

*What Was It, This Fearsome Visitor of
the Night That So Terribly Shook
the Nerves of Two Strong Men?*

Just Bones

By SAMUEL STEWART MIMS

I HAVE lived beyond my three-score years and ten. If seventy years is the maximum age allotted to man, then the Timekeeper has allowed thirteen more to slip by without ringing the bell. Why? I do not know.

Age is the old man's armor. Because of his age he is pardoned for thinking that the best men and women lived fifty years ago when he was in his prime.

After these admissions, if it occurs to you that I am overstating the strength of body and other qualifications of my friend Chad Wells and myself, kindly remember that I sit in retrospection, day after day, rehearsing in my mind, over and over, the episode that was enacted fifty years ago.

It is past my understanding that I did not become insane, as did Chad Wells.

Perhaps I was as strong physically as Chad was back in those days, but I never even claimed or pretended, although I was mannish and somewhat given to self-exultation at that age, to be as fearless as he was. Many times have I heard old

Wilbur Brownley say of him, "That fool ain't skeered of man, beast or devil," and I always thought the strong assertion well justified.

Strange things happen in this world. Forty-two years ago Chad Wells died,



Hatman

hopelessly insane, in the Pineville Asylum. He had been an inmate for seven years and five months, when death kindly ended his miserable life. Yes, strange things happen in this world. Here I am eighty-three years old, yet I was no stronger physically, and not as fearless, as was Chad when "That Thing" began coming into our tent at night.

I can now see the twisted legs and the drawn feet of "That Thing." It was something that dragged itself along on its rump, pulling and clawing with crab-like claws and toes. Its hind feet were used in scratching its nose and were used that night in an attempt to hide its face from us, or to shield it from the light of the candle that Chad held in his trembling hands.

Well do I know that I shall be criticised for calling it "That Thing," but as I am the only living human (unless "That Thing" be a human) who knows what caused Chad Wells to become insane, and since I am writing of this episode that has never been told heretofore, I must put it down straight. Although my own mind becomes confused and I often realize that I am thinking of "That Thing" as if it were a man, there are other times when I can think of it only as a demon from hell.

I know, as did old man Wilbur Brownley, that Chad Wells was not scared of man, beast or devil, but Chad was scared of "That Thing," and he was so uncontrollably frightened that greenish-white froth exuded from the corners of his mouth and trickled upon his chin and seemed to cling there as foam collects against a snag in a swollen stream, all of which I could see as he held the lighted candle just above his head, peering at the crouching, cringing form of "That Thing."

LIKE most old men, I am getting ahead of my story. There are many persons younger than I am who will remember when the Louisiana, Texas & Gulf Railroad was built through south Louisiana to the Gulf of Mexico. They also remember a great many of the weird tales that have been told about Jean Lafitte and his crew of pirates that made boat transportation along the Gulf coast very hazardous for many years. They recall the stories about the treasures that were buried in the cypress brakes of south Louisiana by the adventurous Frenchmen, and how that pirate, although cruel, always brought the bodies of the poor victims of his pillaging crew to the shore and buried them, Jean Lafitte, himself, conducting

some kind of burial rite at the time of interment.

Fifty years ago that country was replete with stories of romance and adventure.

Attention is called to these facts in order to admit to you that Chad and I were continually hearing these fantastic stories, and that our minds were receptive and impressionable while we were in that section of the state surveying out the right of way for the Louisiana, Texas & Gulf Railroad. And the first night "That Thing" came into our tent I almost reached the conclusion that I had seen my first ghost, but two nights later I knew without doubt that it was not a ghost.

I take it that the strongest believer in the mysterious and the occult will admit that ghosts and spirits do not scratch, claw, bite, or strike with a club; nor have I ever heard anyone claim that ghosts would curse and swear in two different languages when physical pain was inflicted upon them. "That Thing" cursed Chad and me that night in language, both English and French, that I dare not set down, even in my personal and private memoirs. Such vile epithets as I had never heard before, nor have I heard since, came shrieking from the sputtering lips of "That Thing" as he or it sprang into the air clawing and scratching and biting and striking. It fought more like some wild bird such as I have never seen, but how I imagine one would fight if defending its life. I have since seen cocks fight and they reminded me of the way "That Thing" fought. However, there was something these fowls could not get into their melees that "That Thing" was past master at, such as striking and clawing with all of its four feet while in mid-air, and actually biting at one and the same time. Then it would drop to the ground upon its rump, bouncing therefrom into the air where something mysterious seemed to suspend it, thwarting the law of gravity.

It seems impossible for me to write out this episode coherently and with continuity, but I am determined that the nephews and nieces of Chad Wells shall know what killed him, or at least what drove him insane. If this document is to be found among my papers after I am dead and gone, I sincerely hope it will be published, for many there are who will be glad to know that Chad Wells was not guilty of any mental or physical abuse that destroyed his mind. However, I do believe that Chad could have, by force of will, driven the horrors of those nights out of his mind. I did, which no doubt accounts for my living beyond my three

score years and ten. Never have I mentioned those three nights of "That Thing" to a living soul, nor have I ever before penned one line about anything pertaining to those experiences that redirected my course in life, for no man can be the same normal, nonchalant, devil-may-care person after encountering some death-dealing, soul-torturing creature of the devil.

Poor old Truebuck! He was my deer hound. When I awoke that first night and heard him whining and howling, I instantly knew that something was wrong. Although Truebuck was a deer hound, he was also a good watch-dog. He was my friend and protector. I got up to go to him because I thought he was suffering, but when I got out of my bunk something right close to me began to chatter and sputter. I sat down upon my bunk because I was not familiar with such sounds, and was playing for time in order to clear my brain from the dulness of sleep. "That Thing" became more tranquil when I sat down, but it continued to make a noise like the rasping sound made by a frightened bat, at the same time crunching its teeth together as a sleeping child does when bad dreams are making it restless.

I could hear Chad's deep rhythmical breathing and I knew that he was sleeping soundly, therefore, to disturb him would be inconsiderate when I knew full well he was fatigued from many miles of walking. Therefore I sat quietly for perhaps ten minutes. Then "That Thing" began to move about in the tent.

Chad's old-time knapsack was hanging on a nail that he had driven into one of the tent stays. In this knapsack were some portions of venison, some corn hoe-cakes, and two or more baked sweet potatoes, this food being Chad's lunch for the following day. It was our custom before retiring at night to prepare our lunch for the next day and to place it in our knapsacks in readiness for an early start the next morning.

AS I SAT there on the side of my bunk contemplating the proper and brave thing to do, for I must now admit that I was somewhat frightened, "That Thing" moved over to the tent stay, took Chad's knapsack off the nail and began eating that lunch. As I write down these notes my ear drums seem to quiver at the sound of "That Thing" munching and crunching upon Chad's lunch. If the memory of those sounds still affects my ear drums after the lapse of fifty years, think, will you, what the effect must have been there in the darkness of that tent fifty years ago.

SEVERAL weeks have passed since I wrote the foregoing. The last paragraph was written late at night. It must have been the sudden coming of a norther, the moaning of the wind, and the howling of a dog that affected me. I lay in my bed positively ashamed of my cowardice. My nerves were in a frenzy. I prayed for sleep, but none came. I could hear nothing but "That Thing" munching and crunching upon those bones that it had taken out of Chad's knapsack. Then I happened to think in mockery of how foolish it was for me to be affected by something that happened fifty years ago. I began to cheer myself with the fact that I had warded off this thing for fifty years by sheer power of will and that it was absurd for me to lose my nerve when, perhaps, that creature of the devil was long since dead, and its spirit! God! Its spirit! Where was the spirit of "That Thing" if it were dead? Then I remembered that I did not believe in ghosts, and so remembering I decided to laugh out loud and strong in order to reassure myself. But when I laughed it was not my laugh—it was the chattering sputter and the rasping squeak of "That Thing"!

I have not thought of this story that I am writing for several weeks, because I abandoned all thought of "That Thing" until I could get my nerves out of the "kinks." Although I let a moaning wind and a howling dog and too much concentration on this episode of fifty years ago get me down, I am determined to continue. I shall write out this episode to its finish. I am quite sure my strong determination will keep me from losing my mental equilibrium again, and I apologize for the break in my story, brought about by my sudden weakness. Especially is this annoying to me when in the beginning I asked pardon for any probable egotism that might flare up in the telling of this episode.

I SAT there on the side of my bunk contemplating the propriety of shooting this intruder. Had I been in the tent alone I know that I would have shot "That Thing," or at least I would have tried, because at the time nothing had caused me to believe it to be anything but some strange, wild animal of the swamp country.

Would it not be the act of a coward to shoot a living creature while not knowing what it was? Would Chad do such a thing? No, positively I knew that he would not, nor would he have me do such a thing. Should I call Chad and let him find me trembling with fear, let

him discover that the cause of my agitation was over-wrought imagination struggling to make something uncanny out of a predatory animal? The proper thing for me to do—the thing that Chad would do under similar circumstances—was to catch this nocturnal visitor and hold it until a candle or a pine torch could be lighted.

Before giving my mind time to change the course of my determined action, I quickly arose from my bunk and quietly walked over to where "That Thing" was munching away on Chad's lunch. I could have touched it. I could have grabbed it. But when I got within reach of "That Thing" my courage melted away and I stood weak and quivering. "That Thing" was ravenously hungry, for it had not heard my approaching footsteps. However, it must have suddenly heard my pounding heart, for in the twinkling of an eye it darted under the tent, at the same time grabbing me about the ankles and jerking my feet from under me. I must have hit the hard-pressed ground under the edge of the tent with tremendous force, for I was knocked unconscious.

Minutes or hours later, I do not know which, I began to hear faintly the sound of an ax. Gradually familiar noises began clearing my brain and I could hear the sturdy blows of Chad's ax, chopping upon the hard, dry oak limbs that we had accumulated for cooking fuel. I sat up and tried to look about me, but my eyeballs turned in their sockets and my head whirled in a dizzy haze. I stretched out on the ground again and then opened my eyes to learn that day was breaking. Old Truebuck arose, stretched himself and yawned, then walked over to me and licked my face. This act of kindness helped my mind to adjust itself to my surroundings.

While sitting there on the ground about fifty feet away from the tent I attempted to recall the happenings of the hideous night that had just passed. Fragments of incoherent fact were gathered together and pondered over until my memory became clear up to the time "That Thing" grabbed my ankles and jerked my feet from under me. As I was thus engrossed in meditation, Chad called me to get ready for breakfast.

Evidently he had not discovered that I was absent from my bunk when he got up and left the tent to cook breakfast. Our established rule was to alternate by weeks in our cooking duties, that is to say, Chad would cook all meals one week and I would take over the culinary duties the following week.

This was Chad's week to cook.

FOR some reason I was glad that Chad had not noticed my empty bunk before he left the tent, and that he had evidently not seen me lying upon the ground. Of course, it had been dark when he slipped into his trousers and boots. The trite expression that "it is always darkest just before the dawn" no doubt originated with some old time camper, and it was at this time that one of us crawled out each morning to boil the coffee, heat the fresh meat, and cook corn bread in an open skillet. I was also glad that the tent was between the spot where I was sitting and the place where Chad had a hot fire around the cooking stones upon which rested the crude cooking utensils.

These situations enabled me to slip into the tent for my trousers and boots. Of course, it is unnecessary for me to explain that men in those days who lived entirely out of doors removed but few of their clothes when retiring to their bunks at night. Therefore, it was necessary for me to put on only my trousers and boots and I was dressed for the day.

When I went to wash my face and hands in the little brook that supplied our camp with sufficient water, I found a bruise upon my left cheek and a worse one on my head. The one on my head was entirely hidden by my long, unkempt hair, but the one on my cheek must have been quite noticeable. I did not seem to know then, nor can I explain now, why I wanted to hide from Chad all the happenings of the night before, but I remember distinctly that I hoped Chad would not pay enough attention to the bruise on my face to ask any questions about it. Bruises and scratches and cuts were scarcely noticed by men who lived in the woods in those days, and it was quite satisfying to me when Chad failed to mention the blue spot that decorated the left side of my face. Although Chad was not much of a talker, I was convinced before the day ended that he knew nothing of the visit of "That Thing" the night before. I artfully suggested subjects calculated to cause him to mention anything unusual that he might have heard had he been disturbed by the antics and the strange noises of "That Thing."

What I must now admit stings me keenly. When the sun began to drop behind the dense cane-brakes and cast dark shadows beyond the tall cypress trees, I began to dread the oncoming night. When the evening breeze from the Gulf of Mexico began blowing through the long streamers of gray Spanish moss to tangle and weave them about the small twigs to which they clung, and the somber silhouettes from

these moving tresses began stealthily stealing about in front of me and over me. . . . Oh! I admit it! I was a coward. I dared not return to that tent. Instead, I dwelt upon the importance of a letter that I must post, even though it necessitated my walking nine miles to the nearest postoffice and back the next morning in time for work.

THE following morning when I returned to camp Chad was drinking coffee and eating cold corn bread. He scarcely greeted me when I said "Good morning, Chad" and sat down upon a block of wood that I used at meal time for a chair. His right eye was blood-shot and I noticed that the muscles in that side of his face twitched at irregular intervals. The veins across his temples bulged out bold and prominent, the blue of them exaggerating their size. He held his coffee cup clasped between both hands—I wondered why. He replaced the cup upon the crude table with both hands. He bit hungrily at the pone of corn bread that he picked up immediately after releasing the cup.

I needed nothing more to tell me that Chad Wells had experienced a bad night, and that he was in worse condition than I was after walking eighteen miles to and from the postoffice, following a night of torment with "That Thing."

"Chad," I said, trying to break a silence that was becoming uncomfortable, "the Atchafalaya is rising several inches a day and has been for the past week; back water up the Red is pushing into her, with all the tributaries of both rivers pouring Arkansas rains into her. Wouldn't be surprised if we aren't run out o' here."

Chad attempted to answer me as he reached for his coffee cup with one hand. That hand trembled like one with palsy. Then I knew why Chad was handling his cup with both hands. His voice was high-pitched and unnatural.

First it embarrassed him for me to ask questions, then I could see that it angered him, and having consideration for my good friend and compassion upon him while in this condition, I desisted from any attempt at conversation during the entire day. He made no attempt to talk to me, nor did he utter a word until we had returned to the tent late that evening, when he suddenly surprised me by saying, as much to the trees as to me: "This is going to be a hell of a night."

I had been so absorbed in the poor condition of Chad during the day that I had quite thrown off the tormenting fear that gnawed into me all the day be-

fore. But that cold declaration of Chad's chilled me to the bone: "This is going to be a hell of a night." It brought me back to "That Thing." It seemed to deliver me into the clutches of that hideous, uncanny, devilish creature, munching and crunching upon the bones from Chad's lunch, making a noise like the rasping sound made by a frightened bat, chattering and sputtering. I could see it, yet I had never seen it. But there it was, with its twisted legs and drawn feet, dragging itself along on its rump, pulling and clawing with crab-like claws and toes. It had been too dark in the tent the night before for me to see it, but there it was. There it was, dragging itself! It had a head like that of a man, formed like that of a man, but there seemed to be no skin covering its face—just raw flesh, dry but bloody looking. There it was creeping and dragging along, with eyes glittering out of the shadows like chiseled rubies. I shrieked a sort of command for it to stop. "That Thing" grinned, then raked its long finger-nails across its protruding teeth, making a rasping noise like that of a frightened bat.

I SEE "That Thing" now. It is here. It is there. It is everywhere. Chad! Come back, Chad! Come to your old comrade, boy, and help me fight. I helped you, Chad, that night when we were young. Come, Chad! Come! Come!

Too late, it has me by the ankles now, dragging me and munching and crunching upon my bones.

I AM now where Chad Wells died. I am in the Pineville Asylum. I became insane as did Chad Wells, but there are times when I can understand everything. I hear the doctors discussing me and they say I have semi-lucid periods. I hear some of the nurses say, "I am afraid of that wild nut." Just a little while ago, it must have been this morning, or maybe yesterday, one of them said, "Doctor, don't make me go in there; I'm afraid of 'That Thing'."

Yes, "That Thing" put me here, just as it did Chad Wells, but by all the demons of hell I'll finish this story! I know where I left off. I was telling about "That Thing" coming to our tent on the third night just before dark, and I could see it plainly for the few minutes preceding the blackness of night. I was seeing it when my nerves got into the kinks again, but I'm all right now.

THAT Thing" came dragging along. I have told you how it did and how it looked. Chad trembled for a spell, a minute maybe, then he

started toward "That Thing." It spread out flat upon the ground with its little raw-flesh head turned upward. When Chad got within a step of "That Thing" the little raw-flesh head stretched way out like that of an angry goose and hissed through its protruding teeth. Chad quickly kicked at the ugly head, but before he could get his foot back to the ground, "That Thing" was in mid-air, scratching, clawing and biting. Before Chad could strike, the hellish thing was back on its rump, ready for another spring. Chad again kicked viciously at the raw-flesh head, but it shot sideways and upward, with those fiendish claws twisting and writhing and squirming for an opening at the man's throat. While off the ground the protruding teeth of "That Thing" extended far beyond its hair-covered lips, exaggerating, if such a thing were possible, the murderous appearance of this soul destroying archangel of the devil.

As much as I loved Chad, I could not force myself to go to his aid. I prayed aloud for mental and physical strength to rescue my friend and comrade from the clutches of "That Thing," for now the twisted legs and drawn feet and its crab-like claws were about Chad's neck and head. The protruding teeth were glistening from against the background of the raw-flesh head and the hair-covered lips; they were darting forward and backward as if sparring for an opening at Chad's throat.

I tried to close my mind—make it a blank. I rushed into the fray and grabbed. God! I can feel that slimy, jelly-like substance now as it sloughed off "That Thing" and quivered in my hands. I then opened my mind (I hope you get my meaning) which told me that the body and form of that hellish demon was by no means demolished or impaired by losing the quantity of slushy slime that quivered in my hands. However, I must have torn "That Thing" from the neck and head of Chad, for it was now about to attack my friend with a heavy limb that it had grasped within its claws.

Now for the first time Chad lost his nerve. I do not think it was because of "That Thing" seizing the heavy limb and raising it to strike Chad, but because this monster suddenly began to curse us with language too vile to write down. "That Thing" cursed in French and cursed in English. It was enraged. The more it cursed us, the more furious it got.

When I saw Chad running I followed him with all my might. We were only about fifty yards from our tent. I could

feel "That Thing" clawing at my back; I could hear the rasping, twanging noise of its claws being drawn across those protruding teeth. I prayed then and I thank God now for strength to run. Although my legs seemed paralyzed and my joints seemed to be sore and stiff, I knew that I was gaining on Chad.

But Chad disappeared. One moment he was just a few steps ahead of me. Now, he was gone—like that. I saw him. I never took my eyes off him until he disappeared.

Then something went wrong with me. I was sinking. The earth was sinking beneath me. I could feel something crawling and squirming under me. Was it "That Thing"? No, I felt the boot legs and knew it was Chad. Then I felt bones, the frame of a man's chest. Then I knew we had fallen into an open grave.

We had seen many times a slightly sunken place in the ground not far from the tent and I had meant to examine it, but now I knew what it was. It was an old grave. No doubt it had once held the body of one of Jean Lafitte's victims, but now the flesh had returned to dust, the crude coffin had amalgamated with the soil, and the worms of the earth had devoured the hair, and there was nothing left but bones, just bones, lifeless bones.

I reached for Chad's boot-legs. I wanted to feel them again; I wanted to feel something that was warm with life, not cold and feelingless like bones, dead bones. Instead I felt . . . instead of feeling Chad's legs . . . instead of feeling something warm with life, I felt, I felt something crawling and crinkling and squirming. I felt jelly, slushy slime

that quivered in my fingers, and I felt claws at my throat. Then "That Thing" began laughing and chattering. It was triumphant laughter and defiant chatter. Then it stopped and hissed. Oh! Savior of Souls, those teeth, and that rasping, twanging noise of claws being drawn across protruding teeth!

I SEE "That Thing" now. It is here. It is there. It is everywhere. Chad! Come back, Chad! Come to your old comrade, boy, and help me fight. I helped you, Chad, that night when we were young. Come, Chad! Come! Come! Too late! It has me by the throat now, dragging me and munching and crunching upon my bones. Maybe it's the bones of the man in whose grave I am lying with "That Thing." My bones and his. But everything is just bones.

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