

MYSTERY RIVER

By ELWIN J. OWENS

PILOT WRIGHT NELSON was making his first long trip alone in his biplane. He had crossed the mountain range in western Washington and had left the snow-capped peaks far behind. The narrow neck of northern Idaho had been passed over with the same speed, and then he was over a fertile valley in Montana. How beautiful it did look to him. The vast fields of waving grain, from his height, appeared like a green sea with just enough breeze to fan its surface into gentle waves.

He slowed his machine and lowered his elevation so that he could get a better view. The closer he came to earth, the more absorbed his thoughts became in the beauty of the country.

Snap! Crack! Something broke. Pilot Nelson lost his head, so to speak. The machine was out of his control and started its plunge downward. "Five hundred feet to go! Can I make it safely? What will mother say?" These were the last sane thoughts that flashed through his mind. Everything turned black before his eyes. To him it seemed that his body was shrinking. He was dropping down through space a dead weight.

The earth seemed to open up. His falling body took on momentum. Into the opened chasm he fell. Down between its ragged sides, he glided, even faster than the plane. Faster, faster, faster he went. Suddenly he hit bottom with a thud that almost flattened him.

He realized himself alone in a strange world, surrounded by strange beings. More than that, he was in the middle of a milky river; and when he tried to right himself, he found that his body floated easily in an upright position with his head above the surface.

He surveyed the situation. At the source of the river, he observed huge propeller blades similar to the ones on his biplane, only a hundred times larger. They were fixed to stationary supports but were slowly rotating, forcing the liquid of the mysterious river from them. Turning his gaze in the opposite direction, he noted that beyond him lay monstrous mountains, such as he had never dreamed of seeing. More still became the mystery, the river was being forced to run up hill by the huge propellers.

Upon the bank, some distance from him, were nude persons. They came nearer to him. Such ponderous masses of human flesh, he had never seen. Large rolls of fat encircled their bodies, making them appear like human forms built up of odd sized automobile tires piled one upon the other. Their bodies were gigantic, but such small heads. No larger than his fist. And eyes no larger than those of small birds.

A crowd of them gathered on the bank. They conversed with each other by means of radio head-sets and used floating aerials. All seemed to be happy. All seemed to be looking in his direction. He tried to call to them. They paid no heed. But when he motioned that he was hungry, they laughed heartily and plucked straws from the ground. Through these straws they gorged themselves with the fluid of the river.

Having drunk their fill, they again laughed heartily, wiped their lips, motioned him to drink the same, and moved inland.

Pilot Nelson took a swallow from the river. It nauseated him for a few moments. Then he began to feel his flesh bulge out and his strength began to return. He plunged over on his side and tried to swim to the shore.

The contents of the river became thicker and thicker as he progressed. Soon he found it impossible to swim further. He tried to climb to the surface, but when upright he could only get his head above the milky matter that surrounded him.

Soon he saw the inhabitants moving in large processions in the direction of the huge propellers at the source of the river. They threw large tangled masses of wire high above their heads. These, too, floated in mid air and he discovered that they were aerials, very much similar to the ones used in conversation, only many times larger. They snatched electric current from the atmosphere. The propellers began to turn more rapidly. They began to spin. The contents of the river began to move more rapidly up the inclined bed and he was carried with it.

Besides being forced to flow up hill at a rapid rate, the river contained several whirlpools. Pilot Nelson floated into one

of these. It spun him around like a top. He soon became dizzy. His vision was hazy. On and on the river carried him.

THE ATMOSPHERE became warmer and warmer the further up the hillside he floated. At last, the heat was torrid. Again his body began to shrink. Smaller and smaller, he became until, at length, he seemed no more than three feet high.

The river was changing color. He was out of the whirlpool. The current had slackened to a slowly moving mass. The color changed from white to cream, then to chocolate, finally becoming dark brown. And, as it changed color, it grew warmer and warmer until it was hot. His body was becoming seared. His clothing dropped off. His flesh was fast being dried out. Lighter and lighter he grew and, as he grew lighter, his body floated more and more above the surface. At last, he was fully emerged, nothing but a miniature of his former self.

A still stranger land confronted him. Great rocks stood out, the only landmarks in the vast expanse of seemingly barren waste. Far back, he saw pigmies of dark complexion floating about, their feet just skimming the surface. Close to them, from out of the fissures in the rocky bed, floated up gases of many colored hues.

He inhaled a deep breath and, to his surprise, he, too, floated across the surface. He was being carried by a gentle breeze in the direction of the pigmies. A great light of purple-white, so bright that it nearly blinded him at first, served as their sun.

The pigmies seemed very busy. They did not notice him. He observed them carefully. No hair, no ears, no nose, no mouth. Simply a dark ball for a head and a face form that resembled a small, old copper funnel. Through this funnel they drank freely of a boiling hot liquid. Their eyes were large and green. Their arms were nothing but bare bones and, at the end, were cupped hands with the fingers webbed together.

They were boiling metals and precious stones in the fissures of the rocks. Silently, he watched them. One would dip up diamonds in his cupped hands and sail away; another would dip platinum

and float off in another direction. He followed their course in the light of the great purple-white lamp and noted that they deposited their wares here and there in small quantities in what seemed the under surface of the earth's crust.

Suddenly, he heard what he thought was the chirping of a bird. The chirp became more shrill. He looked about him and saw millions of these pigmies floating in from all directions. They surrounded him. A leader floated to the center of the assembly and began to scratch characters in the stone with his chisel-like foot. Soon, all was commotion. A stiff breeze came from a fissure in the rocks and blew toward the river.

Pilot Nelson was carried in its course. When he reached the river, his body took on weight; and again he dropped helpless into the dark brown liquid. Numerous air currents began to agitate the stream. It began to flow again, and again it flowed up hill.

The huge purple-white lamp became brighter than ever. It blinded him. He could feel himself being carried rapidly through space by the current. The air was becoming cooler. He was somewhat refreshed and his body enlarged to its natural size. Slowly, the dazzling light became fainter. He could see.

GIANT vegetation was on all sides. No leaves or branches. Just huge, rough, gnarled roots. Again, the current of the river stopped. He was in blood-red waters, just a little more thin than the liquid had previously been. Still he floated with just his head emerged.

Mammoth animals were feeding upon the roots. Animals with skin like elephants, and legs no more than a foot long, twenty of them on a side. Their jaws resembled massive stone crushers. As they chewed into the vegetation with sickening sound, a red fluid came freely from the roots. This, the animals gulped up greedily, allowing only a small quantity to stream from the corners of their mouths. They drank their fill and soon became as large as the gas bags of dirigibles. They fell asleep where they fed.

Thunderous shrieks rent the air and Pilot Nelson heard the flapping of monstrous wings. Vultures with wings sixty feet long came to the spot. As they came closer, he observed that they had sword-like bills from six to eight feet long. To him, they paid no heed; but attacked the sleeping animals, plunging their bills into their prey. Blood ran in rivulets from the struggling beasts.

The sight became too much for Pilot Nelson. He tried to move, but found

that he was paralyzed with horror. He sighed. To his surprise, his sigh was as loud as the sound of a locomotive whistle.

The vultures were attracted by his involuntary expression. Overhead and about him, they circled in numbers, flapping their long, ponderous wings violently. Waves began to form on the surface of the river. Soon it began to move slowly. Again it carried him up the hill. Feathers of immense size dropped on all sides of him. A down from them seemed to fill the air, which his sight could not penetrate.

Slowly the river flowed on. He was his normal size, but he had grown weak. In time, the air cleared of feathers and he could see. The light was like a summer day when the sun is out of sight.

He was slowly floating into a great lake, set amongst numerous mountains. Its contents was murky green. When he floated upright, his feet occasionally touched something. Soon he could stand on its bed. The current ceased and he found himself in dead water. Such a dreadful odor. It was terrible, as of dead things.

On a far-off shore, he could see green vegetation, the same shade as the water. Slowly, he made his way in that direction. The banks were covered with moss of a pale green color. Such long, hairy moss. All a tangled mass. Through this he dragged on, almost fatigued.

Small bushes covered the soil in front of him. He paused to examine them. Small, square leaves, completely covered with worm nests, warts and other growths. The branches seemed to be covered with silken ashes which fell at his touch.

In his wanderings, he came upon a spring of water, the first natural thing he had seen. But it had a peculiar taste. He investigated its source. Instead of flowing continually, it spurted in jets. He observed more carefully. A huge muscular body, the color of an oyster lay almost buried in the sand. It expanded and then contracted. When it contracted, it forced the water from an opening in its side.

The sight of this caused Pilot Nelson to grow weak, so weak that he could not stand. He dropped down to rest.

Almost immediately, a large, grass-green spider spun a thread across his chest and attached the end to the vegetation on the other side. Back across his legs, the spider spun another thread. He tried to rise but found that he was tightly bound. Soon, numerous threads completely bound his struggling form.

Strange noises came from all sides. He tried to turn his head so that he could see the objects but found that the spider's

web had bound his head. A slimy, crawling thing passed over his body. It began to chew at his toes. Such pain. He tried to call out, but could make no sound.

Then, a strange, small bird with four wings flew over his face and began to peck at his fingers. Others came and he was being besieged on all sides. One became more greedy than the rest and in the struggle broke the thread that bound his head. He could now turn his eyes in the direction of his attackers.

Suddenly a film seemed to envelop his body and he was immune from pain. But slowly and surely the birds were picking away his body piece by piece.

OUT OF the slimy recess of the grass-green lake came a crawling, wriggling thing. It was half snake and half fish. As he lay with his face toward the lake, he watched it approach him, coming as if by instinct. It carried its head erect by means of small wings attached just below and back of its eyes. Its mouth was small, with short jaws which it kept opening and shutting as it wriggled its way toward him. Closer and closer, it came. He could now see plainly that its back was covered with mossy vegetation, its belly was covered with scales. Its teeth or fangs consisted of two sharp protruding teeth on the lower jaw and a sort of broad flat tooth on the upper jaw. The lower jaw it kept on moving up and down as if anticipating a feast of human flesh.

He tried to turn his eyes from the object but learned that the film that had deadened the pain had finally paralyzed his muscles. He could not move his eyes. They remained set on the object.

When close to him, froth came from the corners of its mouth. It plunged its head against his side, sinking the teeth of its lower jaw deep into his flesh. Up came its head and it had gouged out a piece of flesh. With one gulp, the snake-like thing swallowed the mouthful. It drove in its fangs for another piece. Again and again it kept gulping down his flesh.

The effect of the film was now dying out. He could feel the painful stabs of the fangs in his side, and for the first time realized that the birds had left him. He was alone with this carnivorous thing. The pain was growing more intense. In his agony, he tried to move. He could turn his head but nothing more.

The fangs again pierced his side and he could feel them tearing away his bowels. He groaned and then lay quiet. The groan seemed to relieve his agony.

A human voice came quietly from a distance. "How is Wright this morning, Doctor?"

It was his mother's voice.

"I have just dressed the wound in his side. It is healing nicely. The crisis is passed. He seems to show some signs of consciousness and I think that he will

be able to go home in the course of a month."

Pilot Wright Nelson opened his eyes and found himself in a hospital, his mother at his bedside. A smile showed in the corners of his mouth.

"Did the plane land all right, Mother?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes, it is all right; but do you know that you have lain here for five days without showing any signs of life while I worried about you?" She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Are you going to fly again?" she appealed.

"Never! I saw too much," was the quick response.

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