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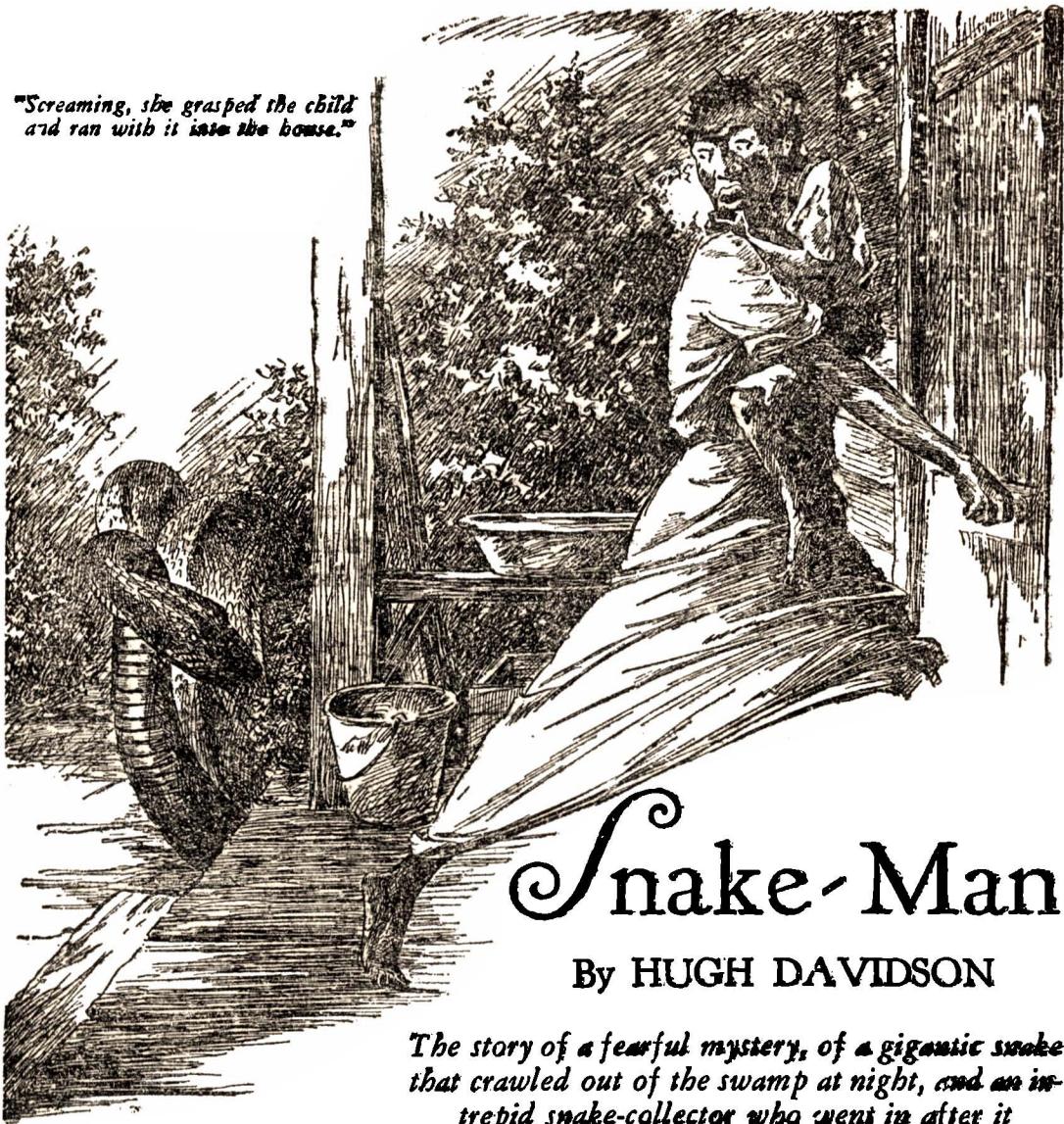
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"Screaming, she grasped the child and ran with it into the house."



Snake-Man

By HUGH DAVIDSON

The story of a fearful mystery, of a gigantic snake that crawled out of the swamp at night, and an intrepid snake-collector who went in after it

IMET Hemmerick upon his first coming to Corala. Peter Winton and I were chatting that morning on the station platform, Peter bemoaning the general cussedness of the garage business and I wondering aloud why on earth I had ever thought this inland Florida village a good place for a young attorney to settle. The spur train that runs into Corala from the main line pulled in as we were talking, and Hemmerick was the only passenger to alight from it.

My first casual impression of him as he approached us, suitcases in his hands, was

of a keen-looking middle-aged man with bright black eyes and a friendly face. He asked where he would find the village hotel and after a few more words introduced himself—Doctor John Hemmerick of Yates University and Eastern Zoological Museum. We took his cards and shook hands with him.

"This is Frank Rawlins, Corala's rising young lawyer," Peter told him, "and I'm the local representative of the automobile industry, known as Winton, Pete."

Hemmerick laughed. "I hope we'll be friends," he said, "for I'll be staying in

this district for some time. I've come to make some studies of this region's snake-life, in the Corala swamp."

"You've come to a good place, then," Peter said, "for if there's one thing that swamp has, it's snakes. You're going to stay here in the village? The swamp's about five miles west of here, you know."

"My idea was to locate somewhere at the swamp's edge if possible," Hemmerick answered. "It'd be much more convenient—most of my work in the swamp will have to be at night."

"You could stay in the old Drowl place at the north end of the swamp," I suggested. "That is, if you wouldn't mind roughing it."

"Yes, the Drowl house would be convenient," Peter agreed. "It's been abandoned for years and is in pretty bad shape, but it's right at the swamp's edge."

"That would suit me fine, then, for I'm used to discomfort on these trips," Hemmerick said. "How would I get out there?"

"There's a road runs almost to the place," Peter said. "But look here—why not let Rawlins and me drive you out this afternoon?"

"I couldn't think of bothering you," Hemmerick began, but we cut him short. "No bother at all," I told him. "We'll be around for you at two."

Hemmerick thanked us and promised to be ready, then found a negro boy to carry his luggage to the hotel and thus left us. That afternoon we called for him in Peter's roadster and drove out of Corala along the soft dirt road that leads in a wavering westward direction toward the swamp.

The country between the village and the swamp is only thinly inhabited, mostly by small farmers, white and black. There are marshy spots here and there

and these become more frequent as one approaches the big swamp.

Hemmerick was not surprised when we told him that snakes, especially the big diamond-back rattlers, were the dread of the region. He had apparently pursued his studies and quest for specimens over much of the world, for he told anecdotes of snakes he had encountered in South America and Africa and Asia, hooded cobras and deadly mambas, coral snakes and fer-de-lances, giant pythons and boas and anacondas. Our conversation had certainly a snaky flavor as we drove toward the swamp.

THE road grew rapidly more marshy and soon we stopped the car and got out to go the rest of the way on foot. The dense green wall of the swamp stretched not far ahead, a tangled mass of scrub pine and palmetto and saw-grass, rising out of soft marsh and stagnant green pools and waterways. We were near the north end of the swamp, which is roughly oval in shape and almost twelve miles in length.

Hemmerick's eyes lit as he looked along it. "There'll be snakes here all right," he said. "It looks like a snake-paradise."

"I can't imagine any paradise with rattlers and moccasins in it," Peter said. "But this path leads to the Drowl place."

In single file, with Peter leading, we followed the overgrown and half-visible trail leading along the swamp's edge. The rank breath of the marsh was sickening in my nostrils, a heavy musky odor of decay. Hemmerick seemed to breathe it in with zest.

In minutes we came to the rotting frame house known as the Drowl place. It stood at the very edge, a clear space of slimy green mud sloping down from it into the swamp.

I could think of no place where I would less like to live, the more so after we entered the damp and decaying front room of the house in time to see a good-sized snake writhe down into a hole in the rotted floor. But that only seemed to make Hemmerick the more enthusiastic about the place.

"It'll be the most convenient place imaginable for me while I'm working in the swamp," he said. "I can bring out enough stuff from the village to make it livable for the time being."

"Strange are the ways of scientists," said Peter. "I wouldn't live in this cheerful spot for enough specimens to fill ten museums."

"Nor would I," I agreed. "I don't fancy sleeping where snakes crawl in with you to keep warm."

Hemmerick laughed. "Every one to his liking," he said. "Besides, what sleeping I do here will be mostly in daytime—most of my snake-catching I do at night, with a bright light to dazzle them."

We drove Hemmerick back into Corala and the next day he arranged to have some simple furnishings and supplies taken out to the Drowl house. Hemmerick followed to take up residence in the place on the day after that, thanking us for our trouble and promising to look in on us whenever he came into the village.

He did come in a few days later and when I met him he was enthusiastic about the swamp—already, he said, he had found some magnificent specimens and one or two odd variations of usual snake-species. The swamp's denseness made search in it somewhat difficult by night, but he was more than satisfied, he said.

In the ordinary course of events I would not have seen Hemmerick for some time, probably, after that, but an unusual event led Peter and me to make

him a visit two days later. A negro named John Williams who had a small farm bordering on the swamp had come in to Corala with a snake story that had interested all listeners.

Williams was in a state of some excitement. His story was that a commotion among his small flock of goats down in his swamp-side corral had led him to investigate, before midnight on the preceding night. He had gone down to the corral and had seen in the moonlight the dark form of an incredibly large snake that had seized one of his young goats in its jaws and was gliding with it into the dark swamp.

He had, Williams said, watched the monster snake go in a sort of stupefaction, and only when it had vanished in the swamp did he think of his own peril and retreat hastily to the house. But with morning Williams had found the great snake's track in the soft mud to assure him what he had seen was no hallucination.

Williams' story led a number of men to go out from Corala that morning, Peter Winton among them, and they returned with assurance that there was certainly a snake-track of incredible size where Williams had said.

"Why, the snake that made that track must have been nearly a foot thick and heaven knows how long," Peter told me when we met that day at noon.

"Sounds impossible," I said. "No one ever heard of snakes that size around here, though one might have escaped from a circus or zoo."

"Wherever it came from originally, it came out of the swamp last night and went back in," he replied. "I'd hate to meet any snake that can take a goat like that."

A thought struck me. "Why not go out and tell Doctor Hemmerick about it?

He could probably tell from its track what it was, and anyway would be interested in it."

PETER accepted my suggestion and that afternoon we drove back out the swamp road to see Hemmerick. We left the car in the same place as before and went on along the swamp's edge to the old, decaying house.

We had to knock for some time before Hemmerick, yawning, came to the door. He explained he'd been busy in the swamp each night but wouldn't hear our apologies for waking him, and invited us inside.

The front room of the old house now held besides a few simple articles of furniture, a dozen wire cages in which were twenty or more living snakes of various kinds and sizes. I recognized some unusually large diamond-back rattlers, two fat brown water-moccasons, some harmless water-snakes and some green and white reptiles I couldn't identify. The room had a bitter, slimy odor of snake I found repellent.

Hemmerick looked around the cages with some pride. "These are some specimens I've been able to get already," he told us. "Got a good many of them near the house here, too, by night."

"It'd give me the creeps to have them in the same house with me," Peter said. "But Rawlins and I came out to tell you about a snake that tops all these."

Hemmerick heard our news with swift-mounting interest. "Why, I'm grateful to you for coming!" he exclaimed. "Of course I'll go over to look at the track—though I can't imagine what kind of snake native to these parts it could be."

"We could take you over," I suggested. "I want to see the thing's track myself—Peter was there this morning."

HEMMERICK locked his sagging door and came with us to the car. We drove along another wretchedly soft road parallel to the swamp's edge, toward its southern end.

We reached John Williams' little farm, an unpainted frame house surrounded by a score of cultivated acres that at their western border met the swamp's edge. Williams' wife told us her husband was down at the scene of the snake's appearance, and we three picked our way along the edge of a cornfield to the spot where we could glimpse Williams and two other negroes standing.

Williams was in earnest conversation with the other two, and I recognized one of them as Uncle Wally, a negro of some age who had a reputation among the blacks around Corala as a conjure man. He was pointing to the ground and saying something solemnly to Williams and the other.

They broke off their talk as they saw us approaching, and at Peter's request Williams showed us the track the snake had left. It was in the soft mud between Williams' little goat-corral and the swamp, leading up to the corral and then returning to the swamp. It was a groove in the mud some inches deep and a full foot across.

Hemmerick dropped to his knees and examined the track keenly. He looked up to us in a moment. "It's a snake track all right," he told us, "but who ever heard of a snake this size in this part of the world?"

"Sure was awful big," Williams said, shaking his head. "Grabbed that goat and went off with it right before my eyes—couldn't hardly believe what I was seein'."

"Did it have any markings you could see?" Hemmerick asked him. "What did it look like?"

"Jus' looked like big dark snake, all I got to see of it," Williams answered. "Its eyes were red, though—eyes shone jus' like red fire."

Hemmerick looked back at the track. "Rawlins said maybe the snake's one escaped from a circus or zoo," Peter told him, but Hemmerick shook his head.

"Circuses don't carry big snakes, and there's no zoo within several hundred miles of here. Yet how in the name of all zoological science did a snake that size get into this swamp?"

Williams spoke hesitatingly. "Uncle Wally say it wasn't a real snake at all," he said. "He say it was a snake-man."

"A snake-man?" Peter repeated. "What in the world's that?"

"Hit's a snake dat's a man in daytime," Uncle Wally told him solemnly. "Night-time comes, man uses devil-spell and turns into big snake. He crawl around all night as big snake, grab whatevah he sees, but daytime comes 'gain, spell change him back into man."

Hemmerick stood up. "I've heard that superstition before," he said interestedly. "When I was after mambas in Southern Africa I lived with tribes that believed utterly in snake-men. Their medicine-men told me lots about men who were men by day but whose compact with the forces of evil allowed them to take on snake form at night, and the spells by which it was done. I suppose the superstition here is a racial survival of that African one."

"Ain't no supahstitution," Uncle Wally asserted. "Hit's a snake-man made dis track all right—some one round heah livin' a man in daytime, an' a big snake in dis swamp at night."

"For all we know it might be you, Uncle Wally," said Peter, grinning. "You're the only conjure man around

here, and thus the only possible snake-man."

Hemmerick laughed and Uncle Wally looked strangely at him. "Mabbe you won't laugh at snake-man 'fore long," he told the scientist. "Mabbe you'll find out dat snake-man don't like man who captures snakes, an' dat snake-man'll come find dat man when he's snake at night."

"Well, snake-man or snake, I'd like to see the thing that made this track," Hemmerick said. "Maybe I'll meet it in the swamp some night—I hope so, at least."

We left the three negroes by the snake-track and went back to our car. As we drove Hemmerick back along the swamp road he was full of speculations about the snake's origin, and Peter and I were as puzzled and interested as he.

WE HEARD nothing more of the great snake, though, until three days later, when we learned that it had appeared again by night. This time it was one of the white farmers near the swamp's end, one Hannon, who had glimpsed the great creature.

Hannon's experience had been much like that of Williams. A squawking tumult in his chickenyard had roused him by night and he had stepped out just in time to see a monstrous black serpent-shape glide off to the swamp. Hannon had run back into the house for his gun, but when he got back out with it the snake was gone and five of his hens with it. Hannon swore, like Williams, that the snake's eyes had been fiery red in the glimpse he had had of it.

After Hannon's story none of us could doubt that a snake of extraordinary size haunted the swamp. There were many speculations as to how it had got there, and Hemmerick's statement that judging from its track the snake was of a kind unknown to him increased discussion. But

the negroes in and around Corala were unanimous in believing it a snake-man.

"Uncle Wally has the blacks so convinced there's a snake-man loose that it wouldn't take much to make them desert the county," Peter told me, chuckling.

"The old rascal's simply working up their superstitions for his own profit," I commented. "No doubt he's selling them charms against snake-men."

"They're looking up to Uncle Wally now, that's sure," Peter said. "They act in as much awe of him as if he were the snake-man himself."

"They'll get over it in a day or so. These superstitious scares of theirs don't usually last long."

I proved a poor prophet, for on the next day came news that not only intensified the terror of the negroes to an infinitely greater degree, but alarmed the section's white inhabitants also.

The great snake had appeared again at the farm of a negro named Cralley or Crallie, whose land was not far along the swamp's edge from that of Williams. The snake had come this time not long after nightfall, Cralley himself being in Corala with a load of produce but his wife and little boy at home.

Cralley had arrived home about ten to find the door barred and to hear his wife scream hysterically when he tried to open it. He had to smash down the door to get in and found her, with the child, in a state of terror approaching insanity. It had taken him most of the night to quiet her and find out what had happened.

The woman, with the little boy, had gone into a small pasture between the house and swamp not long after nightfall, to bring in a two-weeks-old calf that had been tied there. They had untied it and were returning, the boy proudly leading the little calf, when the woman had heard a strange rustling and turning

around had seen the great snake writhing toward them from the swamp, its huge dark body moving with incredible speed and its terrible head slightly raised as it advanced.

Screaming, she had grasped the child and run with it to the house. The snake had pursued and she had slammed the door almost in its jaws, piling table and chairs against it. It had remained outside the house for a little time, gliding around as though seeking entrance, and she heard its rustling crawl.

Then the sound ceased as though the snake were gliding away, and a minute later came a soft, strangled cry from the calf. She had not dared look out, but there had been no more sound of the snake's presence. Yet she had been still too numbed with terror to admit Cralley when he arrived. Cralley had found the calf gone and the snake's track leading into the swamp.

WHEN Cralley came into Corala with this story, it aroused instant response. What had been before but a matter of interest was now one of alarm. The huge snake must be hunted down before some child fell prey to it. Ross Sanders, Corala's deputy sheriff, organized a party to penetrate the swamp in search of it.

As the only hope of finding the snake in the big swamp would be by following its track, Peter Winton suggested that in such trailing the help of the experienced Hemmerick would be invaluable. Sanders agreed, and Peter and I drove out to Hemmerick's place that afternoon, as the hunting-party was to start in the swamp on the next morning.

We found Hemmerick's rotting house silent, and while Peter knocked to rouse the scientist from his usual daytime slumber, I noticed in the stretch of mud between the house and the swamp some

tracks like those the great snake had left at Williams' place.

I was calling Peter's attention to them when Hemmerick came to the door. "You've noticed those tracks already?" he said. "I'm certain they're of the same big snake that was at Williams' place. I wish I'd been here when they were made—three days ago I came in from the swamp at dawn to find the tracks had been made there in the night. And the next morning when I came back there were more tracks—the big snake had been here again in the night!"

"Why in the devil should it come here?" Peter said. "There's nothing here for it to get—nothing but you, Hemmerick."

"Maybe Hemmerick's what it was after," I said, smiling. "Uncle Wally would say that the snake-man's coming here after Hemmerick in revenge for his capturing so many of the swamp's snakes."

"But if it came twice, whatever its reason, it might come again," Peter said. "Why not lie in wait here for it with guns?"

Hemmerick shook his head. "That I wouldn't allow," he said. "If that snake—any snake—were killed here, all snakes would avoid the place by their strange snake-instinct, which would make my work here hard."

"I suppose you're right," Peter said, "but we've got to get the creature some way. You haven't heard of its latest appearance."

Hemmerick was serious when he had heard of the great snake's dreadful appearance at Cralley's farm. "Why, that's terrible!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad you're going to hunt the thing down—I'll be glad to help, for I'm keen to find out what kind of snake it really is."

"Well, I'll be satisfied just to see the

thing killed," I told him. "We're meeting at seven in the morning at Cralley's place—come in your swamp-clothes, of course."

The next morning saw some fifteen or sixteen of us assembled at Cralley's farm, Sanders heading our group. We were all in hip-boots and rough clothing and almost all of us had shotguns. Hemmerick appeared shortly after Peter and I arrived, and we all tramped down to the swamp's edge where the great snake's groove-trail was still clearly visible in the soft slime. Cralley was with us, and so was Williams.

We plunged into the swamp, and found the snake's track plain enough for a time in the mud and slime. But as we went on into the depths of the swamp, pools of green water lay more frequent in our path and the trail was much harder to follow. Hemmerick found it several times when none of the rest of us could do so.

HEMMERICK led the way, following the snake's trail in toward the center of the swamp. Though the sun blazed in the heavens, the light in the swamp was dim and pale, so dense the choked tangled vegetation. Hemmerick proved experienced enough in swamp-work, and more than once he pointed out quicksands we had not recognized as such.

By the afternoon we were well in toward the swamp's center. Peter and I were already well winded, but the trail was becoming ever harder to follow. Hemmerick scrutinized every inch of solid ground in search of it. Now and then we encountered snakes of various kinds, rattlesnakes and moccasins among them, some of unusually large size. But the great snake none had glimpsed.

At last even Hemmerick could follow the trail no farther. We stopped, knee-

deep in green water, a sweating, baffled group.

"Well, can't go no farther on this track," Sanders said. "One'd think the snake was taking care to hide its trail."

"Sure is the hardest I've ever followed," said Hemmerick. "The thing must have moved in the shallow water most of the time."

"We'll go back out to the Williams place and try following it in from there," Sanders decided. "It's an older trail there, but there's nothing to be gained hunting longer here."

We toiled out of the swamp and along its edge to Williams' farm, and started on the great snake's track there anew. This trail proved as hard to follow as the other, with the added handicap that in the several days that had elapsed since it had been made, rain had partly erased it.

Hemmerick again was the only one who could keep to the almost invisible trail. We plunged on after him, the rest of us having some difficulty at times in keeping up with the swamp-toughened scientist. We were heading in toward the center again, apparently, the light around us growing dimmer as the afternoon waned. At last, when the sun was setting and the swamp already darker, Hemmerick announced again that he could follow the trail no farther.

"It's too much for me," he said. "I've trailed far smaller snakes than this one through worse swamps, but they weren't so uncannily good in hiding their trail."

"Well, we've done what we can," Sanders said. "I guess we'll just have to give it up, and trust to the chance that some one will get the snake some time when it emerges from the swamp."

We tramped back out of the swamp for a second time, to Williams' place. Night had fallen by then and we found a knot of negroes in Williams' yard who

seemed waiting for news of our hunt. Among these was Uncle Wally. When they heard of our failure Uncle Wally shook his head.

"Can't track down snake-man—snake-man know nuff to hide his trail, all right," he said. "Nobody round heah smart nuff to catch snake-man."

"I'm inclined to think he's right," Hemmerick told us. "It was the toughest trail I ever followed, and the worst of it is I've got more swamp-work to do to-night."

"Be careful in there," Sanders told him seriously. "I'd hate to be in that swamp alone, with that creature somewhere in it."

"That doesn't worry me," Hemmerick said, as he turned away, our party splitting up by then. "I've met snakes as big or bigger than this one by night and had no trouble with them."

As he swung off into the darkness, Peter shook his head. "Well, cursed if I'd hurry home simply to get into the swamp again. I had enough swamp today to last me for a long time."

"Swamp's a bad place when dere's snake-man round," Uncle Wally said. "Dat man think he know all 'bout snakes, but when snake-man meet him some night he know different."

Uncle Wally moved off into the darkness too, and we saw that most of our party had already gone, the negroes dispersing. Sanders and Peter and I bade Williams good-night and started toward the road leading back to Corala.

"Sure hate going back without a chance at that snake," Sanders said when we reached the road. "I won't feel easy, knowing it's still here in the swamp."

"There's a chance we might find it at Hemmerick's place," Peter told him. "It come there twice in the night and might come again." He told Sanders about the tracks we had seen at the Drowl house.

"But Hemmerick said he'd not allow any one to lay for it or try to kill it at his place, Peter," I reminded him. Peter shook his head impatiently.

"What if he did?—he'll be gone into the swamp by the time we get there and it's the best thing to get that creature killed even if it does hamper Hemmerick's work by making snakes avoid the place."

Sanders thought, and then nodded. "It's worth trying," he said. "Hemmerick won't be there, and we can go before he comes back if the snake doesn't show up."

So instead of heading toward Corala we went along the swamp-road toward the north end. The moon had not yet risen and the swamp's dark wall was hardly distinguishable in the darkness beside us. Its rank odors seemed heavier at night than by day.

WE CAME finally toward the old Drowl house. As we had expected, there was no spark of light from it, Hemmerick having already entered the swamp on his usual nightly quest for specimens. The place was very silent, its odor of rotting wood mingling with the swamp's breath.

"All well," Sanders said. "Door's not locked, either—we can go right in."

"Be careful where you step," Peter warned him as he opened the door. "Hemmerick has some dozen cages of snakes in here."

We stepped up into the dark front room. The snaky odor was strong in the darkness and we heard from all about us a hissing and rustling that was blood-chilling.

Sanders struck a match and the flame showed us the room as Peter and I had seen it before, with Hemmerick's collection of snakes all about us in their wire

cages. Their unwinking eyes stared beadily at us in the light, some of them coiled and watching us with upraised heads.

"Nice place," grunted Sanders. "Move those cages away from the window at the swamp side, Peter—we can open it and watch the edge of the swamp from there."

While he lit matches, Peter and I shifted the cages with our gun-barrels to make a clear space by the window. We opened the window and drew up three of Hemmerick's camp-chairs to it.

In the darkness again as Sanders' matches went out, we could sit in the chairs and with gun-barrels resting on the edge of the open window could look down on the slope of slimy mud that lay beneath, between the house and the dark swamp. The moon was rising now, showing this muddy space clearly.

"This'll do," Sanders said. "If the snake comes out of the swamp again for whatever brought it before, we'll see and can let it have it."

"We'd better do it or leave before Hemmerick gets back," I warned, "for he'll be pretty angry to find us here."

"Hemmerick will probably be in the swamp until morning," Peter answered. "It's not midnight yet."

After that we were silent, waiting.

It was a strange wait, there in the darkness of the rotting house, watching the dark swamp and the stretch of moonlit mud that lay between house and swamp. The only sounds, save when Sanders or Peter shifted restlessly, were the occasional rustling of the snakes in the cages about us. It was a spine-thrilling sound to us, sitting in darkness.

Time passed silently, slowly, as we waited, the moon swinging higher. I felt my confidence in Peter's plan on the wane. Why should the great snake approach Hemmerick's house again? Why

had it come before, even? Uncle Wally had said it was the snake-man coming to revenge on Hemmerick the swamp's snakes he had captured, an explanation I smiled to remember. Yet I was puzzled as to what attraction drew the great snake to Hemmerick's house.

I pictured Hemmerick out in the dark swamp, searching for his specimens with patient obliviousness to discomfort and danger. There was no movement in the swamp that I could see or hear, nor on the slimy shore beneath. Hours had passed. The moon had swung into the western quarter of the sky.

Peter spoke, his voice low. "If our snake doesn't show up before long we'll have no chance at him," he said. "Hemmerick will be back soon—it's near morning."

"We'll wait a while longer," Sanders answered, "though I don't want Hemmerick to find us here when he gets back."

We were silent again, watching, waiting. The occasional rustle of the reptiles in the cages was still the only sound. Time passed, and an almost imperceptible dulling of the moonlight showed that night would soon be over.

We still stared out. There moved nothing in the dark swamp—but suddenly now there did move something! It was a dark shadow of something, advancing out of the swamp in soundless, gliding movement.

I KNEW as Sanders and Peter straightened beside me that they too had seen. Our fingers were on our triggers as we raised our guns. And out of the swamp onto the moonlit mud between it and the house there writhed a huge dark snake-shape, gliding up toward the house with great snake-body and hideous head and

red eyes clear in the moonlight. The next instant we pressed on our triggers.

The shattering roar of our guns split the night and we saw the great dark snake-body below coiling and flexing wildly, convulsively, then contracting and lying still. I cried out excitedly, and we leapt out through the window and down to that dark mass.

We bent over it and then there came a choking cry from Sanders, another from Peter. It was no snake-body that lay huddled there now but the body of a man, his rough dark clothing torn by our shots! He lay with body contracted terribly, and his face that showed pale and set in the moonlight was the face of Doctor John Hemmerick!

"Hemmerick! Hemmerick! God, and a moment ago he was the great snake!" cried Peter. "A snake-man—and we didn't believe!"

My brain seemed cracking. "Hemmerick the snake-man—the great snake! He told us he learned about snake-men in Africa, remember! He told us he'd learned the spells of the snake-men—and it was he in the swamp at night—" My voice choked into a whisper.

"Listen to me, you two!" Sanders, swaying himself, had gripped our arms. "Hemmerick was no snake-man—there's no such thing as a snake-man—we killed Hemmerick by accident, do you understand? By accident!"

His voice broke. "My God, they'd hold us all insane if we told. Hemmerick was shot by accident, do you hear?"

"We understand—Hemmerick was shot accidentally, and there's no such thing as a snake-man," Peter managed to answer. "But when Hemmerick died the great snake died, and only we three will ever know that they died—together."