

Famous
FANTASTIC
Mysteries

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Book-Length Novel

Ogden's Strange Story

Here's one of the strangest stories ever told—the saga of Ogden Rutheford, spoiled child of civilization, and Og, the Dawn Man. Centuries away, worlds apart, they wove strange, dark tapestries into history's pages, until in a screaming holocaust their paths met and crossed.

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Edison Marshall 10

No-Man's-Land

When he went delving into the last weird mysteries of earth spirits, he thought he had reckoned with every danger that superstition warned of. But he forgot the fear-ridden, cringing cave man who dwelt deep inside himself.

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John Buchan 82

What Was It?

They could feel and hear the Nameless Horror, but they could not see it. . . . They could have no doubt that it was present among them, but what was it?

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Jameson

Woe be to him who spies upon the secrets of the half-world beneath our own . . . for though he may see what only few men know, so will he be punished as few men ever have been!

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JAMIESON

By Margaret St. Clair

THE curse (said the man who was sitting in the armchair with the orange upholstery) which fell upon Jamieson was unjustified. As a husband he was kind, as a father, affectionate. He met his payroll promptly. Never once did he transgress the thin but definite line which separates good business dealing from skullduggery. It is true, he was not much given to piety nor effervescent in the matter of good works—but nowadays, gentlemen, who is?

Jamieson's doom was not only unjustified, it was inappropriate. It was the sort of doom which ought to have been imposed on a poet or a reasonably romantic man of letters rather than on a prosperous roofing contractor. But when the second week in August turned intolerably hot and from day to day the heat increased until the city was a burning, echoing, emptiness, Jamieson took the resolution which led to his downfall. His wife was visiting her mother, the children were at camp. There was no reason why he should stay in town. He decided to spend a few days at the beach.

He had no reservations. Perhaps the moral of this history (the man in the orange armchair said) is always to make reservations. He tried first at the Belmont-Pierre, a de luxe hostelry surrounded by twenty-seven acres of gardens, where he and Mrs. Jamieson had always stayed before. From there, growing less choicey with every refusal, he visited eight or ten hotels, each slightly lower in the social scale than the one before. He came to rest at last in a boarding house.

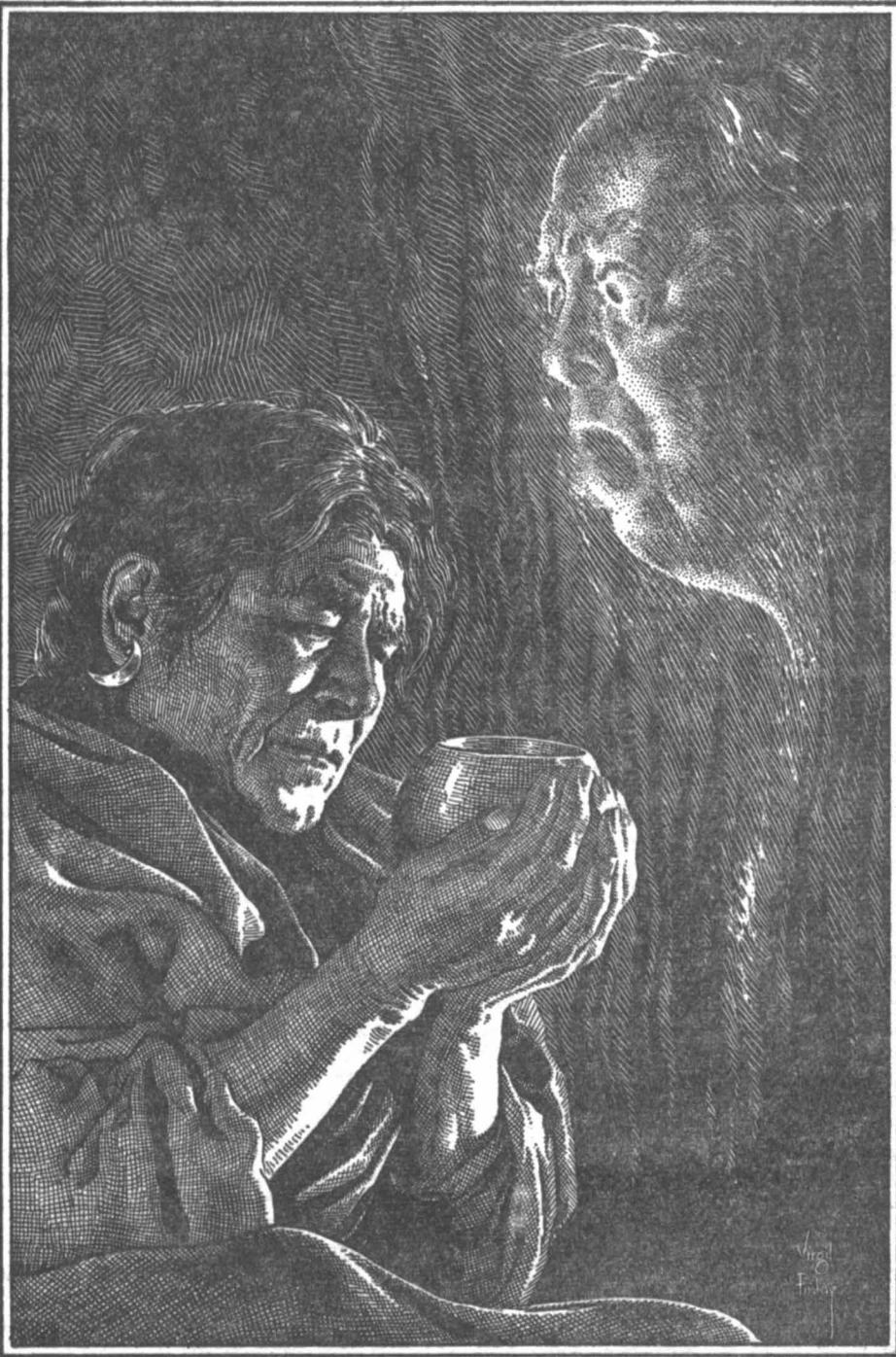
Even for a boarding house, it was low. Only the hottest August in thirty-two years, would have induced Jamieson to put up with it. But a wonderful cool breeze fluttered his room's dingy curtains, and he could get all his meals except breakfast at restaurants. He decided to stay.

The clientèle of "Seahaven" was as dubious as the food. There was a young man who wore a bracelet on one wrist, a woman with a dry, scaly skin who slapped constantly at an imaginary fly on the bridge of her nose, and a child who brought decomposed starfish and bits of rotting seaweed into the dining room. And there was Madame Zilfa.

Jamieson noticed her particularly because she had the room next to his, and all day long people knocked at her door. She came down to breakfast the first morning of Jamieson's stay wearing an ankle-length frock of magenta-colored chiffon with sequins sewed all around the edge of the wide, wide skirt. The top part of the dress was covered by a little black plush jacket, and around her neck she wore a pallid, stringy bit of fur. Her eyes were the exact greenish yellow of a cat's.

Despite her sallow skin and dusty braids, she had a sort of haggish handsomeness. Jamieson decided that she looked like a fortuneteller at a street fair, and was pleased with the accuracy of his diagnosis when the landlady told him, with shy pride, that Madame Zilfa gave "readings" in her room.

On the second night he slept at "Seahaven" Jamieson was awakened by the thin tootling of a flute. He tried to go



"You have spoiled the charm for who knows how many tens of years. . . ."

back to sleep at first, but the noise, though slight, was persistent. Jamieson turned on the light, saw that it was nearly two o'clock, and after a moment's indecision got up and rapped sharply on the wall between his room and Madame Zilfa's.

The noise of the flute continued for a few minutes more. Then it stopped, and somebody—Madame Zilfa?—gave a low laugh.

To the sound of the flute there succeeded a soft, mouselike scurrying, a gentle patter of little sounds. Jamieson wondered vaguely as to what the noise could be, and then went back to sleep.

Jamieson should have left "Seahaven" then and there (the man in the orange armchair said). But would you, gentlemen, have found anything so alarming in the sound of a flute? I think not. Poor old Jamieson!

The next night the routine with the flute was repeated, only this time it was nearly two-thirty when Jamieson awoke. Once more he rapped on the wall, once more, after an interval, the sound of the flute ceased and Madame Zilfa laughed. Again Jamieson listened to the complex of mouse-noises and wondered what they were.

He was growing curious. This in itself would have led to nothing, nor was his purchase of a roll of peppermints during his post-prandial stroll along the beach necessarily dangerous. But the package of candy, placed insecurely on the edge of the dresser, fell off and rolled under it; Jamieson had to move the dresser out to get his candy back; and when he was picking up the dusty, hairy, filthy roll, he discovered the crack in the wall.

It was rather a wide crack, about three inches above the baseboard. Jamieson ought to have moved the dresser back against it and forgotten it. Instead, his joints creaking, he squatted down and looked through it into Mme. Zilfa's room.

THE sibyl was out at the moment, which was fortunate for Jamieson, since it deferred his doom by several hours. What he could see of her room was draped in rusty black, embroidered with the signs of the zodiac. On the table in the center of the apartment there was a crystal ball and a limp pack of playing cards; and over to the right, on top of a dresser like the one in Jamieson's own room, there was a flute, and beside it a small, square, heavy brass-bound chest. There was a padlock on the chest.

Jamieson hung a soiled shirt over the crack with a thumbtack so no ray of light would warn Mme. Zilfa when she returned. The remainder of the evening he spent in restless speculation. When it was time for bed, he took off his shoes and his coat, turned off the light, and lay down on his uneven mattress.

The first tootle of the flute awakened him. Very cautiously he groped his way across the room toward the crack. He located the pendant shirt, pulled the thumbtack out, and eased himself into a semi-recumbent position before the opening. He looked in.

Madame Zilfa was sitting cross-legged on the floor three or four feet in front of him. The brass-bound chest, the lid open and thrown back, stood at her left, and she was leaning toward it and playing the flute over it.

The soft, plaintive noise went on for a considerable length of time, while Jamieson watched and grew fidgety with expectation. At last Mme. Zilfa stopped, laid the flute aside, and got to her knees. She reached into the box and began lifting objects out of it carefully and setting them on the mat in front of her.

Jamieson had expected, I think, (said the man in the armchair upholstered in orange) serpents, as much as he had expected anything. What Madame Zilfa actually got out of the box was a number of figurines of dark brown wood, not over two inches high, and carved to represent men. They wore conical thatched straw hats, like oriental peasants, and in the hands of some of them were tiny hoes and mattocks and pruning knives. Lastly, Mme. Zilfa got from the chest what looked like a little bundle of dry twigs.

The little men began to move about on the surface of the carpet. Some of them hacked at its surface with the little mattocks and others followed behind them and planted the twigs in the furrows the mattocks users had made. As Jamieson watched, the tiniest froth of green began to appear at the top of the twigs. It expanded and grew, and Jamieson saw that the little men had planted cuttings of minute grapes. After those who had done the planting came those who pruned the vines and those who cultivated the surface of the mat with hoes.

Mme. Zilfa reached into the chest once more and brought out what seemed to be a miniature cider press. By now there were distinct touches of purple among the leaves of the vine. The workers walked up

and down the rows, stripping off the bunches of grapes and carrying them to the press.

This all sounds very improbable, does it not? (said the narrator in the armchair.) Very improbable, and so Jamieson thought as he watched it going on. Once or twice he shut his eyes and opened them again in the hope that the action would cause the manikins to cease their agricultural operations. It had no such effect.

By now juice was beginning to drip from the tiny press. From the chest Mme. Zilfa extracted a low, shimmering, orbicular cup of pale yellow porcelain. She set it under the press, and the small gleaming purple drops trickled into it. As the cup grew full, the little workers stiffened into the immobility of wood. Madame Zilfa picked them up carefully and put them back in their box again.

The cup was full to the brim. Mme. Zilfa blew on it three times and raised it to her lips. Jamieson, in his anxiety to see everything, shifted his position. The heel of his hand came down on the thumbtack. Involuntarily he yelped. And Madame Zilfa raised her eyes and looked directly into his.

The next thing Jamieson knew, he was standing in front of the sorceress, having left his room behind him in a rush. He rather thought he had left his body, too, for though it was a warm evening he was feeling most distressfully cold. For a space Madame Zilfa looked at him and meditated, smiling unpleasantly, while Jamieson wriggled around on her gaze like a caterpillar on a pin.

"Now, by Isis and Osiris and Anubis, the conductor of the dead!" the sorceress said. "By Set the ill-minded and hawk-headed Horus! By the Weigher of Hearts and the Guardian of the Gates!" And she went on for quite a time invoking various heathen deities whom poor old Jamieson had never heard of before. "So you, you little squirt with the potbelly, you were watching me the whole time I performed the lunar oblation, were you? Fah! I like your nerve!" And having apparently arrived at the end of her invective, she tapped her teeth and looked at him.

Jamieson painfully felt his disembodied condition. Even if he had been able to think of anything to say in his defense, he lacked a throat to say it with. But even in this dreadful moment he could not help observing that Madame Zilfa's neck was dirty and that her lipstick had been patchily applied.

"For your curiosity alone you deserve to be punished," the enchantress said. "But when I think that you have spoiled the charm for who knows how many tens of years, when I consider that your profane gaze has sucked the virtue from my puppets of basuto wood, and rendered the juice of my moon grapes no more potent as an elixir than so much wine vinegar, then—"

And Mme. Zilfa gnashed her teeth at him.

"We must try to suit the punishment to the crime," she said at last. "Do you, then, hunt basuto wood and moon grape cuttings for me. I anticipate it will take you quite a time, but do not let that worry you. You have all eternity before you. On your way, then, on your way!" And with a rush and a thump, Jamieson was back inside his body again.

Since then, gentlemen, (the man in the armchair stretched out his legs and sighed) poor old Jamieson has been pretty much on the go. He's been twice to Africa, hunting basuto wood, and once to the Mountains of the Moon, after the moon grapes. The second time in Africa he had filarial fever and thought he was going to die, but he didn't.

That's the funny thing about Jamieson —there's always money in his pockets, and he can't seem to die. When he was in South America a bushmaster stung him and his hand rotted and then his whole side. It hurt so much he asked the people with him to kill him, but they were frightened and ran away, and after a while he got over it.

He always gets over it.

Once he was down in a submarine, hunting the moon grapes, and something went wrong with the pumps. Everyone else drowned, but poor old Jamieson went floating up to the top and stayed there for days. His tongue swelled up with thirst, and he wanted to die that time too, but he couldn't, and after a while a ship picked him up.

His only chance, he thinks, is that some time they'll develop a rocket ship that will go to the moon. If there are moon grapes anywhere, they'll be on the moon, don't you think so, gentlemen? Of course that would leave him still hunting the basuto wood.

By the way, none of you know anything about basuto wood, do you? Or moon grapes? I thought not.

You don't know how tired I get of hunting them.