

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

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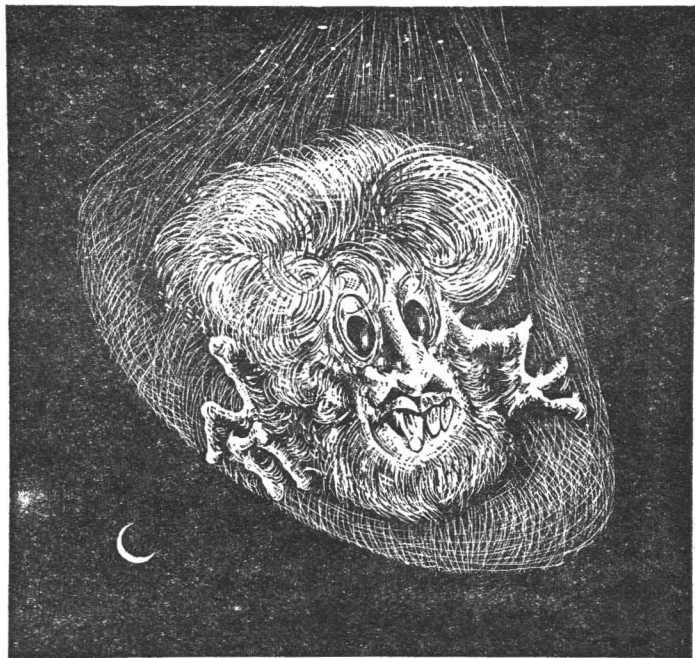
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D. McLWRAITH, Editor

Terror Under Eridu



BY MALCOLM M. FERGUSON

BY ALL that is holy I urge whoever reads these words, get out at once. Leave the Temple of Ehpor. Do not delay. Take this writing with you and read it outside. Then you may return if so utterly, abjectly mis-

guided. Stranger, a dying, doomed man urges you thus, in a matter which transcends life or death—yours or mine. Go at once, and only open these pages out of doors. . .

"I can only hope, stranger, that you have obeyed my injunction, and what I have to

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

Beware of the lidded gastropod guarding the inner chambers and their terrible secrets!

say reaches the outer world in time. Maybe it will reach the eyes of someone possessed of a genius great enough to help, for my distracted mind cannot.

"The floor of the front chamber of the Temple of Epor, I now know, is a sentient thing, its surface resembling a gigantic doorbell-pushbutton, though involving no mere batteries and alarms. *It is a part of a living creature.*

"Mind-staggering nightmarish thing! Oh, horror, horror beyond conjecture! By what madness could this be brought about that the lidded mouth-foot of a gastropod of unheard-of size be guardian for the inner chambers? It is the crowning horror, for when I won my way back just now to this front chamber I thought marvelingly, that I had escaped. But my light showed the small outer doorway even then being blocked by the oozing, sidewise-canting rise of the floor, leaving me confined, a prey. For I will never return to the depths below the temple.

"Already the rising lid or operculum reveals the creature beneath. I thrust this with my notebook at the feet of Epor. Not alive will the snail-thing engulf and consume me. Heed well the notebook; it matters. I no longer do. Samuel Wheelcraft Chard—31 December 1913."

Thirty-five years later Major Jeffrey Lemperey, standing before the Temple of Epor, turned to Theodore P. Marsh, his co-leader of the Apthorp Fund Expedition exploring the ruins of ancient Eridanus.

"Well, this is idiocy. Do you suppose this Chard bozo was trying to throw a scare into us? And if so, why?"

"He might be a nut, I suppose. Or a practical joker. Apparently he either left after writing this, or was done in by person or things unknown. Surely he never reported his discoveries or the institute would have them in its files."

"We may as well read his notebook while we're here: By the way, did you notice the floor?"

"Yes, Ted. It was gray and all of a piece. Don't you remember I remarked on it? I couldn't see how it had been put together without fissures. Come to think of it, it did seem slightly resilient, like cartilage."

"Hmmm. Perhaps this Chard fellow was already stirred up by something else, and suggestion readily became reality for him. Just one look at the statue of Epor might do it. Maybe, too, he knew more than we do. Nebo and Nergal and Marduk and Ninib I knew, but Epor, no. How alien, primordial that statue seemed, how slimy were its basalt lines. But the notebook, Jeff."

The notebook of Samuel Wheelcraft Chard:

Eridanus at last. Here in a waste of sands was once the seaport of the Euphrates. Eridanus that gave the river its bygone name, Eridu, and even the stellar river now swinging wide above my head. Eridanus of Chaldea, whose gods were great. Tsou and Nod and the deathless Epor.

How far from us were these spade-bearded men, richly living, richly accounted, accounted magicians in the days of Biblical Daniel.

The sealing of their sorcery was reputedly ever perfect; a remarkable thing, for such secrets are ever blabbed about, as hard to confine as open ground-water. And that is why I came here, a one man expedition, a Peer Gynt puzzling this problem. For I do believe that the Eridanean Chaldeans had a power of sorts; perhaps imperfect, capricious, set to do some things and not others, tricky, part "deus" and part "machina."

Before the Temple of Epor is an old sand-and-wind-weathered sign in Arabic, invoking an injunction from Al Koran not to meddle hereabouts. Taboo. Bad medicine. Verboten. . . . How weird the temple looks in the starlight, long and lean, like a coffin on its side. The only doorway is in the front, no bigger than a house-door, built low, near the west corner (was it for astronomical reasons that the Chaldeans faced their temples north, one wonders?) reminding me of the passageway that snakes sometimes make or find to winter in a coffin—having heard of a baker's dozen so found in my native New England. But these are chideworthy, childish, morbid thoughts, and I don't want to add to my trepidations at tomorrow's exploration of the Temple of Epor. Enough for yesterday and today discovery of the temple, examining of the exterior, and clearing away a century or per-

haps a millennium of sand from the blocked doorway, whose cornice alone appeared. Possibly something in the blind face, the odious decorations on the cornice and of the walls themselves had caused the unknown Arab to erect that sign.

I'm taking this notebook, my pistol, plus a miner's headlight equipped with batteries mounted at my waist to last forty-eight hours of usage. I can imagine circumstances under which it would be damnably unpleasant to be without a light. . . . (Later:) My God, what I have been through? Can the body be caught in the mind's nightmare? Or could I become mad by passing through the doorway of the Temple of Ehpör—caught in a madness new and strange to the set of my mind?

YOU who read this must have penetrated to the statue of Ehpör, and your flashlights limned its horrid ebon, obese form, seeing (with but a dread foretaste) the image of this slimy riser from some unguessed primordial fen.

Yes, all about you is desert now, but underneath—underneath a Euphrates channel seeps—through a muddy "cavern measureless to man, down to a sunless sea." A sea and a sea's edge alive with remnant creatures which remember other suns, and abide their coming again! Yet how fearful, dangerous, inimical to man is their abiding

None of this I knew when I gazed upon Ehpör, wondering at the minds that had devised such a creature—a man-dinosaur, I called him, combining the brutal power of

Tyrannosaurus rex, a cranial capacity as big as man's, bigger, even, being to proportion, plus the dark skin of an amphibian. The heavy, stubby tail confirmed my classification—as an anomaly. Yet how could the Chaldeans have seen a dinosaur to base their absurdly imagined mutation upon?

After about twenty minutes in the temple's main upper chamber I descended the rock-encased stairway leading from Ehpör's right. At a level twenty feet lower I found myself in a room with three doorways—right, left and straight ahead. I chose the one before me, and found myself in one room of at least several, proving to be a sort of museum, scarcely furnished. Here my miner's lamp singled out, on pedestals, two statuettes which looked African, and beyond them were strangely adapted scale models of simple machines—pumps, a lathe, hoists. Next a metronome and a crystal ball. Last of all, an escapement wheel. Good Lord, my mind cried out, such devices could not have been known in Eridanus!

Then I thought of the African tribes which inhabited tombs, of hermit crabs occupying periwinkle shells, and of other creatures that pre-empted habitation already made. Under the present circumstances this thought was thoroughly disturbing and repellent to me, full of implications I could not hope to grasp. And rising out of the perplexity, another. Why had this collection been put together? Was it a haphazard, magpie gathering, or did it have a logical reason? Impossibly modern it was, yet so far wholly in keeping with the ancient scheme of the building.

I went on from one room to another and found always more irregularly-shaped rooms in all directions. I was becoming fearful that I might get lost, a fear accentuated by the total absence of light other than that of my own miner's light, when I found a blank wall in front of me. This relieved me by limiting the area I might get lost in. I therefore explored the room to my right, continuing rather than retracing my way. This was empty to my glance. It, too, opened only on two sides plus the third doorway in which I stood. The opening to

my right was a descending staircase. Making mental note of the number and direction of rooms I had traversed, I went toward the chamber ahead. It was totally filled with spidery filaments, centering around a six foot cocoon, which was held suspended from the floor.

Great heavens, was my mind playing tricks on me, or was there a weaving creature there even then? I could not know, for the sudden confronting of the web and its overwhelmingly large cocoon so occupied me that a scuttled retreat of a creature the size of a human head over grown with hair—such a figure could have existed either in my harassed imagination or in the reality of an uncertain miner's lamp.

I don't know which is more nerve-racking, a miner's headlamp or a hand-held flashlight. The former looks where you do, and can't see from the corner of its round eye. The latter probes nervously with increasing rapidity so that one soon is unable to tell what he has seen and what has deceived him, or yet looms darkly, in his light's fitful progress.

In turning from that fearful room my light caught something I had not seen before. I don't know why I didn't faint.

Four men stood, leaning slightly, against the wall. They were dressed in modern costume, though with different modifications (as if for climate, time of day, occupation and so forth). Each stood with ghastly stiffness, and wore a card. A line of English amidst the hash of alien markings stood out as my miner's light leapt frantically from one to another:

AMBROSE BIERCE RUDOLPH DIESEL
ALBERT JEWEL J. WILBERFORCE
MARTIN

(Editor's note: As Samuel W. Chard could not have known, each of these four prominent men were reported to have vanished from the face of the earth or from ocean-going steamers during the year 1913.)

And now from the rooms which I had come I could hear a measured tread. It was coming nearer. Crazily, I plunged down the staircase, deeper. I fled down two flights

in panic haste. Down below I could hear the slow splash and slap of water.

I STOPPED, turning like a trapped rat, my pistol in my hand. A single-celled room opened off the staircase. In it, incredibly, was a modern, freshly-made bed, and on that bed's white scented counterpane a freshly-cut red rose. But as the steps continued on the staircase I turned down once more.

Had some other explorer tumbled on my trail, I wondered, my mind seeking the unlikely "natural" explanation. Desperate, determined, I refused to be driven further by the approaching footsteps, to be hustled ever deeper until I met other dangers, or at least the hazards of strange footing. On reaching the next level I probed with my headlamp.

I saw then that to stand and meet whoever or whatever approached was indeed my best chance. For ahead of me at the end of a hallway was a subterranean river's edge. A doorway led off to right and left, that on the left having the appearance as I glanced hastily, frantically, seeking reassurance that my back would be protected from I knew not what—like a library.

I pointed my drawn, cocked pistol at the stone staircase. My hand shook as I waited the long moment between sound and sight, realizing that my light would warn the newcomer, removing any advantage I might hope to seize. Sandals of antique mode appeared, opposite my sights, followed by a chunky, gowned figure. But when at last the face came in view my pistol fell from my shaking hands.

The man was blind.

Ordinarily blindness evokes my sympathy. Yet coming here it augured much of the fearful, of horror. The man was short, of a square powerful build, with red hair. His skin was totally devoid of color.

I had drawn in my breath, and held it now as he approached me. I turned, silently, following him with eyes, pistol and miner's light until he had passed within arm's reach of me, and had turned along a walk that followed the river's edge. It was like a mad dream come alive. Somehow I felt he

would turn suddenly while I watched, and seize me. Yet he had kept on.

Blind he could be, and pale from a sojourn underground. Blind and pale and underground, too, are the dead, my mind thrust up at me, frenzied by the encounter. And the thought, once said in my mind, would not be still.

But whether living or dead, or either-neither, here was a component of a cult utterly alien to our race and to all else on our planet. The bizarre museum; those immobile figures outside the web-and-cocoon-filled room; the very fit of these features to this labyrinthine structure which outdates recorded history, all point to a mad, mind-staggering scheme beyond our experience.

It is hard to explain why I did not then run at once back up the stairs and through the terrible series of chambers to leave forever the Temple of Ehpor. Could you understand that I was afraid to? Flight is coupled in the mind with pursuit, and with panic which increases the jeopardy. One imagines, and sometimes meets in flight, sudden assailings and encounters from right and left (What an unnatural thing a crumpled newspaper is to a horse!). I had neither the strength nor the nerve left for such sudden encounters, though daring more, really, barring panic surprise.

But I will not explain what I did; I'll tell it.

Reassuring myself with my Cyclopean headlamp, I saw that the room was indeed a library, a polyglot affair including bound books in languages in incomprehensible dislocation of time and reason. Some were in English, I tell you. The room appeared empty.

I had noticed reflected light on the river, to my left, upstream, and from this, conjectured that not all here were blind. I had been careful, after my initial probe, not to send my light beams out across the river. There being enough light to see by, I switched off my headlamp, got down on my hands and knees, and with my pistol in my right hand crept to the doorway leading to the river. This put my head at an unexpected level, gave me more solid footing plus an instinctive reassurance, for I was trembling

badly. Of course my back was vulnerable to attack if I had been detected, I was painfully aware.

WHAT I saw made me almost forget myself. A score of men—creatures, rather, in the aspect of men,—were standing, some holding torches. All except two were identical in build, and in unnatural stiffness, with the creature who had passed me. The other two were a man and a woman; he, tall, black-bearded, handsome, in a modern suit of clothes, yet with a sort of fez, sandals, accoutrements. . . . She but slightly shorter, beautiful in a daring dress of unconventional cut.

Slowly, as I watched, the balance of a large water-clock tipped, and the ascending beam struck a gong. The sound caused a stir in the air as a dozen pair of wings flapped. Bats, I thought. No; they were too large, and had tails. Pterodactyls, I now believe.

The bearded man began an incantation, standing on a raised dais, while she, on another, stood statuesque ten feet away, and circling both in one ring were the torch-bearing automata, whose heads were now concealed by cowls. He addressed the river, pleading, acting out a drama that was incomprehensible yet wholly terrifying.

Music began. Wailing, whining, and rumbling, with a cadent *pull* to it, evocative. And with it, she began to dance.

Then I saw the head. And seeing it, the human figures shrank to insignificant cavorting and exhorting puppets. There, neck-deep in the murky water was the head of Ehpör!

Living. The shoulders emerged and then the squat black torso on heavy, human-like legs. Rising from the muddy waters he came and squatted in the place between the male and female idolaters. And there were whisperings, gutteral ribaldries, lulling syllables and profane-seeming phrase between the three, instructions of horrible import.

Then I pointed my pistol at Ehpör and fired. A pistol is a poor thing at sixty feet. Yet I think there was a start of brackish blood from the creature's side as he stood toweringly erect like a monstrous amphibian ape, raging.

The three—and I too somehow—stood transfixed. But the male idolater, first to move, seized a torch and ran, not around the arc of shore towards me, but to a top-heavy spirate pillar, and to it applied the torch's heat, while bawling directions, polyglot and profane. I turned on my headlamp and fled, empty, smoking pistol in hand.

The rest you know. My arrival upstairs to discover the ghastly animate upheaval of the floor. Surely the idolater's torch heat had touched a nerve; and the gastropod winced awake, aroused.

I write this with my miner's lamp turned on, and my loaded pistol cocked in my left hand. I presume that the search for me was delayed by the urgency of appeasing and perhaps ministering to Ehpör (badly wounded, or thoroughly angered at a suspected trap, dare I hope?); possibly added to this assumption that I, strange interloper, was one of the four figures outside the cocoon room come unpredictably to life, and would not know the way to the blocked exit. But this is conjecture, much remaining undiscovered in the vastness of this castle subterranea. I fling this notebook in the lap of the stone Ehpör, avoiding the engulfing maw of the gastropod, now fully open. Perhaps before I die I will shoot the idolater who has renounced and betrayed the human race. I can hear them below me now. . . .

Note by Jeffrey Lemperley, Major, U. S. Army: At the foot of the flight of stairs on the left and right are empty chambers. Straight ahead are stone blocks weighing perhaps a ton each, skilfully set in. Whether recently implaced or part of the original solid foundation, we cannot say. The stones are of ancient quarrying, apparently. This limits the extent of the Temple of Ehpör, barring secret passages, of such cunning contrivance that we haven't found them.

While we brand this a fiction, we are sending it out with our reports by today's courier. We are photographing the statue of Ehpör, and studying some of the friezes, which have novel aspects, but after that we will look for something more interesting, especially, relating to Marduk or Nergal, Nebo or Ninib.