishness."

He took a short length of cord and stepped up to Clarice, who was nearest.

"Please cross your wrists behind you, *Fräulein*," he said with ironic politeness.

For an instant Clarice glared at him, standing very straight with her chin in the air. Then she shrugged, and clasped her hands behind her back. Schweitzer tied the girl's wrists securely, and motioned to one of his men to take her in charge.

When Schweitzer and his men rushed us I had been a little farther back toward our own peninsula than the others. While he talked, and while he was binding Clarice's hands, I had slowly been inching backward. Slow motion is difficult to detect in the darkness. Just as Schweitzer finished with Clarice's hands I decided it was time to make a break for it.

Spinning around, I sprinted at top speed up the peninsula toward our camp—and our rifles—a hundred yards away. Shouts sounded behind me, and an irregular volley cracked out. Bullets smacked on the sand ahead, but I was un-

touched when I tumbled headlong over the barricade.

A moment later I had cocked one rifle, seized two others, and started back toward shore. There seemed to be a lot of turmoil on the beach, and when I got there I found the disheveled survivors of our party in possession of the field. When I broke away and drew the fire of the German's men, Clive and the others had jumped them. Schweitzer had almost immediately called off his men—but they had taken Clarice Saunders with them!

Behind the shelter of our rock wall, we lit a lantern and gathered for a hasty council. To leave the camp and supplies unprotected while we went to look for Clarice might be fatal. And it would probably be playing right into Schweitzer's hands, since he must expect us to try a rescue. Surprise was our only chance, and two would probably do as well as four. Larry and I were to go.

"All right," I said tensely, "shall we start now?"

"Wait until moonrise," Clive told us, "then you'll have a better idea of what you're doing. Pete and I will make some noise here and keep the lantern lit."

Larry and I buttoned our holsters tightly, and secured our knives by lanyards around our necks. We smeared our bodies heavily with grease to give some protection against the bitter cold of the water. At last the moon rose over the jagged peaks of the Kurugh Khan and shed a pale radiance on the smooth water of Lake Reardon. Larry and I shook hands with the others, then slipped over the barricade.

We crawled up the peninsula on hands and knees to avoid being silhouetted against the sky. On reaching the pile of logs we dragged one out into the water, then waded till we were up to our armpits.

"God, but it's cold!" I muttered.

"It is that," Larry whispered back. "What wouldn't I give right now for a good drink of whisky! Irish whisky! Well, come on."

SLOWLY we waded westward, pushing the log before us and keeping our bodies under water. There was a low mist on the face of the lake, which increased our chances of being taken for simply a drifting log if we were seen at all. Watching the shore as we went by, we pushed steadily ahead.

Once we saw a dark blot against the silver of the beach, probably one of Schweitzer's sentries watching to see if we came along the shoreline. My teeth were beginning to chatter, and I clenched my jaws savagely. At last we saw a pin-point of fire gleaming through the trees.

Where that fire was burning must be Schweitzer and Clarice. We went ahead until we were directly in line with the fire, and then moved slowly inshore. We would have to take our chances on meeting any of the tentacle-creatures on our progress from the beach to Schweitzer's clearing.

Our slow journey along the shore had taken longer than we realized, and the moon was setting when at last we crouched in the shadows at the edge of Schweitzer's camp. A small fire burned in the clearing, and four of Schweitzer's bearers were dozing around it. The German scientist himself sat on a log with his chin in his hand and his strange eyes fixed on the fire. He seemed to be brooding.

Clarice was near by, sitting on the ground with her back against a small sapling. Her wrists were tightly tied behind the slender trunk, and her crossed ankles were lashed together. She looked very tired. For a few seconds I whispered in Larry's ear, and then we separated.

I crawled as close to Clarice as I could

get without leaving the shadows, and then settled down to wait. Larry had farther to go, and it would take him some time.

At last a shot rang out across the clearing. Schweitzer leaped to his feet, and at the same moment Larry's mighty voice boomed through the darkness. "All right now, boys, *all together!*"

I saw Schweitzer leap into action, snatching up his rifle and plunging out of the firelight into the shadows across the clearing. In the moment when he stood there I had the sights of my rifle lined up on the back of his head, but I could not pull the trigger. It seemed too much like cold-blooded murder.

There was a great deal of noise from across the clearing. Scattered shots came in quick succession, and Larry's voice shouting mingled commands and encouragement. The German's bearers had all followed him, and our ruse was working. Larry was doing his best to sound like half a dozen men. I jumped into the clearing and cut Clarice's bonds.

"Back along the shore!" I whispered to her. "Come on!"

We broke through the underbrush till we reached the shore, and then ran at top speed down the beach. I had thought Schweitzer would be too busy with Larry to notice what was happening on our side of the clearing, but we had not gone over a hundred yards when we heard shouted orders behind us and then the crash of men charging through the underbrush.

The damp sand dragged at our feet and we could not make very good time. Dawn was near, and there was a faint gray light along the eastern sky. The men behind us were gaining fast, one well ahead of the rest.

"Keep going!" I snapped to Clarice and spun around with my rifle raised. Then I saw that the nearest pursuer was Larry.

"Get along with you!" he panted, and flung himself down on the sand.

Larry's rifle spat viciously back at the shadows behind, and after a moment's hesitation I ran on after Clarice. With Larry to cover the retreat, it was foolish to let the girl go on toward our camp alone. A minute later I saw her running back toward me.

"Jim," she gasped, "one of those *things* is after me and I have no gun."

Close on her heels was one of the fantastic tentacle-creatures, bizarre and terrifying in the pale light of breaking day. As I shot twice at its cold eyes it leaped toward us with a shrill scream. I flung Clarice to one side and jumped myself, snapping a shot behind the creature's head as it hurtled by me. It fell to the ground, writhing and screaming, but was up again before we had taken a dozen strides.

This time I met the thing squarely, jamming the muzzle of my rifle into its open beak and pulling the trigger. Again the monster went down, screaming horribly, and this time it did not rise to follow as we ran off.

There was now a pale gray light that struck coldly through the mists. Our little peninsula came in sight as we ran, and Clive and Pete came running down to meet us.

"Good work!" Clive snapped. "Where is Larry?"

I nodded back toward the strip of mist-veiled beach behind. "Back there somewhere. Let's go get him."

Clive and I trotted steadily along over the loose sand of the beach. Somewhere ahead of us Larry was still alive, for we could hear a scattering and desultory rifle fire. The beach was a narrow corridor between the blackness of the forest and the mists of the lake. Then with startling suddenness, a man loomed up through the fog ahead of us.

It was Larry. There was no mistaking that hulking form, even though he now staggered with unsteady steps. As we ran forward he fell to his knees. His chest was horrible to see, riddled with bullets, and a crimson trail stretched back across the sand the way he had come. With indomitable will he twisted around and emptied his rifle into the mist. Then, just as we reached his side, he fell again.

There was nothing we could do. A man with a less remarkable vitality would have been dead long before. In the grip of delirium he muttered brokenly that Morales was storming San Jacinto. God only knows in what forgotten fight he thought he was at the moment. Then he died.

CLIVE and I carried Larry's broken body back to camp. He was a heavy load, but we would not leave him there on the beach for the tentacle-creatures to feed on. Sunlight was gilding the peaks of the Kurugh Khan as we buried him under a big pile of boulders by a friendly pine tree on the edge of the jungle. Then we started to complete our raft.

We were not destined to do any work on the raft. Probably it never will be completed. Even as we got our axes from the stores behind the barricade, Clarice pointed shoreward.

"Look there!" she gasped.

A half-dozen of the tentacle-creatures had emerged from the jungle and were slowly crossing the beach. Gruesome and ominous, they settled down in a semi-circle at the base of our peninsula about a hundred yards away. Even at that distance we could feel the relentless glare of their cold and unblinking eyes. Three more came out of the jungle.

"Looks as if they mean trouble," Clive said.

Pete nodded. "They seem to be gathering for an attack in force."

"Then we're done for," I told them hastily. "I fought one on the beach last night. I finished him off finally, but they're very hard to kill. If a lot of them rush us at once we haven't a chance."

While we stood there silently, clutching our almost useless rifles, the gathering of our foes steadily grew in size. By twos and threes, a minute or so apart, more tentacle-creatures moved out of the jungle and squatted down on the sand. There were a full score of them when Pete suddenly swore with deep feeling and began to hurl the contents of the packs out on the sand with frantic haste.

"I've an idea!" he snapped. "Where's that box with the gold assay equipment?"

"In the third pack," Clive answered wearily. He glanced at me, and we were both wondering if Pete Saunders' mind had weakened under the strain. "What good will that do us?"

"There's a lot of potassium cyanide in there. Here! You take this file and cut deep notches in the noses of our rifle bullets. Work fast!"

We caught the idea then, and furiously began to file deep notches in our nickel-jacketed bullets. Pete had found the cyanide and added a little water. As we finished each bullet he stuffed the notch with the deadly chemical and smeared it all over the nose. As each was finished he laid it carefully on a piece of canvas.

"It's just a chance," he said hastily. "The nervous system of these creatures must be very abnormal, but there's a bare possibility that cyanide may do the trick. It's our only hope."

As I write this, with all our bullets ready and nothing to do but hope, the attack is imminent. There must be over fifty of the things on shore there now. They have now arisen to stand on their tentacles, obviously getting ready for a rush. Clive is carefully sighting his rifle,

about to try the effect of one of our prepared bullets. . . .

Clive's shot went home, but the creature seems unaffected. God help us now!

JULY 24.—We are now floating on a crude raft on the surface of Lake Reardon, we few who still remain alive. It now seems more hopeless than ever to continue writing, but at least it keeps my mind busy. I certainly never expected any of us to survive that mad turmoil at the barricade.

As if Clive's shot had been a signal, the assault began. The tentacle-creatures began to straggle up the narrow peninsula. The soft sand slowed them up, and they could not move as fast as we had seen them do in the jungle. It was a grim sight to see that horde of perverted creatures waddling silently toward them. I moved over next to Clarice Saunders and quietly decided to put a bullet in her brain the moment the fight was definitely lost.

At once we opened fire, shooting as fast as we could work the levers of our rifles and refill our magazines. A chorus of shrill yelps came from the advancing horde as our bullets struck home. I hit one squarely in the eye and saw it go sprawling among its fellows with tentacles twitching horribly. Another went down, and then another, but the main advance continued almost unchecked. They were half-way to the barricade, and the barrels of our rifles were hot to the touch. Those in the front rank, hit by many bullets, were wavering but still advancing. I made sure that my machete was close at hand, and then shifted my fire to the ranks farther back.

Up to the rampart came the tentacled mob, into the very muzzles of our guns. As we were bracing for the final rush that would send them pouring over the rocky barrier, the two things in the lead stopped

short. They began to scream horribly. Not the short yelps that had followed each bullet wound, but a long-drawn keening that chilled the blood. Foam dripped from their jaws. All at once they dropped writhing on the sand, and another just moving past them began to exhibit the same symptoms.

"By Heaven, the poison's working at last!" Pete shouted jubilantly. "Those were hit first and oftenest. Let the others have it!"

That was the secret of our salvation. The poison had been slow to work upon the curious nervous organization of the creatures, but it had taken effect at last. As we poured in a new fire, the same thing began to happen throughout the mass of our attackers. The turmoil was deafening, and the length of the peninsula was a hell of twisting, agonized tentacles. Only one of the things actually mounted the barricade—and was cut to pieces by our flailing machetes.

The survivors slowly withdrew. Perhaps a dozen staggered back across the beach. We shouted and laughed hysterically, but then we took stock of our remaining supplies.

Only twenty or thirty rifle cartridges remained among all of us, and we could never survive another attack in force. We hurried to complete our raft, and in about three hours we had finished. The slain tentacle-creatures had grown still at last, looking like a long pile of jagged stumps. There was no sign of another advance from shore yet, but we wasted no time. As soon as we could load all our gear on the raft we pushed off and floated clear on the waters of the lake.

We turned toward the eastern and nearer spur of the range. Our crude oars were not very effective, but we made definite progress. We were pretty well shaken. Clive took a small bottle of brandy from what remained of our medi-

cal stores, and each of us took a drink.

It was just at that moment that there came a sudden outburst of screams and shots from on shore. We could see nothing beyond the edge of the jungle, but the sounds that came across the water indicated that hell had broken loose somewhere beyond the fringe of trees.

One of Schweitzer's men burst out through the underbrush. He backed slowly down across the beach, and every other step he paused to fire at something we could not yet see. Other men appeared, Schweitzer among them. All were fleeing from something that was pressing them back from the jungle.

Then the first of the tentacle-creatures came into sight. It ran toward the nearest of the fleeing men, crouching forward and shaking its ghastly head from side to side. Hit squarely, it faltered for a moment but then started forward again. The man suddenly found his rifle empty. With a despairing cry he hurled the weapon at his pursuer and ran toward the water. The thing caught him in the shallows. Clarice averted her head from the grisly sight, but the rest of us stared in a sort of horrible fascination.

Another wave of the tentacle-creatures swept out of the jungle, and Schweitzer abandoned the fight entirely. Hurling away his rifle, he dove into the water and began to swim out toward our raft. Most of the creatures stopped at the water's edge, but two of them plunged in after the fleeing man. With their tentacles splashing steadily, they caught him in a dozen strokes. For a few seconds there was a wild confusion while they pulled him under; then the water grew crimson and the turmoil died.

Clive laid aside the rifle he had lifted. "Exit Schweitzer," he said without flippancy.

It is now the next day, and we have been a third of the way around the lake.

The cliffs are as sheer and unscalable as ever. Only the knowledge that Tommy Reardon escaped in some way from this place keeps us going.

AUGUST 16.—It is very pleasant here in the hospital at Changor. After all we have been through, it is good to lie still and do nothing at all. My broken leg is healing nicely.

In the late afternoon of the next day after the last entry above, we were paddling listlessly along the far border of the lake where the cliffs were screened by a great mass of vines. For a while we ceased paddling and just let the raft drift. It was a few minutes later that I noticed we were drifting steadily along parallel to the rock wall.

With every passing minute our speed increased, and soon we were speeding along in the grip of a current that gurgled softly against the rock as it went by. We became frightened then, and tried to paddle out of the current.

Our crude paddles had little effect, and we could not get free from the current. Every minute we traveled more swiftly. The raft swung against the rock with a heavy jolt, and scraped along against the cliffs. Then we were spun around, and many trailing vines brushed our faces. A second later we were speeding along in a faint gray light that quickly turned to utter blackness. The roar of the waters was loud in our ears.

"I see it now," Clive shouted. "We should have realized that the lake must have an outlet somewhere, with all those streams running into it. Try to find that lantern, Jim."

A few minutes later I had located the lantern and managed to light it. We were floating on the surface of an underground river that flowed through a natural arched cavern. The waters hissed and gurgled as they flowed, and the raft sped

along at high speed. Though the tunnel varied in width from time to time, we found that one man with a steering-oar could keep the raft in the middle of the channel.

"This must be the way Tommy Reardon escaped," Clive said, "probably on a raft like this. Very likely this thing has its outlet across the mountains. We must be making ten miles an hour."

"But what made Tommy go blind? It must have happened near the end of his journey."

"God knows."

For perhaps an hour more we drifted quickly along. Then Clarice, who was sitting beside me, looked up sharply.

"What's that?"

I followed her pointing finger, and saw a black shape that circled above us. Occasionally it dipped down toward the light, then soared up again to the roof of the cavern, which at this point was quite high.

"Some sort of a bat," I said.

"Queer-looking bat!" Pete Saunders was peering up at it. "Not like any I ever saw before."

Even as he spoke, the thing swooped down toward him. With its leathery black wings flapping, it darted straight for his face. He flung up his arms for protection, and I struck at the giant bat with the butt of my rifle. The next instant it had flown away, but Pete had an ugly wound in his forearm.

"This thing hurts!" he muttered, his voice rising sharply. "It burns. It burns like fire!"

Clive had already ripped open the medicine chest and was working speedily. The flesh around Pete's wound was turning yellow. Then Clive poured on a strong alkaline solution. It smoked as it met the acid eating into the wound. Pete went white as a sheet, and set his teeth in his lower lip till a trickle of blood ran

down his chin. After a while he relaxed.

"Thanks, Clive," he said. "I feel better now. That thing injected some kind of acid, all right. The funny thing is that it went straight for my eyes. A second slower with my hands and I would have been blinded."

"Now we know what happened to Tommy Reardon. Poor devil, it was a tough break to have it happen after getting this far. We'd better put our canvas armor on again."

WE LOST count of time. The hours did not seem to exist in that dark, roaring cavern beneath the mountains. For mile after mile we were carried along on the face of the underground river. The swift current kept the air moving, and we had no trouble in breathing. Now and then one of the strange bats swooped down to attack us, but they were not so hard to beat off when we were on the watch for them. Clarice slept fitfully, and the fever from his wound seemed to have made Pete drowsy, but the rest of us were able to keep the bats away from them.

Later, a long time later, a tiny spot of light appeared ahead. I was squatting on the raft at the time, with the lantern behind me. For a minute I blinked, thinking it might be a trick of my eyes, but then I was sure.

"Light ahead!" I shouted.

Clive crawled up beside me.

"Right! It must be the end of the tunnel. We have gone far enough to be on the other side of the Kurugh Khan. Wake Clarice up—and get off this heavy canvas. You can't tell what we may find at the end."

Gradually the spot of light grew larger. Before long we could see the rocky opening at the end. As the daylight filtered into the tunnel we had the

illusion of standing stationary on the river while the tunnel rushed past us. Blue sky appeared ahead, there came a sudden roaring—and we were out in the blinding sunlight.

Everything fell away from us. Dimly I realized that the raft had gone over a fall. The logs broke apart as they hit the water below, and a searing pain went through my right leg as the bone snapped between two of the churning timbers. With one arm around Clarice and the other clinging to one of the logs I fought to keep our heads above water. When

friendly hands pulled us to shore a little later I tried to speak, and in the same moment lost consciousness.

There isn't much more to tell. We lost all our photos and specimens and scientific data. Most of the diamonds went too, but enough stayed in Clive's pockets to make us all reasonably well off. Clive and Pete are talking about going back some other time to try and capture a tentacle-creature alive in the interests of science, but Clarice and I will probably try a little domestic science instead.