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# NIGHTMARE ISLAND

by E. WALDO HUNTER

● If he hadn't been so thoroughly drunk for so long, he couldn't have accepted the situation—or acted so intelligently.

Illustrated by Schneeman

THE governor took a sight between two leaves of carefully imported mint, lining the green notch up with the corner of the bamboo veranda and the bowed figure of the man on the beach. He was silent so long that his guest became restless, missing the easy drone of the governor's voice. That was the only thing to do, he thought, watching the old man pressing the cool glass against his cheek, peering through the leaves at the beachcomber; the only thing a man could do in this dreary, brilliant group of little islands—you could only talk. If you didn't keep a conversation going, you thought of the heat and the surf-etched silences, and the weary rattle of palm fronds, and that brought you back to the heat again. God, he thought suddenly, the governor dresses for dinner in this heat, every last damn day.

"Poor crazy devil," muttered the governor.

His American visitor asked, "Who?"

The governor gestured with his glass toward the sea and the beachcomber, and then sipped.

The American swiveled and stared. The beachcomber stood dejectedly with

the surf tumbling about his knees, and the sun was sinking so rapidly that his shadow crept and crawled along the beach like something with a life of its own. A trick of the light seemed to make the man's flesh transparent for a split second, and it appeared to the American that the man was a broad-shouldered skeleton standing there staring out to sea. A slight shift of shades showed him up again for what he was, the thin husk of a man, sharp-boned, stringy.

The American grunted and turned back toward his host. "What's the matter with him?"

The governor said, "Him? He just doesn't give a damn any more. He lost something and he can't—I can't let him—get it back."

"What did he lose?"

The governor regarded him gravely. "You're a businessman. You deal in dollars and cents and tons— You wouldn't believe me if I told you, and you might not let me finish."

The American opened his mouth to protest, but the governor held up his hand and said, "Listen to that."

The beachcomber's cracked wail drifted out over the cluttered beach and the whispering surf. "Ahniroo!" he cried. "Ahni— Ahniroo!" Then for a long while he was silent, and it grew darker. Just as the sleepy sun pulled the blanket of horizon over its head, they saw the beachcomber's shoulders slump. He turned and walked up the beach.

The American squinted at him. "I



As he drank, the room wobbled some more,  
and the Things grew bolder around him.

take it he isn't as crazy as he looks?"

The governor shook his head. "You can put it that way."

The American settled himself more comfortably. He didn't care about the 'comber particularly, or the governor either, for that matter. But he had to stay here another forty-eight hours, and there would be nothing to do until the mail steamer came except to sit and talk with the old boy. The man seemed to have at least one good yarn to tell, which was promising.

"Come on—give," he grinned. "I'll take your word for it. Don't forget, I'm not used to this kind of country, or the funny business that goes on in it. Who is he, anyhow? And why is he calling out over the water? Gives me the creeps. Who's Ahniroo—or what is it?"

The governor leaned back and looked up at a spider that would probably drop down someone's collar before the evening was over, and he said nothing for quite a while. Then he began:

AHNIROO was a . . . a friend of the fellow's. I doubt that any man has had a friend like that. As far as the man himself is concerned—yes, you may be right. Perhaps he isn't quite all there. But after what he went through, the surprising thing is that he can talk fairly sensibly. Of course, he's peculiar there, too—all he'll talk about is Ahniroo, but he does it quite rationally.

He was a seaman, much like any other seaman. He had relatives ashore and was going to marry one of these years, perhaps; and there was a visit to the place where he was born, some day, when he could walk into the town with a hundred-dollar bill in every pocket of a new suit. Like other seamen he saved

his money and spent it and lost it and had it stolen from him, and like some other seamen he drank.

Being on the beach really started the whole thing for him. A sailor's unemployment is unlike any other kind, in that it is so little dependent on the man's whereabouts. A silk-mill worker must starve around a silk mill before he can get his job, but a seaman can starve anywhere. If he is a real seaman, he is a painter and a general handyman, a stevedore and roustabout. Chances are that he can drive a truck or play a little music or can turn his hand at any of a thousand semiskilled trades. He may not know where he will eat next, but he can always find a bit of a drink to warm him or cool him as the weather dictates. But Barry—our beachcomber over there—didn't care much for eating, and didn't do much of it for quite a while, except when it was forced on him. He concentrated on the drinking, and the more he drank the more reasons he found for drinking, until he couldn't walk or sleep or work or travel or stay still without a little snort or two as a persuader. Not so good. He lost a lot of jobs ashore and afloat. When he had a job he'd guzzle to celebrate, and when he lost one he'd guzzle to console himself. You can imagine what happened.

It hit him in a small town on the Florida coast. He had just been fired from a little four-thousand ton freighter that ran coastwise and found that stopping in such half-forgotten whistle stops paid expenses. It was on the North American continent, but aside from that it hardly differed from these islands. It was hot and humid and a long, long way from anywhere else.

And Barry found himself sitting on the edge of a wooden sidewalk with his

feet and his soul in the gutter, with no money and no job and no food in his stomach. He felt pretty good, being just halfway between a binge and a hangover. He stared for twenty minutes at a painted stone in the dusty road, just because his eyes happened to be directed that way. And before long a scorpion crept out from behind the stone and stood looking at him.

It was like no other scorpion he had ever seen. It was no larger than any other, and the same dark color, but instead of the formidable pincers, it had *arms*. They were tiny and perfect and pink and soft, and had delicate hands and little diamond specks of fingernails. And—oh yes; no joints, apparently. They were as sinuous as an elephant's trunk. It was such an unheard-of thing to see that Barry stared at it for a long moment before he let himself believe what he had seen. Then he shook himself, shrugged drunkenly, and said:

"I'll be damned!" And then, addressing the strange scorpion, "Hi!"

The scorpion waved one of its perfect, impossible arms, and said, "You will be!" and then, "Hi yourself."

Barry started so violently that he came to his feet. The liquor he had been sopping seemed to have collected in his knees; at any rate, those members were quite liquid and buckled under him, so that he fell on his face. He remembered the scorpion scuttling away, and then his forehead struck the painted stone and the lights went out for him.

BARRY HAD BEEN a strong man, but after two years of nursing from flat bottles, you wouldn't have known it. He was no beauty. He had a long leather face and a purple nose. His eyes

were nearly as red as their lids, and his broad shoulders were built of toothpicks and parchment. Skin that had been taut with the solid muscle under it was now loose and dry, and fitted him as badly as the clothes he wore. He was a big fellow—six feet three at least, and he weighed all of a hundred and twenty-seven pounds.

The scorpion was the start of it, and the crack on the skull brought it on full strength. That's right—the horrors. The good old creeping, crawling horrors. When he came to and hauled his ragged body back up to the sidewalk, he found himself in a new world, horribly peopled by things he couldn't understand. There were soft white wriggling things—a carpet of them under his feet. Standing at bay in the doorway of a general store down the street was a gryphon, complete with flaming breath, horns and tail, frighteningly real, lifted bodily from an old book that had frightened him when he was a child. He heard a monstrous rustle over his head, and there was a real life prototype of Alice-in-Wonderland's bucktoothed Jabberwock, and it was out to get him. He shrieked and tried to run, and fell choking and splattering into the Slough of Despond from "Pilgrim's Progress." There was someone else in there with him—a scantily clad girl on skis from the front cover of a Paris magazine. She laughed and turned into a six-legged winged snake which bit at him viciously and vanished. He scrambled to his feet and plunged sobbing down the dusty road, and people on the sidewalks turned and stared and said, "Crazy with th' heat" and went on about their business, for heat madness was common among beached sailors in that country in August.

Barry staggered on out of town,

which wasn't very far, and out among the sand dunes and scrub and saw grass. He began to see things that he could not describe, monsters made of other monsters, devils and huge spiders and insects. In the angry blaze of the sun he slumped to his knees, sobbing, and then something clicked in his mind and he collapsed from sheer psychic exhaustion.

IT WAS NIGHT, and very cool, when he woke again. There was half a moon and a billion stars, and the desertlike dunes were all black velvet and silver. The black and the gleam were crowded with strange life, but it was worse now than it had been in the daytime, because now he could feel what he couldn't see. He *knew* that twenty feet away from him stood a great foul buzzard that stared steadily at him, and yet he could not see it. It was more than a fearsome sensation that the thing was there; he could feel each feather, every wrinkle of the crusted, wattled neck, each caloused serration on its dry yellow legs. As he stared tremblingly into the mounding distances, he felt the grate of a bison's hoof as it eyed him redly, ready to charge. The sound of a wolf's teeth impacted on his skin rather than his eardrums, and he felt its rough tongue on its black lips. He screamed and ran toward the town, guided by his omnipresent seaman's instinct, dodging and zigzagging among the silver dunes. Oh, yes—he had 'em. He had the horrors really thoroughly.

He reached town about eleven at night. He was pretty much of a mess—covered with grime, cut and bruised and sick. Someone saw him leaning rockily against the sun-dried wall of a gin mill, trying to revive himself with the faint clinking of glasses and the

fainter odor of liquor that drifted from inside. Someone else said, "Look at the hulk; let's feed him a drink." It was a lucky break for Barry; with his metabolism in the pickled state it was, he would most certainly have dropped dead if he had not had that snifter.

They led him in and gave him a couple more, and his garbled mutterings were amusing to them for a time, but after a while they went home and left him cluttering up a round table with his spent body.

Closing time—which meant the time when there was no one left around to buy a nickel beer—came, and the bartender, a misplaced Louisiana Cajun, came over to throw the sailor out. There was no one else in the place but a couple of rats and some flies. One of the rats had only two legs and wore a collar and tie even in that heat. The other rat had some self-respect and scuttled under the beer pulls to lap suds, being a true quadruped with inherited rat reflexes.

The two-legged rat's name was Zilio. He was a small oily creature with swarthy skin, a hooked nose supported by a small mustache, an ingratiating manner and a devious way of making a living. His attention was attracted toward Barry by the barkeep's purposeful approach. Zilio slid off his stool and said:

"Hold it, Pierre; I'm buying for the gentleman. Pour a punch."

The name did not refer to the ingredients of the drink but to its effect. The barkeep shrugged and went back to his bar, where he poured a double drink of cheap whiskey, adding two drops of clear liquid from a small bottle, this being the way to mix a Zilio punch.

Zilio took it from him and carried it over to Barry. He set it on the table

in front of the seaman, drew up a chair and sat close to him, his arm on Barry's shoulder.

"Drink up, old man," he said in an affected accent. He shook Barry gently, and the sailor raised his head groggily. "Go on," urged Zilio.

Barry picked up the glass, shaking and slopping, and sipped because he had not energy for a gulp.

"You're a sailor, eh?" murmured Zilio.

Barry shook his head and reared back to try to focus his disobedient eyes on the oily man. "Yeah, an' a damn good one."

"Union member?"

"What's it to you?" asked Barry belligerently, and Zilio pushed the glass a little closer. Barry realized that the smooth, swarthy character was buying a drink, and promptly loosened up. "Yeah; I belong to the union." He picked up the glass.

"Good!" said Zilio. "Drink up!"

Barry did. The raw liquid slid down his throat, looped around and smashed him on the back of the neck. He sank tinglingly into unconsciousness. Zilio watched him for a moment, smiling.

Pierre said, "What are you going to do with that broken down piece o' tar?"

Zilio began to search Barry's pockets diligently. "If I can find what I'm looking for," he said, "this broken down piece of tar is going to be removed from the rolls of the unemployed. Another minute's searching uncovered Barry's seaman's papers. "Ah—able seaman—quartermaster—wiper and messman. He'll do." He stood back and wiped his hands on a large white handkerchief. "Pierre, get a couple of the boys and have this thing brought down to my dock."

Pierre grunted and went out, returning in a few minutes with a couple of fishermen. Without a word they picked up the unconscious Barry and carried him out to a disreputable old flivver, which groaned its way out of sight down the dusty road.

Zilio said, "'Night, Pierre." He handed the bartender two clean dollar bills for his part in the shanghai, and left.

WHEN BARRY swam up out of the effects of Pierre's Mickey Finn, he found himself in all too familiar surroundings. He didn't have to open his eyes; his nose and his sense of touch told him where he was. He was lying in a narrow bed, and the sparse springs beneath him vibrated constantly. His right side felt heavier than his left, and he rolled a little that way, and then the weight shifted and he rolled back. He groaned. How did he ever get working again?

He opened his eyes at last, to see what kind of a box it was that he had shipped out on. He saw a dimly lit fo'c's'le with six bunks in it, only one of which was occupied. The place was filthy, littered with empty beer cans, dirty socks, a couple of pairs of dungarees, wrapping paper from laundry parcels, and cigarette butts—the usual mess of a merchant ship's crew's quarters when leaving port. He closed his eyes and shook his head violently to rid himself of this impossible vision—he didn't remember catching a ship, *knew* he was on the beach, and was good and sick of seeing things he could not believe. So—he closed his eyes and shook his head to clear it, and when he did that he groaned in agony at the pain that shot through it. Oooh—that must have been a party. Wow! He lay very still until the pain subsided,

and then cautiously opened his eyes again. He was still in a ship's fo'c's'le.

"Hey!" he called weakly.

The figure on the lower bunk opposite started, and a man pushed his head into the light that trickled in from the alleyway.

"Hey, where am I? Eh—when is this?"

Apparently the man could make sense out of the vague question. "Tuesday," he said. That meant nothing to Barry. "Ye're aboard th' *Jesse Hanck*. Black oil. Far East."

Barry lay back. "Oh," he moaned.

The Hanck ships were famous—or was it notorious? They were old Fore River ships, well-deck tankers. They were dirty and unseaworthy, and they were hungry ships and paid ordinary seamen's wages to their petty officers, grading it on down from there. Twenty-

eight lousy dollars a month. No overtime. Eighty-six-day runs.

Barry got up on one elbow and said half to himself, "What did I do—*ask* for this job?"

The other man rolled out and sat on the edge of his bunk, putting on tankerman's safety shoes. "Damfino. Did you ever meet a guy called Zilio?"

"Ah— Yeh."

The man nodded. "There you are then, shipmate. He gave you a drink. You passed out. You wake up aboard this oil can. That's Zilio's business."

"Why the dirty— I'm a union member! I'll tie this ship up! I'll have her struck! I'll report her to the Maritime Commission! I'll—"

The other man rose and came across the fo'c's'le to lean his elbows on Barry's bunk and breathe his gingivitis into Barry's face. "You'll do your work



and shut up. When you sober up enough to look around, you'll find out you're sailing without seaman's papers. If you're a good boy and play along with the seahorse that calls himself a chief mate, you'll get them back. Step off the straight and narrow and you'll be beached somewhere without your livin'. An' listen—better dry up with that union talk. You got picked up by a fink-herder and shipped on a fink ship. They don't go for that around here, that fellow-worker stuff."

"Yeah?" Barry swung his feet over the side of the bunk and had to clutch his pounding head. "I'll jump ship in Panama! We got to go through the canal!"

"Ain't nobody jumpin' no ship in Panama nowadays, friend. They'll send out a fifth-colyum alarm fer you from the ship an' you'll spend somethin' like fifty years in a military bastille. Besides—time we get to Colon you won't want to be jumpin' ship. Better cool off now. G'wan back to sleep. I got the eight to twelve. You got the twelve to four."

So BARRY went to work again. He spent his days and nights in the utmost misery. The packing around the port-hole beside his bunk had kicked out some years ago, and every time the weather got a little drafty, his bunk shipped water. The food was atrocious, and the crew was composed of boot-blacks, kids on vacation, ex-tenant farmers, and one or two bona-fide seamen like himself, either outright finks or shanghaied wrecks. But all of this didn't stack up to his horrors. They persisted and they grew.

It isn't often a man gets them that badly, but then it isn't often that a man lets himself get into the state that Barry was in. He walked in a narrowing circle of ravenous beasts. When he

slept he dreamed horrible dreams, and when he lay awake he could feel tiny, cold, wet feet crawling over his body. He was afraid to stand a lookout watch by himself, and the mate had to batten down his ears for him before he would go out on the fo'c's'le head at night. He was dead sure that there was something horrible hiding in the anchor engine, ready to leap out at him and wrap him up in the anchor cables. He was just as afraid to be in a roomful of men, because, to his sodden eyes, their faces kept running together fluidly, assuming the most terrifying shapes. So he spent his hours off watch hovering on the outskirts of small groups of men, making them nervous, causing them to call him Haunt and Jonah.

He found out what the eight-to-twelve man had meant when he'd said that Barry wouldn't feel like jumping ship in Panama. A day before they made the canal, those who might make trouble were called to the second mate's room, each secretly, and fed rotgut liquor. They hadn't learned—not one of them. It was a Mickey again. When they came to, they were in the Pacific.

The *Jesse Hanck* steamed well out of the usual steamer lanes. The Hanck fleet were charter boats, and they saw to it that they were always behind schedule sufficiently to enable the captains to pad the fuel and store consumption accounts enough so that pockets were lined all around, except for those of the crews. A thoroughly rotten outfit. At any rate, Barry had his little accident eight days out of the canal.

The ship was shuffling along somewhere on the tenth meridian, and it was hot. It was one of those evenings when a man puts clothes on to soak up perspiration and rips them off thirty seconds later because he can't stand the

heat of them; when sleeping in the fo'c's'le is impossible and sleeping on deck is just as bad.

The men bunked all over the place, throwing mattresses down on the after boat deck, swinging hammocks from the midship rigging, crawling under the messroom tables, which were out on the poop now—sleeping anywhere and everywhere in impossible attempts to escape the cruel heat. Calling the watch was a hit-or-miss proposition: you might find your relief and then again you might wake the wrong man from a rare snatch of real sleep and get yourself roughed up for your mistake.

Barry came off watch at four that morning. He turned in somewhere back aft. He never got up for breakfast anyway, and when the eight-to-twelve ordinary seaman tried to call him for lunch at eleven-twenty, he couldn't be found. It was one-thirty before the bos'n missed him. Sometime between four in the morning and one in the afternoon, then, Barry had left the ship.

It gave all hands something to talk about for a couple of days. The captain wrote up a "lost at sea" item in the log and pocketed Barry's wages. An ordinary seaman was given Barry's duties with no increase in pay. Barry was forgotten. Who cared, anyway? Nobody liked him. He wasn't worth a damn. He couldn't steer. He couldn't paint. He was a lousy lookout.

BARRY HIMSELF always gets that part of his story garbled. How a man trained at sea, capable in any emergency of looking out for his own skin, no matter what the weather or his state of sobriety, could possibly fall off a ship at sea is beyond understanding. I don't believe he did. I think he jumped off. Not because of the way he was being

treated aboard that slave ship; he hadn't self-respect enough left for that. It must have been his horrors; at any rate, that, according to him, is the last thing he remembers happening to him aboard the *Jesse Hanck*.

He had just drifted off to sleep, when he was aroused by some shipboard noise—the boilers popping off, perhaps, or a roar from the antiquated steering engine. At any rate, he was suddenly dead certain that something was pursuing him, and that if he didn't get away from it, he would be horribly killed. He tried, and then he was in the water.

As the rusty old hull slid past him in the warm sea, he looked up at it and blinked the brine out of his failing eyes and made not the slightest attempt to shout for help. He trod water for some moments, until the after light of the tanker was a low star swinging down on the horizon, and then he turned over on his back and kicked sluggishly to keep himself afloat.

Now delirium tremens is a peculiar affliction. Just as the human body can be destroyed by a dose of poison, but will throw off an overdose, so the human mind will reach a point of super-saturation, and return to something like normality. In Barry's case it was a pseudosanity; he did not cease to have his recurrent attacks of phantasmagoria, but he became suddenly immunized to them. It was as if he had forgotten how to be afraid—how, even, to wonder at the things he saw and felt. He simply did not care; he became as he is today, just not giving a damn. In effect, his mind was all but completely gone, so that for the first time in weeks he could lie at ease and feel that he was not mortally afraid. It was the first time he had been in real danger, and he was not afraid.

He says that he lay there and slept for weeks. He says that porpoises came and played with him, bunting him about and crying like small children. And he says that an angel came down from the sky and built him a boat out of seaweed and foam. But he only remembers one sun coming up, so it must have been that same morning that he found himself clutching a piece of driftwood, rocking and rolling in a gentle swell just to windward of a small island. It was just a little lump of sand and rock, heaped high in the middle, patched with vegetation and wearing a halo of shrieking sea birds. He stared at it with absolutely no interest at all for about four hours, drifting closer all the while. When his feet struck bottom he did not know what it meant or what he should do; he just let them drag until his knees struck also, and then he abandoned his piece of wood and crept ashore.

THE SUN was coming up again when Barry awoke. He was terribly weak, and his flesh was dry and scaly the way only sea-soaked skin can be. His tongue was interfering with his breathing. He lolled up to his hands and knees and painfully crawled up the sloping beach to a cluster of palms. He collapsed with his chin in a cool spring, and would have killed himself by over-drinking if he had not fallen asleep again.

The next time he pushed the groggy clouds from him, he felt much better. He was changed; he knew that. He was basically changed; he felt different about things. It took him quite a while to figure out just how, but then it occurred to him that though he was still surrounded with the monsters and visions and phantoms of his own drink-

crazed creation, he did not fear them. But it was more than that. It was not the disinterest he had experienced out there when he was adrift. It was a sullen hatred of the things. It was an eagerness to have one of them come near enough for him to attack. He crouched by the spring and looked craftily about him, trying to find an object to kill and tear. He found it. Near him was a coconut. He picked up a stone and hurled it, and cracked the coconut. He caught it up and drank greedily from the streaming cracks, and then broke it and ate the meat until it made him sick. He was enormously pleased with himself.

All around him the ground pimpled and dimpled, and from the little depression what he thought were strange plants began to grow. They were sinu-

ous stalks, and they seemed to be made of two rubbery sheaths that wound about each other spirally, forming a tentaclelike stem, and spreading out at the tip in two fleshy extensions like snail's eyes. He reached out and touched one as it grew visibly, and it writhed away from him and began clubbing the ground blindly, **searchingly**. He'd never dreamed up **anything like** this before. But he was **certain he had** nothing to fear from them. **He got up**, kicking one out of the way **disgustedly**, and began to climb the central hill for bearings. Just as he left, one of the growths spurted up out of the ground, curved over his head and smashed wetly down on the spot he had just vacated. He didn't even look over his shoulder. Why should he, for a figment of his imagination? The mistake he made was

that the things were real. Just as real, my friend, as you and I!

BARRY, poor crazed wreck, couldn't realize it then, because the growing, writhing trunks all around him were mixed and mingled with things of his own creation, dancing and gibbering around him. There were things harmless and beautiful, and things too foul to mention, and it is little wonder that the stemlike things were of little importance.

Barry went on up the hill. He picked up a thorny stick, quite heavy, and strode on, casually swiping at his monsters, real and imaginary. He noticed subconsciously that when he stuck at a unicorn or a winged frog, it would vanish immediately, but when he swung at a growing tentacle it would either duck quickly or, when struck, twist into a tight knot about its wound. He even looked back and noticed how the stalks kept pace with him, sinking back into the ground behind him and sprouting ahead. It still meant nothing to him.

A few hundred yards from the top he stopped and sniffed. There had been a growing, fetid odor about the place, and he didn't like it. He connected it somehow with the smell of the ichor that exuded from the wounded stalks after he had slashed them, but he was incurious; he didn't really care. He shrugged and finished his climb.

When he had reached the top he stood a moment wiping his forehead with his wrist, and then sighted all around the horizon. There were no other islands in sight. This one was small—nearly round, and perhaps a mile by a mile and a quarter. He spotted two more springs and a tight grove of coconut and breadfruit. That was encouraging. He stepped forward as a rubbery trunk poured out of the ground

and lashed at his legs with its two prehensile tentacles. It missed.

A puff of wind bearing an unspeakable odor brought his attention back to the crest of the hill. It was nearly round, almost exactly following the contours of the island, and fell in the center to form a small crater. Down at the bottom of the crater was a perfectly round hole, and that was the source of the noisome smell.

Barry walked down toward it because he happened to be facing that way and it was the easiest way to go. He was halfway down the slope when two points of what looked like pulpy flesh began to rise out of the hole. They seemed to be moving slowly, but Barry suddenly realized that it was an illusion due to their enormous size. Before he could bring himself to stop, they had risen twenty feet in the air. They began leaning outward, one directly toward him, the other across the hole, away from him. They grew thicker as they poured upward and outward, and finally they lay flat on the slope and the near one began licking up toward him.

It was the most frightening phantasm that had yet presented itself to Barry's poor alcoholic brain, but now he would not be frightened. He stood there, legs apart, club at the ready, and waited. When the thing reached his feet he raised himself on his toes and brought the thorny club down with all his strength on its fleshy tip. It winced away and then poured back. He hit it twice more and it retreated. He ran after it and smashed it again and again. It suddenly rocketed up in the air, as did its mate from the other side of the crater. They struck together with a mighty wet *smack!* and stood there, a pale-green, shining column of living flesh, quivering in the sunlight. And

then, with unbelievable speed, they plunged into the ground, back into their hole. Barry dropped his club, clasped his hands over his head and smirked. Then he turned and went back to his spring.

And all the way back, not another trunk showed itself.

HE SLEPT WELL that night under a crude shelter of palm leaves. Not a thing bothered him but dreams, and of course they didn't bother him much any more. His victory over the thing in the crater had planted a tiny seed of self-esteem in that rotten hulk of a man. That, added to the fact that he was too crazy to be afraid of anything, made him something new under the sun.

In the morning he sat up abruptly. At his feet was a pile of breadfruit and coconuts, and around him was a forest, a wall of the waving stalks. He leaped to his feet and cast about wildly for his club. It had disappeared. He drew his sheath knife, which by some miracle had stayed with him since he left the *Jesse Hanck*, and stood there, palisaded by the thickly planted, living stems. And he still was not afraid. He took a deep breath and stepped menacingly toward the near wall of stalks. They melted into the ground before he reached them. He whirled and rushed those behind him. They were gone before he could get within striking distance. He paused and nodded to himself. If that was the way they wanted it, it was O. K. He put away his knife and fell to on the fruit. The stems ranked themselves at a respectful distance, as if they were watching. And then he noticed something new. Deep within his brain was a constant liquid murmur, as if thousands of people were talking quietly together in a strange tongue. He didn't



The huge stalk would have had him in another instant if something hadn't yanked him out of the way—

mind it very much. He'd been through worse, and he wasn't curious.

After he was quite finished he noticed a rustling movement in the wall surrounding him. The creatures were passing something, one to the other—his club! It reached the stalk nearest him; it was taken and laid gently by his side. The stalk straightened and dropped into the earth quickly as if it were embarrassed.

Barry looked at the waving things and almost grinned. Then he picked up the club. Immediately the things on one side of him melted into the ground, and those on the other side doubled in number. A couple of them began sprouting under his feet; he jumped away, startled. More sank into the earth from his path, and more sprang up behind. He looked at them a little uneasily; it occurred to him that they were a little insistent, compared with his usual disappearing monsters. He walked away from them. They followed; that is, they massed behind him, sprouting in his footsteps. And the murmuring in his mind burst into a silent cacophony; gleeful, triumphant.

He wandered inland, followed by his rustling company of pale-green stalks. When he turned aside they would spring up around him, and it was no good trying to press through. They made no attempt to harm him at all. But—they were *forcing* him toward the hill! Perhaps he realized it—perhaps not. Barry, by this time, was totally unhinged. Any other man could not have lived through what he did. But his peculiar conditioning, the subtle distortion of his broken mind, gave him the accidental ability to preserve himself. Certainly he himself could take no credit for it. His fantastic world was no more strange to him than ours is to us. If

you or I were suddenly transported to that island, we would be as frightened as—well, a gorilla in Times Square, or a New Yorker in the African jungle. It's all a matter of receptivity.

And so he found himself marching up the central slope, being driven gently but firmly toward that monstrous thing in the crater by his entourage of pale-green stalks. They must have been a weird-looking company.

And the thing was waiting for him. He came up over the crest of the rise, and the tip of one of the two great green projections curled up over his head and lashed down at him. He threw himself sideways and belted it with his club as it touched the ground. It slid back toward the hole. He took a step or two after it. It was huge—fully sixty feet of it stretched from him to the hole in the center of the crater. And no telling how much more of it was in there. At the first movement from the thing, there had been a rustle behind him and every one of the stalks had dropped from sight.

As BARRY ran forward to strike again, a shape shot up out of the ground at his side, whipped around his leg and flung him down. He rolled over and sat up, to see the other great green arm come swooping down on the stalk that had tripped him and—saved his life. The two huge tentacles slapped together, twisted the slender stalk between them, and began to pull. The stalk tried to go underground, and for a moment held, while its spiraled body stretched and thinned under tons of pull. Then the ground itself gave, and with a peculiar sucking sound, the stalk came up out of the earth. And for the first time Barry saw it for what it was.

The "root" was a dark-green ovoid,



five or six feet long, about two and a half feet thick at the middle. It was rough and wrinkled, and gleamed with its coating of slime. The stalk itself was nearly eight feet long. The creature hung for a moment in the twin tentacles of its captor, and then it was infolded, the bulge of it sliding visibly down the two arms which had closed together and twisted, forming a great proboscislike tube. And Barry heard it scream, deep down in his mind.

Barry rose and scrambled back over the crest of the hill. It had occurred to him that the monster in the crater had stuck at a victim—himself—and that the stalk had sacrificed itself to save him. Having a victim, it would be satisfied for the time being. He was right. Peering back, he saw the great column rise in the air and slip swiftly back into its hole. And he realized something else, as the two tips disappeared underground. The divided proboscis—the ability to rise from and sink into the earth—why, the big fellow there was exactly the same as all the rest of these creatures, except for its huge size!

What was it? Why, Barry never knew exactly, and though I took a great deal of trouble to find out, I never bothered to tell him. There they were; more than that, Barry did not care. He still doesn't. However, as closely as I can discover, I think that the creatures were a species of marine worm—one of the *Echiuroidea*, to be exact—*bonellia viridis*. They grow large anywhere they grow, but I'd never heard of one longer than four feet, proboscis and all. However, I think it quite possible for a colony to develop in a given locality, and mutate into greater size. As for the big one—well, Barry did find a thing or two out about that monster.

Barry went back down the hill and headed for cover. He wanted to sit somewhere in the shade where he would not be bothered by such things. He found himself a spot and relaxed there. And slowly, then faster and faster, the stalks began to spring up around him again. They kept their distance, almost respectfully; but there was a certain bland insistence in their presence that annoyed Barry.

"Go away!" he said sharply.

And they did. Barry was utterly astonished. It was the first really human reaction that had struck him in weeks. But the sight of these curious creatures, so dissimilar to anything that he had ever even heard about, obeying him so implicitly, struck some long-buried streak of humor in the man. He roared with laughter.

"Hello."

His laughter cut off and he peered around. Nothing.

"Hello." The sound seemed to come from no specific direction—as a matter of fact, it seemed to come from no direction at all. It seemed to come from inside him, but he hadn't spoken.

"Who said that?" he snapped.

"I did," said the voice. He looked around again, and his eyes caught a movement down low, to his left. There, just peeping out of the ground, were the twin tendrils that tipped the ubiquitous stalks.

"You?" asked Barry, pointing.

The creature rose another two feet and swayed gently. "Yes."

"And what the hell might you be?"

"I don't understand you. What is hell?"

"It speaks English!" gasped Barry.

"I speak," agreed the monster. "What is English?"

Barry rose to his knees and stared at it. "What are you?" he repeated.

"Man."

"Yeah? What does that make me?"

"You are different. I have only your words for everything. Your name for yourself is Man. My name for myself is Man, too. I have no name for you."

"I'm a man," asserted Barry, half truthfully.

"And what would you say I am?"

Barry looked at it carefully. "A damned nightmare."

The thing said seriously, "Very well. Hereafter we shall be known as nightmares. I shall tell all the people."

THE THOUGHT of actually having a conversation with this unpleasant-looking beast struck Barry again and almost overwhelmed him. "How the devil can you speak with me?"

"My mind speaks to your mind."

"Yeah? Gee!" was the only comment Barry could think of.

"What are you going to do?" asked the creature.

"Whatcha mean?"

"You have proved yourself against the Big One. We know you can destroy him. Will you do it soon, please?"

"The Big One? You mean that thing in the crater?"

"Yes."

"What can I do?"

"You will know, all-powerful one."

Barry looked around to find out who was being addressed in such prepossessing terms, and then concluded that it was he. He puffed his chest. "Well," he said, "I'll make a deal with you. Get me a drink and I'll fix you up."

It was an old mental reflex, one he had used all over the coast to get himself plastered when offered any kind of a job, aside from shipping out. His technique was to demand more liquor until he was so drunk he was of no value

to any kind of an employer; and they would go away and leave him alone.

The stalk said, "It shall be done."

A whirring telepathic signal sounded in Barry's brain, and two or three dozen of the things leaped out of the earth.

"The master desires a drink. And pass the word; hereafter we are to be known as nightmares. It is his wish."

The stalks dropped out of sight, all but the one Barry was talking with.

"Well; that's something like service," breathed Barry.

"All things are yours for the service you will do us," said the nightmare.

"This is the damndest thing," said Barry, scratching his head. "Why didn't you talk to me before?"

"I did not know what your intentions were, nor whether or not you were an intelligent animal," said the nightmare.

"Y'know now, huh?"

"Yes, master."

"Hey— How come none of 'em talk to me but you?"

"I differ slightly from the rest. See those birds?"

Barry looked up at the wheeling, screaming cloud of gulls and curlews. "So?"

The nightmare gave a peculiar telepathic whistle. The birds wheeled and hurtled downward toward them. In an instant the glade was filled with them. Barry was cuffed and slapped by their wings as they crowded about him. He snatched at a large bird, caught it by the leg, and promptly twisted its neck.

At the nightmare's sudden signal, the rest of the birds turned and fluttered and soared up and away.

"Why did you do that?" asked the nightmare.

"I'm going to eat it."

"You eat birds?"

"Why not?"

"You shall have all you want. But as I was saying— I am different from

these others. Of all of us, I alone can call the birds. Apparently, only I may speak with you."

"Seems like. I can—hear the others, but I dunno what they're driving at. What about this Big One? Where'd he come from?"

"The Big One was one of us. But he differed also. He was a mutant, like me, but he is unintelligent. He eats his own kind, which we cannot do. He is very old, and every time he eats one of us, he grows larger. He can't move from the crater because it is rockbound, and he can't burrow through it. But the larger he grows the farther he can reach. If you were not going to kill him, he would grow until he could reach the whole island, or so they say. It used to be, a thousand years ago, that he could travel our roads—"

"Roads? I didn't see no roads."

"Oh, they are underground. The whole island is honeycombed with our burrows. We never put more of ourselves above the surface than our proboscis. We catch our food that way, feeling about the ground and the water's edge for small plants and animals. We can dig, too, almost as fast as we can travel through our roads— Here's your drink."

BARRY WATCHED fascinated as a column of stalks approached, bearing gourds of coconut shells filled with water, coconut milk, and breadfruit juice. Never a drop was spilled, as the stalks progressed. Two or three would sprout swiftly, lean back toward the gourd bearers. They would take the burden, bend swiftly forward and pass it on to some newly sprouted nightmares, and then sink into the ground and appear ahead.

"Why don't they carry it underground?" asked Barry.

"It might not suit you then, master. You live in the sun, and the foods you have eaten have grown in the sun. It shall be as you wish it."

Barry extended his hand and a coconut shell full of cool water was deposited in it. He sipped once and threw it down. "Call this a drink?" he roared. "Get me a *drink!*"

"What would you like?"

"Whiskey, damn you! Gin, rum—beer! Wine, if you can't find anything better." The more he thought of it, the thirstier he got. "Get me a drink, you—what's your name?"

"Ahniroo."

"Well, get it anyway." Barry slumped sullenly back.

"Master—we have none of these things you ask. Could we perhaps make one of them?"

"Make one? I don't—wait a minute." Barry did a little thinking. If he had to make a drink—brew it up, wait for it to ferment, strain it—well, he'd just as soon do without. But it seemed as if these goofy critters were aching to work for him. "O. K.—I'll tell you what to do."

And so Barry gave his orders. He knew very vaguely what to do, purely because he had some idea of what alcoholic drinks were made out of. And it passed the time pleasantly. He had plenty to eat and drink and never had to lift a finger to get it. For the first time in his life he had the kind of existence he'd dreamed about—even if it was mixed up with nightmares.

The base of his brew was coconut milk. He'd heard somewhere that an otherwise innocuous drink would ferment if you put in a raisin and closed the container tightly. No raisins,

though. He tried several things and finally got fair results with chunks of breadfruit dried on the rocks in the sun. These were put into a plugged coconut shell, the opening carefully sealed with a whittled wooden stopper and sealed with mucous from the hides of the nightmares. Barry wasn't finicky.

It was a pleasure to watch them work. They co-operated admirably, grouping about a task, each supplying one or both of the "fingers" at the tips of their proboscises. To see a coconut held, plugged, doctored with breadfruit and sealed up again, was a real pleasure, so swiftly and deftly was it done. Barry had only to whittle one plug when the knife was taken from him and three of the stalks took over the task, one to handle the knife, two to hold the wood. And do you know how many coconuts Barry had them prepare? By actual count, according to Ahniroo—over nine thousand!

And when it was done, Barry announced that it would be, anyway, six months before the stuff was worth drinking. The nightmares, in effect, shrugged that off. They had lots of time. One of them was detailed to mark off the days; and in the meantime they waited on Barry hand and foot. No mention was made of the Big One. And Barry lay and dreamed the days away, thinking of the binge he was going to go on when he could get his hands on nine thousand bottles of home brew!

"GOVERNOR," said the American, as the old man stopped to light a cigar, "tell me something. Isn't it a little tough to believe this drunkard's yarn? That business of the worms having intelligence and talking with him. Isn't that a little strong?"

The governor considered. "Perhaps. But once you get over the initial surprise of an idea like that, try taking it apart. Why shouldn't they be intelligent? Just what is intelligence anyway?"

"Why"—the American fingered his Adam's apple uneasily—"I'd say intelligence was what we have that makes us the leading race on the planet."

"Are we, though? We're outnumbered by thousands of other species—worms, for instance, if numbers is your idea of racial supremacy. We are not as strong as the elephant or as quick as the antelope—strength and speed have nothing to do with supremacy. No, we use our intelligence to make tools. We owe our position on earth to our ability to make tools."

"Is that intelligence—tool-making?"

The governor shook his head. "It is one of the ways to use intelligence."

"What about these worms of Barry's, then—why didn't they have cities and literature and machines?"

"They didn't need them. They were not overcrowded on the island. There was plenty to eat for all. The only menace they had was the Big One, and even that wasn't a complete menace—he could have lived another twenty thousand years without endangering the life of any but those who wandered too close. His presence was a discomfort. As to their literature—how can we know about that? Barry was a seaman, and a very low-type seaman, an ignoramus. What did he care about the splendid brains that Ahniroo and his people might have had? Intelligence of that sort must have produced superb developments along some lines. Barry never bothered to find out.

"No, you can't judge the intelligence of a race by its clothes or its automo-

biles or its fancy foods. Intelligence is a cellular accident affecting the nervous cysts of certain races. It might strike anywhere. It seems as if it is a beautiful jest handed about by the gods, like a philanthropist giving away beautiful grand pianos to uneducated children. Some may learn to play them. Some may build intricate machines with the parts. Most would destroy them, one way or another. What do you think our race is doing with its great gift? Well?"

The American grinned. "Better get on with your story."

WELL, for those six months Barry lived in the lap of luxury. Yes, raw sea birds and coconut and breadfruit and clams can be luxury, once you're used to them. It isn't what you have that makes luxury, anyway; it's how it's given to you. A raw albatross, carefully cleaned and cut up, is as great a luxury when it is brought to you in style as is a twelve-dollar French meal that you have to cook yourself. Barry had nothing to kick about. He had never felt better in his life; he hadn't sense enough to realize that it was largely due to his being on the wagon. He used to dream about coconut shells filled with rare old Scotch now, instead of winged dragons and snakes.

The months went by far faster than he realized; it was a real surprise to him when Ahniroo came to him one morning bearing a coconut.

"It is ready, master."

"What?"

"The drink you asked to have us make for you."

"Oh boy, oh boy! Give it here."

Ahniroo leaned toward him and he took the nut. A jab with his knife drove the plug in, and he took two gulps. One went down and the other went immediately out.

*"Phhhtooey!* Ahni, take this some place and bury it. Holy sweet Sue! It tastes like th' dregs of a city dump!"

Ahniroo took the nut gravely and swayed away. "Yes, master."

Barry sat there running his tongue around the inside of his mouth to get rid of the taste. The tongue moved more and more slowly; he stopped; he swallowed twice, then leaped to his feet. "Hold it!" he bellowed. "I've drank worse'n that an' paid money for it. Bring that back. Bring fifty of 'em." He snatched the nut and drained it. It was alcoholic, after all. It tasted like nothing on earth, but it had a slight wallop.

Three hours later found Barry sprawled out amid a litter of broken coconut shells. There was a peaceful smile on his long horsy face, and in his mind was unalloyed bliss. Ahniroo bent over and touched the back of his neck with a slimy tentacle. Barry rolled his head and lay still again. Ahniroo was very persistent. Barry finally rolled over and sat up, promptly falling over the other way and lying prone again. Ahniroo and two of his fellows helped to roll him over on his back and sit him up again. Ahniroo shook him gently for some eight minutes until he began to grumble.

"Master—it is time! Come, please; we are waiting."

"Time? What time?"

"Your promise, all powerful one. We have fulfilled your desire. You promised us you would kill the Big One when we had brought you a drink. You have had your drink, master."

Barry clapped his hand to his brow and winced. Promised? Was that what— Then this wasn't all for nothing? He had to pay off? The full import of it struck him. He was deputized to rid the island of that monstrosity that lived in the crater!

"Now let's be reas'n'ble," he coaxed. "You can't make me do that job, now; y'know y'can't, huh?" Getting no answer from Ahniroo, he said belligerently, "Listen, bean pole, you can't push me around. S'pose I don't even try to do that job?"

Ahniroo said quietly, "You will. You have promised. Come now."

A shrill signal, and Barry found himself lifted bodily and set on his feet. Spluttering and protesting, he was shoved by a solid wall of nightmares toward the hill. Twice he tried to simply quit—sit down, the way he had on the tank ships when he thought he was getting the runaround. The *Echiuroidia* did not understand modern labor methods. They picked him up and carried him when he would not walk. And once he tried to run away. They let him—provided he ran toward the hill. He finally settled to a hesitant plodding, and marched along, wishing the island was ten times as big and he was twenty times smaller.

WHEN they reached the top of the hill, the nightmares disappeared into the ground, all but Ahniroo. Barry was in tears.

"Ahni—do I hafta?"

"Yes—master."

Barry looked toward the hole. It was sixty feet away and thirty feet in diameter. "Big, ain't he?"

"Very."

"How's about a little drink before I go down there?"

"Of course, master!"

Ahni gave his signal. In a few minutes a stream of coconuts began to pop out of the earth. They were the only thing of Barry's that Ahniroo would allow to be transported underground.

When fifty or sixty had arrived, Barry broke and drained three. "I tell you, Ahni," he said, "just you keep 'em coming. I'll need 'em."

He gave a hitch at his belt and started down the slope, a coconut in each fist. There was no sign at all of the Big One. He walked to the edge of the pit and looked down, trying to hold his breath against the smell of the thing. Yeah—there he was, the little rascal. He could just see the tips of his proboscis.

"C'mon up and fight!" Barry yelled drunkenly.

Still no movement. Barry grinned weakly and looked back toward the edge of the crater. Ahniroo was there, watching. Barry felt a little foolish.





"Come on," he coaxed. "Here; have a drink." He cracked open a coconut and let the foul liquid run into the pit. There was a stir of movement, and then silence.

Ahni's mental voice came to him. "The Big One is not hungry today."

"Maybe he's thirsty then. Roll me down a couple dozen nuts, pal."

The obedient nightmares shoved at the pile of doctored coconuts. They came rolling and bouncing down the slope. He broke them and pitched them in—about thirty of them. He had not countermanded his order—they were still coming up there.

The Big One thrust up a tentacle, waved it and let it slump back. The last few drinks were getting Barry down. He was long past the stage when he knew what he was doing.

"Hey! My pal wants more! Come on—fill 'em up! He's a big feller—he needs a man-size drink. Couple o' you guys give me a hand!"

Two stalks immediately appeared beside him. He gave no thought to the fact that he was possibly leading them to their deaths. The three began breaking coconut shells and pouring the contents into the pit.

Now just why this happened I could not say. Perhaps the Big One was allergic to alcohol. Perhaps it tripped up his co-ordination so that he couldn't control a movement once it started. But suddenly, with a wheezing roar, the Big One rose up out of his lair.

It is all but impossible to describe that sight. The proboscis alone was fully one hundred and twenty feet long, and it rose straight up in the air, twisting slowly, and then fell heavily to the ground. It lay on the floor of the crater, reaching from the center pit all

the way up and over and well down the hill. If it had fallen on Barry it would have crushed him instantly beyond all semblance of a man. And it didn't miss him by much. The two tips of the proboscis were out of sight now, but the whole mass, eighteen feet thick, pulsed and twitched with the violent movement that must have been going on at the extremity.

Barry fell back aghast, in that instant cold sober. Ahniroo's message cut through his awed horror:

"The bristles, master! Cut the bristles!"

Barry drew his knife and ran to the edge of the pit. The actual body of the thing, that thick ovoid part, was just visible, and he could see the bristles—the powerful muscled projections by which the creatures, all of them, hurried. But the flesh about the Big One's bristles was soft and flabby—it had been decades since he had been able to use them. Barry leaned over and hacked hysterically at the base of one of them. The steel slid through the layers of tissue, and in a moment the bristle hung loose, useless. Barry flung himself aside to avoid a foul gush of ichor, and dove for the other bristle. He couldn't do as much to this one; it sank into the side of the pit, trying to force the great body back into the hole. The earth yielded; the bristle whipped up through the ground and snacked into the Big One's side. That was its last anchorage, and its last refuge was gone.

Immediately the crater was alive with the wavering stems of Ahniroo's kind. Like ants around a slug, they fastened to the gigantic body, dragged and tore at it, tied it to earth. Barry danced around it, his mind drink-crazed again;

he waved a full coconut shell aloft in one hand and with the other cut and slashed at the prone monster. He laughed and shrieked and sang, and finally collapsed weakly from sheer exhaustion, still murmuring happily and humming to himself.

Ahniroo and some others carried him back down and laid him on the beach. They washed him and put soft leaves under his body. They fed him continuously out of the huge stock of coconut shells. They almost killed him with kindness. And for his sake, I suppose, they shouldn't have left him on the beach. Because he got—rescued.

A GOVERNMENT launch put into the cove to survey, since these days you never can tell what salty little piece of rock might be of military value. They found him there, dead drunk on the beach. It was quite a puzzle to the shore party. There he was, with no footprints around him to show where he'd come from; and though they scoured the neighborhood of the beach, they found no shelter or anything that might have belonged to him. And when they got him aboard and sobered him up the island was miles astern. He went stark raving mad when he discovered where he was. He wanted to go back to his worms. And he's been here ever since. He's no use to anyone. He drinks when he can beg or steal it. He'll die from it before long, I suppose, but he's only happy when he's plastered. Poor devil. I could send him back to his island, I suppose, but— Well, it's quite a problem. Can I, as the representative of enlightened humanity in this part of the world, allow a fellow human being to go back to a culture of worms?

The American shuddered. "I—hardly think so. Ah—governor, is this a true yarn?"

The governor shrugged. "I'll tell you— I was aboard that launch. I was the one who found Barry on the beach. And just before we lost sight of the island, some peculiar prompting led me to look at the beach again through my glasses. Know what I saw there?"

"It was *alive!* It was one solid mass of pale-green tentacles, all leaning toward the launch and Barry. There was an air about them—the way they were grouped, their graceful bending toward us—I don't know—that made me think of a prayer meeting. And I distinctly heard—not with my ears, either—'Master, come back! Master!' Over and over again.

"Barry's a god to those damned things. So are the rest of us, I imagine. That's why they were too frightened by us to show themselves when we went ashore there. Ah, poor Barry. I should send him back, I suppose. It's not fair to keep him here—but damn it, I'm a man! I can't cater to a society of—Ugh!"

They sat silently for a long while. Then the American rose abruptly. "Good night, governor. I don't—*like* that story." He smiled wryly and went inside, leaving the old man to sit and stare out to sea.

Late that night the American looked out of his bedroom window uncomfortably. The ground was smoothly covered with a rather ordinary lawn near the governor's house. Farther back, there was night-shadowed jungle.

THE END.

