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Volume 23 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY, 1934 Number 1

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Red Knife of Hassan"</i>		
The Solitary Hunters	David H. Keller	3
<i>A powerful story of the blood-freezing horror awaiting the men who were sent to a living death in the crater of an extinct volcano</i>		
The Red Knife of Hassan	Seabury Quinn	22
<i>A thrill-tale of the Assassins of Syria—an exploit of Jules de Grandin</i>		
Place Names	Katharine van der Veer	42
<i>Verse</i>		
Invaders of the Ice World	Jack Williamson	43
<i>A weird-scientific tale of the far-distant future, when the sun dims, and creatures spawned by the frost make war upon the survivors of the human race</i>		
Too Late	Alfred I. Tooke	58
<i>Verse</i>		
A Phantom in the Sky	Dale Clark	59
<i>A strange tale of an aviator's weird experience in a doomed airplane</i>		
Rogues in the House	Robert E. Howard	68
<i>A swift-moving tale of the squatting monstrosity that sat in the death-chambers of Nabonidus</i>		
The Weaver in the Vault	Clark Ashton Smith	85
<i>A story of the weird doom that came upon the searchers in the tombs of Chaon Gacca</i>		
The Vampire Master (conclusion)	Hugh Davidson	94
<i>A novel of corpses that would not stay dead, and a gruesome horror in the New York hills</i>		
In the Triangle	Howard Wandrei	109
<i>A brief, strange tale about a weird beast and an old man in gray</i>		
Candles	Dorothy Quick	113
<i>Verse</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Woman of the Wood	A. Merritt	114
<i>One of the most popular stories from WEIRD TALES of several years ago</i>		
The Eyrie		132
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		
Possession	Julius Long	136
<i>A short but intensely interesting weird tale</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

In the Triangle

By HOWARD WANDREI

*A brief strange tale about a weird beast, and an old man
in gray*

HE LISTENED. In the familiar woods surrounding the house was some exotic beast, making its presence known in the most puzzling manner. Arnold closed the book he had been reading and walked over to the open window. The August afternoon was at its pitch, and the heavy, moist, hazy air had suffocated all other living things into silence. The man looked through the woods in the direction of the sound, and then cocked his head, listening intently, trying to identify the sound. It was a broken succession of growlings, a gobbling curiously interrupted so as to sound

like a mechanical and humorless chuckling.

He was disturbed. There could be no beast on earth that could make a sound like that. Its utterly mechanical nature seemed all exact repetition. He thought of a phonograph, whose arm soullessly and maddeningly played the same groove of a record over and over and over again. His house was remotely situated, and no one from town would be here on such a stifling afternoon. The empty lightness of children was not in the noise, and it could hardly be made with implements. It was a throaty evidence of life, and now

it cut regularly through the air like a vocal saw.

Arnold knew the woods very well, having lived here many years; the origin of the disturbance would not be difficult to locate. The thing was worth investigating. Having listened at the window with increasing wonder for several minutes, he dropped his book on the window-seat and crossed the room to the door. Here he stopped for a moment, but decided not to lock it. The small animals of the woods might take a bright object or two, so he returned to close the window. Then he closed the door, and after looking up at the dead blue sky and around at his greening acres, made off through the trees. No human being was likely to visit, especially on a day like this. Only one white-haired old man had come by in the last two weeks. Curious old fellow. He had eyed Arnold as though he were taking pictures of his ways, his body, and his brain; and he had taken his own time in leaving.

No air stirred. The birds were silent, and the trees stood so still they seemed waiting for life. Arnold now walked rapidly and softly, peering through the trees ahead and to either side. The ground was not entirely free of brush, nor was it level. But the loose collocations of elms, oaks, and cottonwoods, which were commonest in this country, admitted a fairly unobstructed view for some distance ahead. As he walked he looked familiarly on his property, identifying a stump, touching a tree where he had carved his initials a year or two ago. Now he was ascending a broad, low knoll, the first site he had chosen for his house, and decided against because of the magnificent trees growing here. From the continued noise of the beast he knew that discovery was close at hand. The sound was even more puzzling than before, and it would

be difficult to say whether it was caused by throat or machine. There would be enlightenment on the other side of the knoll.

As he walked, the exotic growling assumed the character of a struggle, and now, as he advanced more and more carefully, a thin, plaintive human voice, oddly familiar, augmented the sound of eccentric, senseless chuckling. So it was a struggle, and one of the contenders was a man calling weakly for help.

Arnold quickly crested the knoll, shouting, "Hold on! I'm with you in a moment!"

The struggle, instead of ceasing at his now noisy approach, increased, and the chuckle became magnified to a broken, staccato barking. Arnold shouted again encouragingly, and, breaking through a clinging screen of creepers and clutching brush, stopped dead as he sighted the struggling figures before him.

In this spot three venerable cottonwoods formed an almost perfect triangle, within which the ground was almost free of all growth. In this triangle was lying prone an old man with long white hair. It was the old fellow who had dropped in two weeks ago. He was plainly and neatly dressed in coarse gray cloth, as before, and he was striving fearfully to protect his throat and abdomen from the teeth and disemboweling claws of a strange beast.

The beast was of human size, and seemed to have something of the characteristics each of ape, pig, and dog. Its fangs were of extraordinary length, however, and it made such a violent caricature of life that Arnold looked on it with disgust and horror. Coarse black hair covered the body, and a short tail jerked convulsively as the beast made its barking noises and its arching fangs worried the

old man's throat. A hybrid? Odd animals have appeared most unaccountably at the strangest times in the most unexpected places. There was the dog-boar monstrosity that was found in France. This might not be the worst nor the least of nature's baroque experiments.

COMPLETELY revolted by the appearance of the queer animal, Arnold hastily looked around for a convenient weapon, answering the piteous appeal in the old man's eyes. If he had taken fuller account of the situation he might have hesitated, and thought the struggle even stranger than at first sight.

In the first place, aside from the affair in the triangle, the woods were uncommonly still, so still that the air seemed charged with waiting and expectancy. There was so marked a contrast between the apparent violence in the triangle and the deathly summer stillness of the air and brush and trees that the whole affair was denied both purpose and reality. The background of silence, suggesting a toleration that approached human understanding, gave the struggle the character of highest artificiality.

Arnold missed the significance in the attacking fangs of the beast. The teeth were terribly sharp, and, though repeatedly closing on the old man's throat, never dented the skin. The disemboweling claws, full of raking death, exerted their convulsive weight, and nothing more. The claws themselves scarcely caught in the old man's neat gray cloth. Arnold had heard the ugly, ghoulish barking aright, but didn't see its meaning. The barks were unfinished growlings, animal sounds continually started and never completed. The old man exhibited no evidences of physical harm; his plain garments were unsullied, and were disposed in careful folds. The waiting woods and the strug-

gling forms insidiously represented a composite threat and nothing more.

But Arnold, unable to find either stick or stone in the enclosed triangle, and daring to take no time looking through the brush encroaching on this particular spot, flung himself bodily on the assaulting beast. The impact of his body liberated the old man, who took to his feet at once, and circled the two on the ground gingerly.

"Kill him! Kill him!" he squeaked querulously.

"Get a stick!" said Arnold, furiously struggling. But the old man stood by, watching the two interestedly.

The beast emitted magnified, full-throated barkings now, and a long violence of growlings. Its rank, intolerable animal odor was suffocating and charnel in the stagnant air, and Arnold fought to finish the thing as soon as possible. Oddly enough, he thought at this moment of his pleasant room and the book he had been reading. The time-spread initials he had carved in the tree seemed stamped on the beast's rugose, leonine forehead.

The hateful feeling of the moist, swine-like skin was a difficulty in itself, but more important was the fact that the animal's body afforded no firm grasp. He was holding the creature desperately by its wrists, and his superior position prevented it from using its deadly legs. Neither of them was free to use his hands.

"For God's sake, hit it! Kick its head!" he said, and looked up at the old man, his eyes full of violent entreaty. But the old man only skipped about tensely, eyeing the beast and looking at Arnold nervously. Arnold cursed his luck in hearing the beast from his untroubled house. Better the old man had died. Or would he have died anyhow? The animal might have been the old devil's pet, to all ap-

pearances. At any rate the old fellow didn't seem to have a scratch on his body from the curious encounter.

As Arnold looked into the beast's flaming eyes his brain flushed with desperation, purpose, and horror. The creature's wide, fixed stare seemed an attempt to take possession of his will, and he felt himself drowning in the engulfing shadows of the beast's mindlessness. He shook his head dizzily, freeing himself from the hypnotizing stare, and, as his one resort, sickly forced his jaws to the beast's throat.

He found his face wet and warm, and the taste of blood on his lips. The reek of the thing's skin checked his breath. Convinced now that the situation demanded the beast's life or his own, he worked with distasteful hurry: there was the sanctuary afterward of his room and his books, nor would he ever bury this vileness on his loved property. The old man would hear a word or two, moreover. He had offered no help in the least, only dancing about like a gray-headed, delighted monkey.

During this time the creature had made no effort to use its own powerful jaws, only barking and growling savagely. And at Arnold's sudden determination to take its life, it closed its jaws for his convenience and merely continued the sound through its nose and throat. Its body lurched about with all the appearance of deadly intent, but it made no attempt at

definite harm. Arnold had missed this singularity, and now his revolted jaws clipped the beast's jugular.

The mingled incidents of the situation resolved themselves into coincidences. Arnold found himself lying prone, in the position the beast had occupied, looking dimly at the sky. Twigs on the ground racked his naked body roughly. His throat and wrists hurt terribly, and he raised his arms to find his neck mangled, the large veins severed, and his life ebbing away in warm spurts. The arm was bare and swarthy, like pigskin, as was his whole unfamiliar body. The coarse fingers terminated in powerful claws. The leathery, slimy tongue with which he tried to lick his straining lips encountered strange, curving fangs. Above him stood the beast, and his dying brain burned with shame as he recognized his own garments, his own watchful attitude, and himself, looking down eagerly with his own now weirdly glittering eyes.

Now the quiet summer afternoon afforded the scene of a hairy beast lying alone on the ground in the center of triangulated cottonwoods, clawing horribly at its breast. A young man and an old man with long white hair were walking off through the woods to Arnold's house, and, as the strange beast's head rolled sideways, the eyes filming in death glimpsed finally the brisk figure of the old man looking back gleefully.

