

Weird Tales



SEPTEMBER, 1952

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

But was the 'day forty years ago—or now?

One Fantastic Day



by Frederick Sanders

EBERLE

Heading by Joseph Eberle

THIS manuscript I am going to call "The Pevington Manuscript" for that is my surname. Up to a few weeks ago I had been a free man moving in a community of freedom. Yet tonight, even

though I know at last that I shall very shortly regain that freedom I still feel utterly isolated, a close-kept personage, in the nothingness of a great inverted cone around which whirls the carefree world. Yes, very much

like a prisoner in a special vortex down which I am being slowly sucked towards some predestined end.

Owing to my home being some distance away and difficult to travel to, I cannot be released until tomorrow when proper early morning traveling facilities are available from this out-of-the-way country town, with its medieval-like prison and court house set upon the cone shaped hill that overlooks the tangle of small streets beneath. The railway-line skirts it to the west as if with its modernity and speeding trains it had wished to avoid this old place, not so much a township as a museum, recalling past centuries since the Romans first built an outpost fort upon the hill down, to the early years of the 19th century when some luckless laborer, accused of stealing a sheep from a local farmstead had been hung upon the old oak-tree that flourished in the very centre of the town-square.

From that time onwards this old town had gradually decayed, become quiet and somnolent, only awakening to feverish activity when the Assizes took place in the ancient court house, near the gray prison, on the sugar-loaf hill.

This year of 1921 will no doubt always be remembered as the year of the Great Drought, for our sea-girt little island, contrary to its usual haphazard weather, had been in old Sol's power for several months until the surprised feeling, not unpleasant, of having so many continuous weeks of sunny days wore off to give way to that of the uncanny and the rising fear that the delicately green land of England would be blasted by such an uncommonly long spell of scorching heat. Timid and superstitious folks began to wonder if rain would ever come again. Farmers, fearful for their crops and herds, openly cursed the flaming orb as it hung high in the wonderful blue vault of the sky, pulsing out its dry heat across millions of miles of space.

Thus, under a blazing sun, in a hard blue sky, week after week the Kentish countryside became more parched, great cracks and fissures intersected the fields and meadows; the corn ripened early into masses of still gold, and the lazy hum of insects made the scorching days feel even hotter with their

monotonous sounds. The rivers ran low. Streams became mere trickles and the smaller ponds dried up. In the larger sheets of Wealden waters the fish grew restive, hungry, and almost gave themselves up to sleepy fishermen.

It was the idle thoughts of the shrinking volume of water in some of the larger Wealden ponds, with their fine large roach and fierce pike that set me drowsily recalling a certain famed sheet of fishing water some miles away from my home. It was lovely to conjecture what might be the luck of a fisherman rodding those sinking waters. For now if ever, was the chance to hook some fine specimen from those hazy-brown depths: prize-sized fish that had escaped the hooks of not only experienced fishers grown old in the tooth, but of men who had been dead these many years. Roach and pike-fish that had eluded time and again the wiles of not only my grandfather but my great-grandfather—such was the cunning of these minor monsters of the piscatorial kingdom that they had even escaped that greatest of all Weald fishermen . . . "Gaffer" Greenstone. It was my old schoolmaster, Mr. Greenstone, who had so often talked of the fishing ponds of the Kentish Weald country and one in particular he always spoke about with enthusiasm mixed with awe on account of the wonderful scaly creatures that lived therein. This certain pond, in fact it was more than that, for its size really gave it the status of a small lake, I had never visited. The fisherman's paradise, the old "Clayhole" at Chart Magna.

Many years ago a flourishing brick and tile works had thrived there and the clay workings had grown and extended over a great acreage. Then through some reason the place closed down, the clay workings gradually filled with water and some enterprising local fisherman stocked it very liberally with several kinds of fish. That was back in 1880. Within the space of twenty years the Clayhole had many fine fish in its waters. Wild ducks, coots and moorhens resided in the large clumps of reeds and bulrushes around its margins, while white-may thorn bushes encircled its high banks making it in all truth a veritable paradise for all keen fishermen.

In my mind's eye I could well imagine that expansive sheet of water throwing back the blazing shafts of sunshine, so dazzling to the eyes. Could almost see the myriad flashes of molten silver lights from every piece of its surface ruffled maybe by a truant zephyr or by the swirl of one of its gleaming inhabitants. The Clayhole would be lying out there in the heat-misty Weald, milky white in its purity, challenging the flaming sun high above it.

SO IT came about that I decided on a fishing holiday in August and made arrangements to stay at the home of Peter Houndstone an old school-chum of mine, who lived in the parish of Chart Magna, close to that village, and within easy reach of the Old Clayhole.

My own village Molesden was about forty miles from Chart Magna, and I reached my chum's home after a rattling journey, in more senses than one, by the "Albatross Bus Service", which consisted of one decrepit motor-vehicle of ancient vintage and solid rubber tires. Well, I got settled in and Peter proposed that after lunch we should leave on the long walk to the Clayhole, some three miles distant from my host's picturesque Tudor residence, "Honeysuckle Farm."

Under the guidance of friend Peter we set out to ramble over to the look-forward-to fishing place. Walking down the dusty lane we were about to pass a vegetation-covered heap of brick and tile rubble that reared its head amidst tall light green ash saplings.

"If we go round by the lane," remarked Peter, "it will be a hot and dusty walk. What say you to taking a shorter cut to the Clayhole?" I was agreeable. "Well, let's turn in here then and pick up the disused light railway track that leads right over to the "Clayhole". I've never been along the full distance, but it will make a change and should prove more interesting to us."

So we forced our way through the brush filled gap and skirting the old rubble heap found ourselves by the side of the rail track, which had, up to 1880 been the means of conveying the bricks and tiles from the works some three miles across country to the edge of the village where it links up with

Chart Magna Railway Station on the main line that winds its serpentine way from London to the South Coast. For in those days the little lane was not much more than a cart-track from the village where it started and was too dangerous for heavy loads to be taken along its length. In fact the track itself had been laid upon an ancient road that in the late 18th century had served a hamlet called Hogsden, that had gradually decayed and vanished.

Soon we were well under way, and it seemed to me that we had been walking for hours along that sun-drenched railroad, studded with tall bushes, entangled with weeds and high grasses. We struggled, gasping, through that miniature jungle athwart the track, finally emerging into clearer surroundings. As I disentangled myself from a clutching bramble, my right foot caught in an exposed root that pitched me forward to crash heavily into a low evergreen bush. As the weight of my body crushed down the shrub, I threw out my arms to save myself, but ended upon the ground. A sharp pain stabbed into the palm of my right hand and shot up my arm. Climbing to my feet, I looked at my hand whence blood was beginning to flow from a puncture in the lower part of the palm. Wiping away the fluid I noticed brown rust in and around the slight wound. Stooping down I searched for what had caused the cut and observed a partly embedded small but heavy iron bar, rusted by age and exposure.

I SHOWED it to Peter who exclaimed jokingly, "Just the thing to commit murder with on a dark night!" As he ended his words a light shock seemed to flow from the rusted bar in my hand to permeate every fibre of my body and to earth itself through me into the ground beneath my feet. My head began to swim and a sick feeling gripped my stomach. In a few minutes the nausea passed and I threw the heavy bar down and turned my attention to my hand. I wiped the wound and sucked it clean.

Once again we got under way and, having got fully clear of the undergrowth, we came upon a large clear area continued as a narrowing vista down the old railroad right of way. On our left we were suddenly con-

fronted by an old stone built inn, standing some fifty yards from the track. A silent, sun-splashed edifice dozing in the sun's warmth. Outside hung a sign with a faded but rampant Red Horse upon it, while the peeling lettering on the sign-board proclaimed that the house was "The Red Horse Inn." Peter stopped, a look of surprise and perplexity upon his sun-tanned face. Was it fear trying to struggle through into his staring eyes? Did those grey windows of his mind hold back but half successfully some swift dread upflung from the limbo of the vast inner mind, acting upon some instinctive stimulus at the sight of that old four-square ale-house? He turned to me, so quickly and swiftly that I jumped.

"Rob," he said, in a hushed voice ending in a queer-little high pitched trill, "I'm sure that inn is not supposed to be there!"

Startled into a split-second paralyzed silence I could make no reply. We both then turned to gaze upon the Red Horse Inn. There it stood, plain as a pike staff and as solid, a very material pile of stones and tiles. For a good two minutes we stood on one side of the rail-track silently noting every detail while the warm sunshine beat down upon us seeping into our bodies as if it would melt us up to become fused into those down bearing shafts of golden waves from the home of the LEO God!

GRADUALLY, from out of the aura of silence surrounding us, a silence caused in our minds by this sudden encounter with what seemed to Peter, the unreality of something existing that had by all standards ceased to exist, we became conscious of the warmth upon our backs; the drone of insects and the lazy chirping of birds. Reality came back to us and speech to Peter. We crossed over together to where the old hostelry offered a shady porch beneath the sign of the fighting scarlet steed. The inn was real enough, no phantom structure this, no ectoplasmic background imprinted with three-dimensional impressions from the past—or the future!

But my friend still seemed a wee bit puzzled and though he now admitted the existence of the house outside of which we stood, he smiled and nervously rubbed his

chin as he said, "Believe me, Rob, this place gave me a real jolt. I had always thought that this old inn had been pulled down years ago, yet here it is. I cannot say that the Red Horse did exist, for it is here before us, solid, cool and inviting. The rampant red horse of the sign is part of the armorial bearings of the ancient Reckness family over at Ashenden Mansion, the ancestral home of the present baronet, Sir William Reckness."

Swiftly the unreal drifted from our minds and became absorbed into the predominating factor of this August day—the warm sun-drenched atmosphere around us. Anyway, we were parched, and as it was still before 2 o'clock went inside the one and only bar, a small square room, with a tiny fireplace, a heavy oak table, three oaken forms, two high stools and upon the wall over the fireplace a huge old-fashioned almanack.

Peter stepped over to the table and rapped hard upon the top to summon the landlord, for service. The sound of the raps echoed in my ears as the bar seemed to become alive with the after sounds zig-zagging and criss-crossing from, and to, each of the four walls. On one side a heavy door, closed and with a sliding hatch fitted into it about breast-high, gave access from the bar-room to the private parts of the house. As we awaited an answer to the summons the atmosphere of the room made itself felt. It was cool, very, very cool. So different was the temperature in here to that reigning outside, that I felt tiny shivers running up my back and isolated spots of chilliness forming about my body. One over the region of the heart; another at the base of the skull and yet one more upon the outside of my right thigh. There was something akin to the state of the air prior to a frosty night about the room, and a mildewy smell assailed my nostrils.

SUDDENLY the sound of hardwood crashing upon hardwood jolted my mental processes. "Go away!" said a quavering high pitched female voice and again came that ear-stinging cry, "Go away! We've no ale left!" So startled was I being shaken out of my momentary inner-reverie that I jerked my head upwards and backwards, instinctively, as if to gain every scrap of distance in view upon which to sweep my gaze for

some hidden danger. Then I saw, across the room, framed in the hatchway in the door the face of an old woman . . . nay, a crone . . . no, no, surely a witch so strange was the contorted face with its eyes blazing like the near-dead embers of a wood fire forced by draft into a high glow.

The face was lined and wrinkled and grey. Dirty-white hair straggled over the brow crushed by care. The thin nose quivered like a piece of rice paper and was about as useful to its owner, for the muscles had long ago ceased to function and air drawn in just drew the nose flat upon itself making breathing impossible. The poor old mouth, a mumbling line of leaden hue fringed with curling hairs rippled and twisted as if to gather strength for one more outburst. "Go away, Sirs! For the love of heaven leave this house . . . we have no ale . . . we have no more ale to serve!"

The crone sucked in a great breath and her eyes seemed to leave her face, hung at eye-level and jerked and danced and in them was such soul-stirring fear and anguish that they actually spoke to my amazed mind "Go away—go away—go away. . . ."

Then what followed happened so swiftly that it was but a blur upon the visual cortex of my brain. The death-like head of the crone was snapped back and the hatch door slammed into position leaving a blank door, a stunned silence, then, slowly the sound came.

First of all a dull beating like fast running waves pounding breathlessly upon a hard sea-beach while far out to sea the storm wind rustles and begins to live, gathering momentum for the final whistling scream before a plunging torrential hell is loosed from the back-cloth of the heaving, moaning deep. Beat—beat—beat!

The wailing, like that of an infant racked with pain increased in force. Gradually these sounds merged into appalling volume. My nerves seemed to be tearing apart, and as I forced my hands over my ears I saw Peter cross my vision, his hands clenched, eyes narrowed, jaws locked. He leaped for the handle of the closed door. As he did so the monotonous deadly beating ceased; the wailing cry ended abruptly.

Then followed a sound beyond the door

like a half-filled coke-sack being flung down. A piteous cry throbbled into the air, but my friend never reached the door for it was flung open and a dreadful figure stepped into the bar, slapping the heavy door shut behind it in one swift movement. A being near seven feet tall confronted us, huge in body, pulsating with strength and inhuman-like vitality. The great pumpkin-sized head was completely bald. The bull-like face was flushed and traces of high anger still fluttered over its surface.

A tangled red beard festooned the lower portions, while a large left eye wild and blood-shot fixed upon us. Where the right eye had once been there now was only a dark-grey socket for all the world like the entrance to some sombre cave alive with hidden horrors! This was our first meeting with the one-eyed host of the Red Horse Inn.

"Welcome, my gentlemen, welcome!" he bellowed, lifting his huge head and stepping all nigh seven feet of him into the center of the tap.

"Sit down my gentlemen, sit down!" As if obeying the order of some super-being both I and my friend did so, pulling up the two high stools and seating ourselves, one at either end of the great bare table. Then we turned to gaze upon our monstrous, though not quite loathsome looking host.

AS IF he mentally read the dual question of our eyes as yet unsaid by words, he roared at us, "Ah! that woman. She will be the death of me yet. Never was a man plagued by such a witch; such a blight; such a mad-pate! All the day she is worrying herself, harrying me, her oh, so devoted husband! All the time she is a little mad; sometimes very mad! Always she is trying to drive my customers away with her silly lies that we have no ale. This house has much ale; ale of the finest brew from richest malts and the finest of Kentish hops. Gentlemen! May God forgive, but sometimes I have to beat her! It is with sorrow and shame, my gentlemen, that I do it, but it is for her good—my good—the good of the Red Horse Inn, sirs and gentlemen! Ah! but I love her so very much, that I would rather beat her, hear her cries, than send her away from here

to fester in a cold cell in the mad-house over on Westwell Minnis hill!"

A large bulbous tear quivered upon the lip of the lower eye-lid of his red-streaked optic. It slipped off like some loathsome-lurking creature and coursed down his cheek losing itself in the red beard.

Our fearsome host wiped the back of his hand across the glistening eye, with his other hand he smoothed away an imaginary tear from the grey socket where once had been his right optic. He bent forward, placed his ham-like hands upon the rough top of the table to support his weight, and, swinging his head from side to side, so as to focus each of us in turn with his rolling eye exclaimed without more preamble, and as if his peculiar explanation of his treatment towards his wife wiped out everything that we had heard or witnessed: "And now my gentlemen, what will be your pleasure?" bared his yellow-brown fangs in a fierce smile and, before we could recover ourselves to tell him what our pleasure might be, cried with a loud booming sound, what our pleasure was to be.

"Sirs, a drink for each of my finest dark ale. Nectar it is! A brew for the high gods!" He vanished back behind the door and we heard him calling to the old crone beyond. Hardly had we settled ourselves before he lumbered in and placed two pewter tankards before us. His large goggle-eye swung about as he bid us drink, and informed us that he would await our further orders, after we had quaffed, and so he left us.

Peter and I drained our tankards, and I must admit the dark ale was the best I had ever tasted. All at once, something seemed to gripe my stomach, and I suddenly felt light and faint. I looked at Peter. A look of surprise and pain was upon his face and he clutched his hands over the region of his stomach. Good Lord! I thought—POISON! Then our host lumbered over to us. He leered.

"Well, my gentlemen, you have tasted an ale fit for the thirst of the gods, and now, thanks be to that special brew, you have appetites fit for the stomachs of the gods also!" He leered again. "In five minutes you'll have vittles to appease them, gentlemen, and two more tankards of that same nectar!" He

swung his head, goggled his solitary orb and moved away, yet for all his bulk making no sound so cat-like was his tread. Once through the door we again heard him half-scolding half cajoling the old witch-like female. I looked across at Peter who pursed his lips. I asked him how he felt and he replied tersely, yet with a smile—"Damnably hungry, Rob! How about you?" I nodded in agreement that I too, was just as hungry. I still felt terribly light. It was hunger induced by the appetite sharpening ale, the Nectar of the Gods of old One-Eye. As I sat impatiently awaiting the appearance of the "vittles" promised, and twiddling my thumbs for something else better to do, my nostrils caught the wafting of the musty odor again.

It seemed to be a mixture of rotted wood, crawling alive with wood-lice; of faint whiffs of the corpse-like smelling stink-horn fungus; of mildew eating away the winding sheets of the dead and the sickly effluvia of disintegrating muscles and gristle vainly holding together the slowly twisting bones of skeletons falling apart hidden deep in dark dells in old woods. There was something very fugitive about that smell. Rack my mind and memory as I could it eluded pin-pointing. I sniffed deeply. The voice of Peter cut across my thoughts.

"I can't smell anything myself Rob, but if it should be a earthy, musty kind of lesser stink, one oftens meets with it in such old inns as these, and in the older types of small farm laborers' cottages with their earthen floors and foundations bereft of damp-courses."

Before I could say a word, the door burst open and "One-Eye" came over to us carrying a great iron tray, a fine piece of workmanship, legacy from the days gone by, when iron-ore smelting flourished in Kent and Sussex. Then the great forests of the Two Wealds had died beneath the axes to help heat the furnaces, for the wood was handy to get and cheaper to burn than the black lumps of bottled sunshine, called coal, mined in the steaming Midlands, the bleak Yorkshire country and that vast black ocean of potential heat and power in fey-like Wales.

Upon this rare antique were two flowing tankards, a huge loaf of home-made bread,

a great wedge of white cheese, and a bowl of mixed pickles, which mine host set down upon the table as if it was a piece of thistle-down. "Fall to, my hungry gentlemen, fall to" he cried, and, slapping and rubbing his huge paws together, went out of the door and closed it shut, but leaving the hatch half-an-inch ajar.

Needless to relate we really did enjoy that simple repast, for the marvellous ale had really given us gargantuan if at first painful appetites!

WE SAT there, fully sated, and my eyes roamed over the little what there was to see, until something strange about the large almanack on the opposite wall caught my eyes. Just at that precise moment Peter whispered to me, "Don't look, but I think that one-eyed horror is peeking at us behind the doorway hatch!" I closed one eye at my chum and continued to watch the almanack. It was a millstone maker's, and bore the information:

Illustrated Almanack

for 1881 of Jas. Stoneknapper and Sons, for the well-known Newcastle millstones. That almanack had been there for forty years! The months from January to July had been cancelled out, and the 16th of August had a red ring marked round it. Suddenly it shot through my mind that this day was August the 16th also, but not 1881, but 1921! What a coincidence I thought!

A queer little convulsive thrill struck throughout my body and again I caught that mysterious odor, only this time it seemed more of a one-ness and made me think of sunshine streaming down incessantly upon a mudflat near the sea. The odor faded and a thought jumped into my questing brain; "Here Time as we know it is standing still as it has always been, only such Time does not—never has—existed, only the mutability of matter which savants call The Universe."

PPETER'S voice spun across my musing: "He's cleared off now—I think!" I nodded, and got up and went over to the almanack. For all its forty years it still seemed smart and fresh-looking.

The only illustration on this record of the year 1881 was a panorama view of the

Stoneknapper Works, at Newcastle. It was a plain black and white imprint lacking depth and with that peculiar timelessness that such old prints have about them: an aura of peace and silence.

Then my eyes travelled down to the date, that certain day's date, with the crimson circle enfolding it as if it would not let it escape as had the days prior to it, but continue to hold it prisoner in Time. Then, slowly, so slowly, because the presence of it was so finely distilled I caught again those suspended particles of decay sending a message to my sense of smell. Then it was gone!

I gazed as if hypnotized at the number sixteen in its little scarlet circle. I felt myself being slowly drawn towards it. No, not my material self but some faint spark from within the mind: an atom of life . . . quite possibly it was what constituted life itself in me.

Gradually the numbers one and six grew larger and ever larger! The crimson belt around them flamed brighter and expanded outwards as if being pumped up by high pressure air. The black figures became taller, widened until all was an abysmal blankness before me, while high above in a vault of heliotrope color the vast half crescent of a glowing red circle continued to expand. Suddenly I winced as a razor-edge knife sliced through my head; I could hear words. It was Peter speaking to me, his voice slashing across my brain. By some miracle I found myself normal and gazing intently at the old almanack.

My friend must have been following my gaze, and it seemed my thoughts when I had first looked at the date, for he was saying, as if by way of explanation; "One often comes across very old almanacks and farm-sale bills in these out of the way country inns.

"Ready to move off, Rob?" he queried. I nodded, and Peter called loudly for the landlord. Goggle-Eye stepped swiftly into view. My chum asked him the price of our meal, and was told. He paid the inn-keeper who swept the coins from Peter's palm in one deft movement transferring them to a front pocket in his breeches pocket beneath the none-too-clean apron he wore.

Then, in his great booming voice he cried, "If, my gentlemen, you should want beds tonight, if returning this way, do not forget that the Red Horse can offer you them and they shall be as satisfactory to your rests, as its ale—that delectable nectar of the Valhalian Gods, and its vittles are to the thirst and the appetite. Good-day, my great gentlemen, and may the spirit of the Sign of the Fishes give you good luck this day," and he nodded towards our fishing equipment piled by the doorway. "And now I must see how that scourge of my life is, my darling wife, my sweet little bird that is so queer in her poor pate. Always shall I cherish her even to her grave if the sign of her house wills her to leave me first . . . alone. Rather, my dear gentlemen, and handsome sirs, would I have Taurus gore me with his fatal horns, than have the swift arrow of old Sagittarius pierce her poor heart. Good-day, my dear sirs and gentlemen, good-day!"

He turned away, and Peter and I gathered up our piscatorial tackle and walked out into the golden sunlight of that glorious August day and set off along the rail-road track to the Old Clayhole.

THOROUGHLY rested and refreshed our walk to the fishing place did not seem so long, and feeling thus we revelled in the golden warmth of the day. As we neared the end of our journey the track curved away to the left towards where the brickworks and the kilns had once been. Crossing the rails with Peter and bearing right I suddenly came upon that almost legendary piece of water, the Old Clayhole of Chart Magna. Its microscopic atoms of white clay made it glisten like a vast expanse of mother-of-pearl and all around its margins drooped the green maythorn bushes. It was an oasis in this countryside of fissured earth, browned grass and listless caterpillar-riddled foliage of trees beyond its life-giving waters.

We selected a likely spot and began to fish. From time to time deep swirls out upon the pearly waters showed where fine large fish swam just beneath the sun-reflecting surface. It was a handsome piece of water, this small lake, quite a quarter of a mile long and roughly two hundred yards in width.

Though we fished steadily until six o'clock

we did not get a bite, yet I felt happy and satisfied. The sun caressed me, warm scents played around my brain; the drying grasses, the dampness of the reed beds, the breath of the shadowy woods and the heavenly scent of the ethereal flower-heads of the meadow-sweet plants.

At a silent hand signal from Peter I drew in my line and we retired to the shade of a maythorn where we partook of tea; a number of ham-sandwiches washed down with some home-brewed cider. After this simple repast we again fished until the gathering shadows made it difficult for us to see the floats.

All at once Peter struck! A boiling swirl frothed in the darkening water and with the swift strike the fish must have leaped in line with the up-pull, for a flashing scaly body flew up, over, and plummeted into the sparse brown grasses back of where Peter stood. We rushed towards the twisting, threshing captive, a really fine roach scattering almost phosphorescent droplets of moisture. I held the jerking fish while Peter got out the hook from the leathery upper lip. My chum was beside himself with excitement.

"What a beauty! Such shape! Never seen such a roach, and I've seen a few big ones caught."

Feverishly he got his small hand-scale from the haversack and stunned the prize so eager was he to weigh it. The fish wriggled a few times then subsided. He drove the hook of the scales into the jaw and held the little machine head high while I struck a match that did not even waver so still was the air. The sliding pointer on the scale pointed to six pounds! It was unbelievable! Never, until now, had it been thought that a fresh-water roach could achieve such a size!

PETER was jubilant. He put the monster into his moss-filled creel, and began to pack. He was getting ready to go. His long day had been crowned with triumph. For he was now famous among fishermen. I felt a pang of jealousy leap across my mind. I thought how like a victor to go off with the spoils, unthinking, unheedful of the defeated. A sharp pain stabbed at my temples and the hair on the top of my head prickled.

Deep black blood seemed to be pumping ink into my head—thump, thump, thumping away.

I caught a whiff of some decaying thing weaving through the dead-like atmosphere. "Oh, damn, Peter!" I thought. "Damn the darkening waters, too!"

Then Peter's voice spoke crisply. "Come along Rob, pack up, for fishing for today is over—it's too dark to see. Better luck tomorrow, old chap!"

My head was splitting, desperately chagrined I mumbled, "Go off and gloat! Go on! Leave me here. I'm going to fish even if I cannot see and have to cast by instinct!"

Peter remonstrated with me. Urged me to have a cooling rinse. Spoke of rest and bed and better luck on the morrow. I continued to fish on for about ten minutes until the pain in my head and the piston-like throbbing across my temples nearly made me sick.

Feeling very ill I shakily unscrewed my rod and wrapped it up in its waterproof case and stooping down picked up my creel and haversack and as I did so a great gout of pain flooded my head making me stagger forward and retch. Peter caught hold of me exclaiming, "Now steady, old lad! Let me carry your gear, and give me your arm till you feel better!" I thrust his helping hand away. "Oh, go to blazes!" I cried.

He struck a match and held it before my face. A look of grave concern was on his face as he spoke to me. "Look here, Rob, you look very, very ill. Maybe you've got a touch of the sun. Let's get back as soon as we can, then you can have some sleeping tablets and a good night's rest and in the morning pop down to see Doctor Smalldale for an overhaul and some medicine."

I really did feel ill; like nothing on earth! LIKE NOTHING ON EARTH? What a funny expression I thought. Thump—thump—thump, went my head, with sudden spasms of excruciating pain flaming through the brain. I heaved, retched, staggered along guided and half-supported by my friend. From time to time my nostrils picked up that tantalizing whiff of rotteness and decay. Gradually the pain in my head began to become a sound, until after a while it felt as if the gray-neurons were swinging round

and round in some ever increasing rhythm, and a subdued howling noise took possession of the inside of my cracking skull! Then came that deathly smell again, but increasing in density until I seemed to be oozing it out at every pore on my sweating body.

The banging and howling inside my poor tortured head increased making me want to twist and turn and shake it viciously and all the while the charnel odor seeped up my nose. It drove down into my lungs and then spreading inwards permeated every fibre of my being, until I got the horrid thought that I was a corpse gradually decaying, yet with some form of after-death consciousness to understand my breaking up, cell by cell. I pulled up suddenly and stood rigid, and let out a scream that after a few seconds so frightened me that suddenly the noises in my head ceased and the inexorable thumping subsided. I was as cold as ice and shivering. All around was a very dark kind of twilight while overhead the night sky flashed its thousands of far-away other worlds.

THEN in the sable gloom I discerned a red eye gleaming. I felt the gentle pressure of my chum's hand upon my arm, and heard his reassuring voice: "Look here, Rob, there's the Red Horse Inn ahead with a light shining through the red curtains of the tap-room. What say we stay the night there so as to give you a rest?"

The suggestion immediately appealed to me and I said so. I had over-strained myself. The long day, exposed to the burning rays of the sun, and my unlucky fishing, coupled with the supreme luck of my friend had undoubtedly upset me in some round-about way that I could not understand. My legs ached horribly and my feet inside my boots swam in hot sticky acidity from perspiration.

"Yes, Peter, old friend," I said, "we'll put up at the inn. Lord, how I crave for rest, to get my feet and legs in a prone position, to let my poor old sconce lower itself into a soft pillow!"

"Good man!" exclaimed Peter, and we walked swiftly to the dim outlines of the old ale-house.

We reached the inn and went inside. It was ten o'clock. An oil lamp, shed-

ding its mellow glow down upon the table, now hung from a hook in the ceiling. Then the fearsome host of the inn was with us again.

"Welcome, my gentlemen!" he cried. "You do well to come here! Your supper shall be served—cold chicken, sirs—right here, at once, and," here he glanced around at us slyly, "enough of that delectable brew to wet your parched throattles. You do require beds for the night, my lovely gentlemen?" he queried. We nodded, "Yes."

He seemed beside himself with happiness that we accepted the inn's hospitality. I intimated to our host that I was not feeling any too good, and not to set supper for me, but that I should like a draught of nice cool water. He clucked-clucked, and rolled his red-rimmed orb. Came and stood over me like some huge fierce pre-historic fowl might have hovered with protective wings over its chick.

He went away and returned with half of a cold chicken and slices of home-made bread for Peter, along with a tankard of the Valhallian nectar to wash it down with. Before me he set a plate with several razor thin pieces of chicken's breast, the superb white meat, with a wafer-thick round of bread and a very small tankard of the wonderful brew.

Silence settled over the inn, my head was clearing. I was able to clear up the chicken, bread and ale, and felt good and very sleepy. Peter, who seemed famished, soon wolfed his supper and drenched it with the contents of his large tankard. Seeing we had finished Goggle-Eye now brought in a slopping small bathful of water and a rough towel and bade us wash ourselves while he prepared our beds. Peter splashed and sloshed water over his head and arms like an infant enjoying its ablutions. Somehow the water did not appeal to me. I was tired, terribly so, and all I now wanted to do was to stay the way I felt, ready to slump into the arms of Morpheus. Tomorrow would be soon enough to wash.

As I sat and watched my old friend luxuriating over the cool water and glinting soap-suds I could hear the inn-keeper scolding his poor old wife somewhere in the domestic regions beyond the door. The air

of the tap-room smelt fresh and sweet and the aroma from Peter's soap made things feel more real than they had done all day. Then our one-eyed host was with us again, calling, "If you are quite prepared, my gentlemen, I will show you to your rooms."

He led us from the "tap" and up a flight of dark narrow stairs, going before us with a lighted candle set in a heavy brass candlestick. Arrived at the landing he pushed open a door on his right and beckoned us into the room, which we found to be a large one occupying the front part of the inn and overlooking the old railway line. Without more ado he set the candlestick on the mantelshelf and bade us, "Good night, my dear sirs. Sleep well, for the beds are comfortable and there is no noise hereabouts to disturb one's rest. I can assure you, that the toils of the day, combined with that drink of the Old Gods will give you rest you have never experienced and may never experience again!" He smiled as he turned to go and for the first time since we had met that day he seemed something more human than he had first impressed us as being.

His footsteps moved down the dark well of the stairway and then—silence, except for the tick of an old cuckoo clock fixed to the wall over the fireplace where its grimy face dully reflected the light from the candle's flame. All at once a peculiar sound came from the dark landing beyond the closed door; something that flip-flopped, flip-flopped, its way along. A gigantic toad could have made such a noise or a frog of unusual proportions. The foot-falls, as I conjectured they were, stopped when opposite our bedroom door. For several tingling seconds all was quiet, nothing happening. Then the cuckoo made a funny whirring, hiccupped and stopped! Again the silence and nothing else! The candle which had been burning steadily flickered, though no one had moved, and no night breeze had twisted in at the open top of the window, then was blown out as if by some unseen presence. The room was suddenly flooded by a darkness so deep that I could not see my friend within a few feet of myself. Even the window was but an indistinct shade of something not quite so abysmally ebony.

Peter fumbled for his matches and struck

one, and as he did so the room gradually was drained of the awful darkness, wisps of sooty vapor sweeping past us and out at the window. The candle was relighted and as the hot tallow spilled over, the flame sprang up very bright and friendly. I looked at Peter and he gazed with widening eyes over my left shoulder to the door. A faint click sounded, followed by a jerky creaking.

Turning I saw the door gradually opening and an almost skeleton-like hand, nay rather a claw than a human hand grasping the edge of it. Wider and wider it opened until, there, on the gloomy threshold stood, in a voluminous white gown—the old crone! Her eyes shone dully, and in their depths glowed little spots of flame like the redness of burning charcoal. Her lips moved spasmodically and we heard, as if from some great distance her poor cracked old voice: "Go away! Don't stay here. Go away, for Life's sake go on, and away! Do not stay here, sirs. God forbid that you should stay in this inn, this night!"

Her old eyes wandered round the room and with her arms outthrust, she called softly, "Blood! Crimson blood! There it is, dripping down the walls! Look at the ceiling and see the drops of rich red blood gleaming there, and dripping down—dripping down—like rain!" The old woman stiffened, every muscle flexed, only her right arm remained extended and with pointing finger she gazed beyond us. "Go sirs, please go! For there I see hanging in mid-room the black iron bar, with the name on it of one, written in flaming letters, the name of JOSIAH BEN-ACRE!"

Swift as thought I swept my gaze around the walls, over the ceiling, across the plain-board floor but nothing could I discern—no blood, no black iron bar miraculously suspended twixt ceiling and floor. Then I swung my eyes back to the old crone as heavy footfalls crashed up the stairs, stamped along the landing and thudded to a stop by the ancient dame. There stood the inn-keeper with wrathful countenance and twitching beard.

Grabbing hold of his wife's right arm in such a crushing grip that I fully expected to hear the sharp crack of bone, he swung her for all the world like an empty flour sack

about face and forced her beyond the doorway.

He then turned to us to say, "Never was a man with his living to make plagued by such a mad-woman! I am grieved, my gentlemen, that this crazy female, this once sweet bird of mine, should interrupt you with her lunatic speechifying at this time o' night. Let no more intrusions unsettle you, gentlemen. Lock and bolt your door against this human pestilence I hold in my hand, in case her dreams awake her in the silent hours and she try to worry and frighten you in your slumbers."

He thrust his crazy partner forward crying out as he did so, "And now to your room, Mistress Benacre! Let us have no more of this madness. To bed with you, and mind you stay in it or I will strap you down to curtail your midnight ramblings! Good-night gentlemen! Sleep well!" and then he was gone with his witch-like wife. We heard his heavy footfalls die away and then came a silence so profound and deep that I could hear the blood in my veins as it coursed around my frame.

THE quietness drew my attention to the cuckoo-clock, and then I recalled how it had suddenly stopped. Looking down at my wristwatch I noticed the time—eleven o'clock. Just at this precise moment the old time-piece began once more to record the passing seconds with its slow tick-tocking, so I set the hands to the correct time. Peter, acting upon the advice of the host locked the door and bolted it top and bottom. Soon after this we were in our separate oaken beds. We had forgotten to blow out the candle on the mantel-shelf, and I lay abed gazing at the sentinel-like flame when a gentle snore from Peter indicated that the Goddess Morpheus had taken him to her restful bosom. Then my eyelids closed and the candle was forgotten as sleep enshrouded my tired mind.

I awoke with a feeling that someone was in the room! The candle still burned. The cuckoo-clock tick-tocked on into the night. Gazing over to the door I could see that it was still securely bolted top and bottom. I turned my head to look over to Peter and then a slight noise distracted my gaze. It

came from one corner of the bedroom where a startling thing began to happen! A large square portion of the boarded floor in that corner began to move up and swing slowly over until it was tied backwards secured by a rope from below. Then a large shadowy figure gradually erupted from the sable void beneath until it emerged to reveal itself as that of the one-eyed inn-keeper. A stab of fear pierced my mind and flowed over my body. I lay transfixed, yet instinctively closing my eyes until they were mere slits, as an animal or bird will do when shamming death from the hunter.

I observed our host gradually approach the bedside of my friend and look down at him as he lay, no doubt in his inner-mind, in some faraway land of dreams. Even now I cannot quite fix the action of the blow, for it came so swiftly, was so annihilating! One second the right arm of the inn-keeper was down by his side holding some object I could not fully discern, then he had raised his arm, in the hand of which I recognized a heavy iron bar about two feet long held in a grip of human steel. So time-defying was that upswung movement, pausing delicately for a fraction of a second at its apex until it swept down so fast that I could not follow the downward stroke that I had no time to call out a warning to my friend. Even if I had been able I sincerely believe that it would have been of little use at that precise moment when time stayed its forward movement of continuity through space. I heard the crunch of bone as the iron-bar ended its journey. Peter's sleeping face from the top of his forehead to his chin opened up and a chasm down the centre of his head became alive with bubbling crimson. The grey-matter of the brain, suddenly released from the skull flew out in streaks of glistening spume splashing into the contorted face of the murderer! He did not lift the bar out but withdrew it swiftly lengthwise and then he turned to where I lay not so many short feet away.

I was fully awake now, struggling to rise, but a thousand strong lilliputian threads of material life held me fast. My spirit in its agony did nearly succeed in wresting itself from the flesh but those threads held fast and I was helpless. Then the monster of the

Red Horse Inn brooded over me and muttered, "He sleeps. My dear gentleman sleeps!" I saw the hairy arm swing up above me swift as light, until it hesitated for a split second before commencing its downward path of death! My body and my mind had become one solid mass of ice-coldness. I could not will myself to move a fraction, while a flowing movement inside me seemed as if my spirit had already commenced to project itself from my earthly frame now on the very threshold of material oblivion. My eyes caught sight of the candle flame which seemed to be growing taller and thinner like a sliver of steel and so acute was its brightness and thinness that it sliced right through one of my eye-balls severing the right to left swing of the optic nerve. The sudden pain jerked my head up partially and with my mind nearly insensible I saw the hands of the cuckoo-clock meet on the stroke of midnight. The imprisoned bird darted forth to make its first cracked call, as the day of August the SIXTEENTH, trembled on the line of the Present before becoming what we call the Past.

As that inane mechanical bird called out, the upheld arm of the murderer began to descend. All at once my arms were released into action and I threw them up in a momentary delayed reflex action. As the bird of the old time-piece commenced its second "cuckoo" the candle flame died, and my hands upheld before and beyond my hapless head bent inwards beneath a ruthless titanic movement. My head exploded as globes and stars, constellations, galaxies roared and hummed round and round in it a mad dance in limitless space. These gave way before exploding starless universes of flaming orange, seering crimson, and then all was blotted out by a blinding super solar heat-whiteness across which travelled heliotrope sine-waves, in a time-eternity as yet unborn. . . .

I WAS accused of the murder of my friend Peter Houndstone by killing him with an iron bar on the night of August the SIXTEENTH. The trial proved to be a magnet which drew to it the absorbed attention of the medical world concerned with the science of mental states. In the little courthouse, day after day, assembled a brilliant

nucleus of the leading stars in the neurological firmament. Why this was so I am not able to fully understand, for my statements at the trial about my movements and experiences of the SIXTEENTH of August were real, so therefore true. Evidence was brought forward on the authority of Sir William Stalisfield-Bowle, the well-known county chronicler, to tally with my story of the Red Horse Inn, the inn-keeper, and his wife.

Sir William stated that there had existed an inn called the Red Horse on the site where the body of my friend was found by the railway track. It was pulled down in 1890. A one-eyed inn-keeper of the name of Josiah Benacre had lived there, with his half-witted wife, until the night of August the SIXTEENTH, 1881, when he had murdered two sleeping travellers at the inn. He had then killed his wife. All three of the dead had evidently had their skulls crushed in by some very heavy weapon—presumably an iron bar, wielded with terrible strength and ferocity. Josiah Benacre disappeared, but was shortly afterwards apprehended as he was about to step aboard a vessel at distant Liverpool about to sail for America. The murder weapon could not be found.

Benacre was tried for his life, found guilty of the murders and hanged. Two doctors at his trial put forward the theory that it was quite possible that Benacre had suddenly gone berserk owing to the injury of his lost eye having after many years affected his brain and therefore his reason. Anyway, they hanged Josiah who, before he was cut off from life cursed whoever might find the missing murder weapon with which he confessed he had crushed in the skulls of his victims. The prosecution for the Crown quickly tore my strange evidence to pieces, for as the prosecutor said, the old inn had been out of existence for just over thirty years. The inn-keeper had been hanged and his remains lay several feet beneath the flagstones in the prison-yard nearby, while his wife rested in her lonely grave in the ramshackle churchyard in the old town below.

EVIDENCE showed that my friend and I had fought near some tangled undergrowth not a great distance from the site of the former Red Horse Inn. My poor friend's

face had been smashed in and when found was nothing but a crimson mask from which his protruding eye-balls gazed upwards to the blazing sun in the blue sky. I was arrested for the murder at my own home at Molesden the evening of the following day. I had been puzzled as to why I was home, for I felt I should not have been there. My parents were away at the time, having gone into the neighboring village to visit some friends. Then the police had arrived, with detectives and a pair of bloodhounds. It was not until after the shock of my arrest and the police statement as to why, that I could recall events, though not one thing about the awful crime I was supposed to have committed. My evidence of the day's fishing trip sent the police to find my fishing gear. They soon discovered it, in the kitchen. There it was: the fishing rod, the haversack with hooks and lines in it; the bait can and the creel. And in the wicker-work creel, upon a bed of damp mosses they found—the six pound prize roach my friend Peter had caught in the early evening of that yesterday!

There was the motive, said the prosecutor. The giant roach. I had been jealous of my friend's triumph. Perhaps I had offered to purchase it from him so that I might be able to bask in the drone-like possession of that marvellous piscatorial specimen. Failure to buy the fish had then led to trying to get it by force. My friend had then tried to defend his prize, but had paid the supreme price, had forfeited his life to my greed and jealousy and as the blood of Peter Houndstone soaked into the thirsty soil I had robbed him of the day's prize.

The murder weapon, the very iron bar some two feet long and an inch and a half in thickness, which I had fallen over in the undergrowth on our way to the Clayhole, was shown at the trial along with the creel with the fish in it coated with an embalming mixture to arrest its too early decomposition. My finger-prints had been found on my chum's creel and upon the fish also. But these did not signify as the defense pointed out, for I had no doubt handled the creel, and without doubt the prize roach long before the murder had been committed. In fact had no doubt handled them shortly after

the catch had been made on the banks of the old Clayhole.

The iron bar, pointed out the defense, was devoid of fingerprints. Only because, responded the prosecution, on account of the entire surface being several millimeters thick with crumbling rusty iron which formed a covering of little more than loosely cemented brown dust. Science, called in on the part of the prosecution, showed that the iron bar had been handled the day of the murder. Had been gripped very tight indeed. Science, that greatest of all enemies to the criminal world, also showed minute specks of corresponding brown metal dust from the pores of the skin of my right hand, and from a septic spot deep down in the lower part of the palm a minute sliver of corroded iron was forcepped out!

As the soul-destroying days of my trial dragged by, the battle for my life took on new shape. It was the Crown and the Forensic Department lusting for my blood and the Defense and Neurological Science trying their hardest not to have that blood spilled. So fair are trials in this land that even one of our greatest physicists and mathematicians was allowed to propound in court in collaboration with the two doctors of psychiatry his Theory of Space-Time Recurrence Frequency. For he based my innocence upon his Einsteinish calculations of Time in Space and the mathematical exactness of the past recurring at set times in the Present.

Through this Theory the Defense pointed out that I had got the rust in the pores of my right hand and the sliver of iron while protecting myself in that last action when I tried to fend off the blow from the inn-

keeper as he aimed the iron bar at my head in the Red Horse Inn. The deadly Prosecutor especially remarked that my head had quickly recovered from that murderous blow! He went on to say that quite possibly the learned physicist and mathematician could also account for this phenomenon? It was possible, said that great mathematician, through a slight outward deviation of the Space-Time curvature moving outwards on its never-ending orbital journeys.

Soon I shall be free. Free from the doubts, the torturing fears, the sleepless nights attendant upon my trial. As I stated earlier in this narrative, owing to my home being so far away and difficult to travel to, I cannot make a move until the morning, but now a very few hours away. At twenty minutes past eight in the morning, the hard tired car of the Albatross Bus Service will pull up in the old market square of this quaint town and await there while the driver-conductor delivers a few parcels to a nearby news-agent's shop, where they can be called for. Just on the half-hour he will collect the fares from the passengers and move into the driver's seat. As the clock over the crumbling town-hall chimes the half-hour he will let in the clutch. The gears will grind, and the racketty vehicle will move forward on its way to Forstal Green, Hawksden, Chart Magna, Thorneden, Witch's Cross, and my own village on the route . . . MOLESDEN!

Not until then shall I feel fully released and away on my journey for at that time precisely the Public Hangman will send me plummeting into space where I shall gently swing until I shall be medically assessed as having been hanged by the neck until I am dead!