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Weird Tales



THE BLACK GARGOYLE

By HUGH B. CAVE

EDMOND HAMILTON
CLARK ASHTON SMITH
DAVID H. KELLER
PAUL ERNST
HAZEL HEALD



A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"He came in on his hands and knees. His mouth was twitching, his features unpleasantly white."



The Black Gargoyle

By HUGH B. CAVE

A tale of goose-flesh horror in the jungles of Borneo—a story of stark terror and the strange doom of an evil white man

GOMEZ was in charge of the jungle garrison at Long Tjuo—*controlleur* if you like official titles better—when Martin Gow and I stopped there on our way up the Mahakam. We were heading for the Upper Merasi, there to meet Langerford, the leader of our expedition, and push on into Iban territory. We were in no hurry, of course. Museum

expeditions never are. And after that gruelling journey up the Mahakam, from Samarinda, we were glad enough to accept Gomez's invitation to lie up for a while.

That was the queer thing about Gomez. He meant well. He would have given a complete stranger his own private quarters and the last bottle of whisky in his

quinine cabinet. But you simply couldn't like him for it. In some blundering fashion of his own, he made you feel uneasy and furtive, and downright hostile. You looked at his fat, flabby face and at his unwashed whites and the matted hair on his chest, and you felt—well, as if some black, bloated leech had suddenly adhered to your clothing. And his eternal grin was positively gruesome after ten minutes.

The grin was the first thing I really hated about the man. We had to endure it through dinner that first night, and I could feel it eating into me. It was as hideous as gangrene. Martin and I would certainly have got up and walked out of the residency on some pretext or another, if young Trellegen and his charming wife had not been at the table—especially when Gomez began his story-telling.

I am convinced now that the man was diseased. There was something mentally wrong with him—some maggot of morbidity boring into his brain. He delighted in horror; in enacting it, in describing it, in visualizing it—but always with that grin.

There was triumph in the grin, and exultation, and eagerness. For an hour the man sat there with a cup of tea in one hand and a spoon in the other, and a half-caten durian on the plate before him, while he blurted tales that made my innards turn. Stories of his own doings, rained you.

He told us, for example, how he had once hung a native murderer in a mangrove swamp, lowering the poor devil inch by inch into the water with a great stone bound to his legs. How he had shot another wrong-doer with a Luger, and a dum-dummed bullet, from a distance of six inches. He told us how he had whipped old Giana, the village *blian* or witch-man, to death three months ago,

and then hacked off the man's head with an ordinary table-knife, as an example to other Dyaks who might aspire to the forbidden practise of magic-making. How—but young Trellegen's wife had gone sickly white by this time; so Gomez laughed good-humoredly and said:

"You mus' unnerstan', I have be in Borneo seven long year. It make a difference."

"Most men," Martin shrugged, "are either dead or crazy by that time."

"Me, I am neither," Gomez grinned. "It is weak men who are those things. Men who are physical weak, they catch black-water or beri-beri and die from sickness. Men who are mental weak, they go insane from heat or because they think too much. Or they are kill by Dyaks because they show fearness. Me, I am much hated, so I am safe."

He was right about the hate, though it was more terror than hate. We had a chance, just before Trellegen and his wife left, to see the system in operation.

"You watch," Gomez grinned. "I show you."

He swung about in his chair and called gutturally: "You, Monkee! Come here quick!" Monkee—Moni-oa was his real name, as I learned later most unpleasantly—was the little house-boy who served us. A slight, emaciated devil with Saputan and Iban blood and a wasp-like face, and the queer chattering voice of a macaque.

He came running from the kitchen in response to Gomez's bellowing summons. Quick as a spider he darted to the table and stood—you know how abruptly a spider can freeze to immobility—beside the big Dutchman's chair.

"Yes, *Tuan*?" he said; and he was very frightened. He spoke in a timid whisper.

"Where's my smokes?" Gomez snapped at him. "By God, I got a good

mind to break you in pieces, you thieving devil!" He snatched a fork from the plate beside him and lunged to his feet, brandishing it. "If you been stealin'——"

It was pitiful. If Gomez thought to impress us with the display, he failed utterly. We were more revolted than amused. The little Saputan recoiled with incredible swiftness, throwing up his hands and hurling himself backward. "No, no, no, no!" he screamed. "Don' kill Monkee! Monkee never steal! Monkee——"

"Come here," Gomez snarled, lowering the fork.

"You no hurt Monkee! No, no, no!"

"Come here!"

Moni-oa cringed forward, whimpering.

"When you speak to a white man," Gomez scowled, taking him savagely by the wrist, "what you say?"

"I say — *Tuan* — always, *Tuan*. I never——"

"Then don't forget it," Gomez rasped. "Now get! *Bukat!* Beat it!"

And then he turned to us, grinning with positive satisfaction, as if he had done something to make us admire his prestige. "You see?" he said. "They are 'fraid of me."

WE ENDURED him for an hour longer, principally because young Trellegen and his pretty wife were such good company. Josephina—that was her name and she was Spanish, I believe—sang for us while Martin strummed the guitar. Moni-oa crept from the kitchen to listen and to stare with wide eyes. Gomez placed a lamp on the table and lighted it, and remained decently silent for a while.

We paid little attention to Gomez after that. I think we forgot him completely until he got out of his chair and went to the window. But then we all looked at him quite suddenly, for he turned with a huge grin and said abruptly:

"It is grow dark outside, my fren'. You have wait too long!"

Martin and I gasped at him foolishly. Young Trellegen's face went white with fantastic quickness. He stiffened in his chair; and his wife touched his shoulder with a nervous little thrust of her hand, as if to reassure him.

"We can find a lantern," she said. "It's all right, Roger."

"Yes, of course. Of course we can," Trellegen replied weakly. But the relief in his voice was slow in coming, and he was afraid. He stood up, rather jerkily I thought, and reached for Gomez's arm. "You'll get us a lantern, won't you, Gomez?" he faltered.

Gomez grinned and dragged the lamp across the table. Martin and I exchanged significant glances. A lamp, to cross a mere hundred yards of open village? It was ridiculous! There was something here that we did not comprehend. Something deep.

"I can't stand the dark," Trellegen blurted with astonishing frankness, noticing our bewilderment. "I can't *stand* it—not after hearing those awful cries!" There was no mistaking the genuine terror in his voice. "I—go on, say it!" he choked, flushing bitterly.

"Say what?" I frowned.

"Tell me I'm a coward!"

"Bosh," I said. "I don't think for a minute——"

"I can't help it," Trellegen said hoarsely. "I've listened to them night after night. They've got me. God in heaven, I'd give my right arm if I knew a way to overcome it!"

"Don't be foolish," Martin smiled, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "It's mere fancy. Just jungle fright. We've all had it."

And so Trellegen and his wife left us. Holding hands, they went across the kam-

pong like two timid children, thrusting the lamp before them. Gomez, closing the door, turned with that maddening grin and said:

"They are frighten'. Young Trellegen, it is his first time in the jungle. The gover'men' should have keep him in Bandjermasin, no?"

"He says he hears—voices!" I scowled. "What voices?"

"It is nothing, my fren'. There are cries in the night, sometime', which are made by the Dyaks, to frighten *me*. The Dyaks, they do not like me; they would be glad to make me go away from here. These cries, they are not pleasant. Trellegen, he have hear them and they frighten him. Me they do not affect."

"His wife is a lovely little thing," Martin mused. "It's a damned shame."

"She is fine, eh?" Gomez leered. "Listen, I will tell you a story how——"

But we had had enough. Quite enough of Gomez's horrible stories and of that everlasting broadside grin. We excused ourselves and cleared out with a cursory good-night.

OUR Dyak abode, on the far side of the village close to the ranshackle shanty occupied by Trellegen and his wife and their Malay boy, was a queer combination of safety and risk. It was typically Dyak—a pill-box of mud-caked bamboo and nipa, propped between heaven and earth on hewn uprights. You entered it monkey-wise, by means of the usual primitive tree-trunk ladder. And once inside, you were exceedingly careful where you stepped, since the floor was a lattice-work affair of bamboo poles covered with mats of lahang grass, not too solid and certainly not free from ticks and occasional centipedes—the latter both vicious and poisonous.

We had two camp cots, one against

either wall, and our own mosquito netting draped across the entrance. Beyond that we had made no alterations. The hut had been abandoned when we arrived, and Gomez had informed us, with more than his usual grin, that it was ours for the taking. A row of fleshless skulls smiled their welcome above the doorway. A dried human head, relic of a pleasant little pastime of earlier days, sat back on a beam over my head, comfortingly concealed by shadows. A Dyak head-dress laughed across at me from the opposite wall; and I swear the blessed thing really did laugh. It was fashioned of an ancient animal skin, full of lice and wriggling things, painted grotesquely to portray a fantastic face with leering mouth and protruding teeth. It spoke well for the maker's imagination!

Martin was gazing up at it as I sat down to tug my boots off. He looked at me soberly, as if I were to blame for the thing, and he said with a smirk:

"Reminds me, that does, of the old familiar fireplace legend."

"Yes?" I said. "What?"

"'Who is in our midst?' That Johnny is enough to scare the living wits out of an undertaker."

"Quite," I agreed.

He glanced at me quickly, curiously. Then he said sharply:

"You think so?"

"Think what?"

"It would throw a scare into you, if you bumped into it unexpectedly, say on a dark night?"

I squinted at the thing and shuddered. Scare me? That gargoyle countenance, grimacing with facetious evil, would have given me the creeping horrors if I ever faced it without warning.

"Don't ever let me in here alone," I said soberly, "when I'm soaked with tuak,

or with Gomez's spiked whisky, I'd be a corpse in ten seconds."

Then I stretched out and pulled the blankets over me. Something was wriggling through the thatch, in the corner, with a noise like a fingernail scraping a straw hat. A big brown tck-tck bug was scrambling up the mosquito netting, and a skipping-on-the-ice bird was chanting outside. When I turned my face to the wall, Martin was still peering at the unlovely creation above him, and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. His imagination was better than mine.

I DID not sleep long. When I awoke, twitching, with that double crescendo of violence piercing my ears, Martin was still sitting on his bunk. He had not yet retired.

It was a human scream that waked me—a jangling, terror-choked shriek that tocsinned over the kampong like the voice of a gibbon. With it came the clapping detonation of a revolver shot.

I was up with a jerk. One does not lie still and listen to such things in the heart of Mahakam jungles. I was at our narrow doorway, tugging at the mosquito drop, even before Martin lurched into me.

For a tense second we saw nothing. No sounds followed the first two. The kampong was fantastically quiet, and the surrounding jungle had been abruptly hushed. There was an eery stillness over every dormant object of darkness that seemed full of brooding danger.

"Get your boots on!" Martin snapped.

I scrambled back and seized boots, belt, revolver. There is a sense of safety in being fully clad when trouble intrudes. Strip a civilized man of his garb and you strip his courage likewise—doubly so in the jungle!

But when I groped back to the entry, where Martin crouched defensively, the

impending trouble was past. Peering down, with Martin clutching my arm stiffly, I saw a figure advancing leisurely across the clearing, holding a revolver in one dangling hand and a whisky bottle in the other. It was Gomez.

He came straight toward us and would have passed within a yard of our ladder. He walked with the exaggerated carelessness of a man who is utterly sure of himself and is saturated with a conceited contempt for any danger that might lurk behind him. Martin's curt voice, demanding harshly if something was wrong, fetched Gomez up with an abrupt jerk, as if the very danger which the man scorned had dared to lash out at him.

He stiffened and looked up sharply. For an instant he seemed afraid. Then, even in the pale half-light which blurred the clearing, I saw that he was grinning.

"It is nothing," he shrugged. "A quart of good whisky, it is stole from me by my devil Monkee, so I go to bring it back. See?" He swung the bottle up before his face. "It is just one of those sorry things which sometime' happen," he said, and shrugged again. "That is all."

He laughed aloud—cruelly, I thought—and then continued toward his own shack. We watched him until the doorway had gulped him up. Then, guessing what had occurred, we returned very quietly to our beds. But this time Martin did not sit and stare at the Dyak head-dress above us. He had no stomach for further horror. And this time I did not sleep so easily. My thoughts bothered me for a long time.

I could not drive that absurd picture out of my mind—that picture of the dangling revolver and the uplifted whisky bottle, and the gaping grin on Gomez's evil face.

And then, half an hour later, *it* came.

Lying awake in the dark, listening to the irregular in-and-out of Martin's breathing, I heard it. It began with a soft scraping, sucking sound, almost inaudible, as if something or someone *inside* our hut were struggling futilely to get *out*. It came from the roof—or so I thought at first—but it was not the ordinary noise of crawling things in the thatch, or of scampering things outside the thatch; it was a slithering, sliding sound as of some wet, limp, spongy thing being drawn over solid timbers.

There was nothing horrible about it, either—at first. One hears far more macabre sounds in the jungle at night. More than once, while on trail, I have heard bells tolling where no bells existed, and steel clashing on steel where no human agency was at work. One gets used to such things and learns not to question them. But this sound *grew*. It became the writhing of a creature in torment—a small creature possessed of a human voice. For with the scraping and slithering sounds of exertion came an unmistakable groan and a sucking struggle for breath.

I sat bolt-upright. Whatever it was, the thing was directly above me, either clinging to the under surface of the roof or wriggling down the wall. I did not cry out. Contrary to popular belief, a man does not always scream when confronted with an unknown peril. I sat stiff as a stick of wood, gripping the sides of my cot rigidly, waiting to *see* something.

Then, very suddenly, the sounds above me lost all direction. They filled the hut and came from every corner, from walls, floor and roof. They were a living entity—a hundred different voices in one—gasping, moaning, shrieking in anguish and physical torment. They were the sounds made by a human being in the

throes of awful torture. They pleaded and cursed wildly in the same exhalation of breath. They came from a tongue gone mad. And mingled with them, above and beneath them, was the pitiful noise of a bound body straining and twisting for freedom.

I was out of my bunk with a single desperate leap. There was a flashlight, I knew, on the little reed table beside the doorway. I stumbled to it. A hand caught at my arm and held me.

"Be quiet!"

It was Martin's voice. God, what a relief it was! Only a warning whisper—but real and human! And I felt myself drawn toward it, to find Martin lying propped on one elbow with a revolver clenched in his fist.

"Quiet!" he said again. "That's the sound young Trellegen was talking about. Listen to it!"

I was still again, with Martin's fingers compelling me. Together we crouched there; but there was no sound. Vaguely I realized that every moving thing had become motionless, every audible noise silent, at Martin's first warning whisper. Now there was nothing but intense darkness and uncanny stillness, and the rustling of our own breathing.

WE WAITED an eternity, and nothing more happened. At length Martin's fingers released their hold on my arm. I tiptoed to the table and found the flashlight. A dull click echoed through the hut as I turned it on; and a baleful eye of light played through the gloom. Then I turned to Martin and said lamely:

"Am I crazy?"

There was nothing in the hut with us. Martin was lying stiff on his arm, staring. My own bunk was empty, with the blankets tossed back and trailing the mat.

Above us grinned that infernal Dyak head-dress and the row of ancient skulls, and, farther back in the shadows, the dried human head. Nothing had been moved; nothing did move. There was no slightest sign or sound of an intruder.

"Whatever it was," Martin said hoarsely, "it's gone. It was up there, under the roof."

"Among—those," I faltered, staring fearfully at the obscene objects above us. "Good God, no wonder Trellegen is afraid of the dark! After hearing that horrible voice——"

But Martin was on his feet, examining every separate object in our abode. He drew the cots out and looked behind them. He kicked the reed mat aside. He took that ugly Dyak mask in his hands and lifted it from its resting-place, studying it intently before he set it down again. He moved each skull in turn. He stared into the open eyes of the dried human head, shuddering a little as they seemed to return his stare evilly. He moved the head and examined the wall behind it. Then, with a helpless shrug, he returned to his bunk and sat down again.

"You remember what Gomez said?" he scowled at me.

"Gomez?" I frowned.

"About the voice being the work of certain of the Dyaks, in order to scare him into leaving here?"

"Yes," I said, "I remember."

"I'll bet my last glass of whisky," Martin snapped, "that it's a lie. No native would think of such a scheme. Gomez himself is back of it somewhere. It would be just like him."

"You mean——"

"For young Trellegen's benefit, of course! The boy's wife is altogether too lovely for a place like this and a man like Gomez. The man's a fiend. He'll stop

at nothing to get what he wants. And he's got some mechanical contrivance rigged up here——"

"To frighten *Trellegen*?" I faltered.

"Why not? He's a man of method, isn't he? You heard some of his diabolical stories!"

Martin leaned forward with clenched fists. There was no need for me to answer him, or to question him further. The truth was in his eyes, and his eyes were glaring.

WE WERE in the residency that next afternoon—Gomez, Martin, Trellegen and I—when Moni-oa's wife's brother came. He climbed quietly up the steps and crossed the narrow veranda and stood in the doorway, facing us stiffly. He was one of the finest specimens of Dyak physique I have ever seen. As a rule, you know, Borneo inlanders are dwarfed and under-developed, marred with unlovely skins and flat, expressionless faces. This one was keen, intelligent, lithe and sinewy as a leopard.

"Me speak, *Tuan*?" he said evenly, not at all daunted by the presence of four white men.

"Well, what do you want?" Gomez scowled. "What is it?"

The fellow's name was Maronga, and he came from the kampong Tjon-Tao, four miles up river. He was, he said, the brother of the wife of Moni-oa. Very early this morning he had been fishing with other men of his village, when Moni-oa's wife had come to him. Moni-oa's wife had told him an unbelievable story.

"What story?" Gomez rasped.

Maronga displayed no emotion whatever. It was whispered, he said, that Moni-oa, who had never harmed so much as a makiki in his whole life, had been murdered in the darkness of his own

house last night, by a very wicked person.

"Me come to ask, *Tuan*, why Moni-oa him get killed, and who him kill Moni-oa."

Gomez looked squarely at the fellow and grinned. As a rule, the Dyaks who knew Gomez cringed from that grin as from a thing of evil incarnate. They knew through bitter experience that it was a forerunner of unpleasant things. But this Maronga did not move. He simply folded his arms on his chest and waited.

"I'll tell you who killed Moni-oa," Gomez scowled, "and why." He put a cigarette in his mouth, lighted it with deliberate lack of haste, and faced the Dyak indifferently, as if it were all a routine matter of little importance. "Last night Moni-oa sneaked into *Tuan* Trellegen's house, see? Moni-oa, he was like the rest of you mongrels; he thought *Tuan* Trellegen was afraid of a lot of things, and it would be easy to steal from him. But he was wrong, see? *Tuan* Trellegen is not afraid of sneaking monkeys or anything else. He is a big *rajah besar*, and you want to remember that. Get me?"

"Yes, *Tuan*," Maronga said stiffly. "*Tuan* Trellegen, he——"

"Right. He went straight to Moni-oa's hut and shot the little ape, like he should have done. And he brought back the whisky Moni-oa stole. I'd have done the same."

Maronga's head lifted almost imperceptibly. He looked directly into Gomez's grin; then he turned, as if on a revolving peg, and focused his stare on young Trellegen. Trellegen's face was the color of wet ashes.

"Me see, *Tuan*," Maronga murmured, and walked out.

There wasn't a word spoken while the Dyak paced across the veranda and down

the steps. Not a word. We were all too amazed. Then I think we all spoke at once; but it was Trellegen's shrill voice that smothered all the others.

"Good God, why did you tell him that?"

"It'll boost your stock with the Dyaks," Gomez declared facetiously. "That's what you need, more'n anything else. Make 'em afraid of you, like they are of me." He nodded his head importantly. "Maybe they'll change their minds about you now."

"But this Maronga," Trellegen faltered. "He might——"

"Might get nasty? Not a single chance. If he tries it, you just leave him for me. I'll take care of him. He knows me!"

Trellegen, however, was afraid. We could see it in his wide eyes, in the twitching of his facial muscles, in the way he licked his lips nervously. He had had about enough. This last was too much. He turned quickly and strode out of the shack, walking with a queer jerky motion. We watched him go. Then, very slowly, Martin swung on Gomez and said:

"You killed Moni-oa for stealing a bottle of whisky?"

"It is the only way to teach them," Gomez shrugged.

Martin held back his retort. His glare contained more words of rage than his lips could ever have blurted out. As for me, I was thinking more of young Trellegen's terror than of Moni-oa, and I said harshly: "It was a rotten trick, saying that Trellegen did it. Why, good God——"

"It is what he need!" Gomez exclaimed. Then he said, with a grin widening on his bloated face: "It make no difference anyway. Natives do not anger any more for things like that. We have make well-trained dogs of them, here in

Long Tjuo. They have learn to respect and fear white men — especially fear them."

And for that I loved him even less.

I DID not see Trellegen during the remainder of that day. In itself, that was indicative of the boy's very genuine fear, for white men in a jungle garrison are generally glad of any available sociability. In fact, I have known cases where white men have discarded every personal feeling in order to unite against common loneliness. I spent two years in Java, at one time, with a beachcomber named Gervon, and we two hated each other as viciously as men hate the more loathsome things of the jungle. Yet we remained in each other's company constantly and even shared intimate quarters, rather than face loneliness.

But this is by the way. I mention it merely to show the condition of young Trellegen's nerves. When I spoke to Martin about it, as we were turning in that night, Martin said moodily:

"I'm sorry for that boy. It's cruel, his being sent up here to get acclimated, and having to face an uncanny nothingness that would drive a veteran crazy. Now he's got double fear—darkness and Maronga. Neither one is worth a second thought in reality."

"You don't think he is in danger?" I said.

"Rather not. Gomez is a rotter, clean through, but the Dyaks are terrified of him. He showed me his diary this noon, the way you or I would show a photo album. The man's a fiend. He's mad. If he weren't a government official of sorts, he——"

"He'd be considered a murderer, eh?"

"Sadist is more like it," Martin said bitterly. "Good Lord, he's actually made a list of his various methods of third-

degreering the poor devils! Most of them, he confesses, are not original. He got them from a couple of books he has on the Spanish Inquisition."

I shuddered a little. The usual thing is for white men to stand back of fellow whites, right or wrong, in a place like Long Tjuo. The color of a man's blood does count, after all. But to me, Gomez was an animal—a beast with a beast's instincts and lust for destruction.

"He told me how he killed old Giana, the sorcerer," Martin muttered. "You remember, he mentioned it the other night? It seems he made the process a slow one, with all the horrible ceremony he could lay on. Tied the fellow to a stake in the middle of the village and put the whip to him. One stroke every five minutes. Then he hacked off the chap's head. He grinned when he told me about it. Nasty grin, as if there were something more to the story that he was holding back."

I stared at the floor. Martin said abruptly:

"But we've got to do something for Trellegen. *Got to!*"

"The best thing," I argued, "would be to ship him out of here by the first dug-out."

"He wouldn't go. He's English, proud."

"A good scare," I said moodily, "might——"

"You think so?"

"Heard of such things," I said. "But look here, Martin. The boy's got a *right* to be frightened! That damned voice last night was—well, I don't believe it was Gomez!"

"Don't be a fool!"

"But I tell you it was uncanny. It was only half human. No living man, white or black, could ever——"

"I took a look at this hut of ours to-

day," Martin said quietly. "Admit I didn't find anything — any mechanical speaking-tube, that is. But the shelf up there over your head is scratched in places, as if something were pushed in from the outside. When I saw those scratches, I thought I had the secret of the whole business. It would be just like Gomez to rig up a contrivance through one of those ugly skulls, or through the dried head up there."

"And you found something?" I suggested.

"Sorry—no. I inspected every one of the skulls. Took 'em down and put my fist clean into 'em. The head, too. Didn't find a thing. The skulls are empty and the head's tough as leather. But the screams came from this hut, and Gomez was responsible. He may not have done the actual howling himself, but he hired someone to do it. You can bank on that."

"But the boy said he has heard those sounds for a long time," I protested.

"Naturally. He's been here a month. Gomez didn't need a whole month to realize that the boy's wife is pretty. He's had plenty of time to get his scheme moving. And remember this—you and I will be out of here in a day or two. The boy will suffer a complete breakdown after that voice has screamed a couple more times. Then what? Gomez will be quite alone with *her*."

I thought about it, and nodded. At that moment I wanted to take Gomez's thick throat between my fingers.

"A moment ago," Martin said, leaning forward, "you made a remark that a good scare might——"

"Cure him?" I shrugged. "Yes, it might. Scare a man half to death and then prove to him that his fear was groundless, and you make an utter fool

of him. It might shame him into snapping out of it. But the cure is beastly."

Martin did not answer. He was unlacing his boots. I saw him glance casually at the Dyak head-dress on the wall. Then he muttered, frowning: "I wonder."

He turned in without removing his boots; but I thought nothing of it. Nothing—at the time.

I THOUGHT about it later, though. I woke suddenly, sometime in the middle of the night, with a queer tingling in my arm. It was a brown-and-black house spider—the kind the Malays hold sacred and would never think of destroying—running over my skin with erratic little jumps. Apparently something had frightened it, and it had dropped from the thatch above.

Then I *heard*. This time the sound was not above me, but near my feet. Perhaps the intruder had come from above, and had reached this stage in its descent of the wall. At any rate, it was more than half-way down the wall, slithering slowly and sibilantly to the floor!

The hut was pitch-dark; I could see nothing. I lay utterly still. You've felt the same sensation, perhaps, on waking in the dead of night and hearing the ominous creak of a board somewhere in the room. It makes no difference that the creak was caused by any one of a dozen natural agencies; the momentary terror is acute and stifling. And this was more. It was a combination of animal and human sounds that could have been executed by no natural agent!

I listened, and heard the thing grope its way ever downward. Then there was a thud, and something soft and heavy struck the floor. A low, human sigh filtered through the enclosure. The slithering began again. The thing wriggled

its way slowly, painfully, as if on crippled tentacles, toward the door.

For a single instant I saw the outline of it as it crawled over the threshold, framed against the lesser darkness of the night outside. It was small and round, and seemed to move on tiny feelers which could have extended no more than two or three inches from its blackish body. I thought for an instant that it was a maki-ki—that little monkey-like lemur which smells so much like a mouse and can double itself into a perfect ball. Then it was gone; the mosquito netting rustled into place behind it; and I heard again that slithering, slipping, scraping sound as it descended the tree-trunk ladder.

I waited, blaming the darkness for my terror. There was a thud, as the thing struck the ground below. Then—I swear it!—I heard a human grunt and a throaty, incoherent exclamation of triumph. And silence.

I lay there a long time, listening. Five minutes must certainly have elapsed before I rose slowly, timidly, to a sitting posture and called out, in a whisper, my companion's name.

"Martin!"

There was no answer. I stared sharply at Martin's bunk. And then I saw that I was alone, quite alone, and Martin was gone.

Acute fear took hold of me then. It was idiotic, of course. Any one of a hundred things may take a man out of his house after nightfall without being in the least significant. Perhaps it was my overstrained nerves that thrust a terrible foreboding into my thoughts when I gaped at Martin's vacant bed. Perhaps it was the knowledge that men do not usually or normally go prowling about a jungle kampong in the dark hours. Probably it was the realization that out there in the village, with Martin, was the *thing*; and

the thought was horrible. I sat up and got my boots on, and started for the entrance.

And I got no farther. A scratching, scraping sound outside stopped me. I drew back, tense, as the sounds identified themselves. An intruder was clambering up our tree-trunk ladder. The mosquito drop bulged toward me.

It was Trellegen. He came in on hands and knees and straightened quickly to face me. His mouth was twitching; his features were unpleasantly white. He trembled.

"I—I can't stand it!" he said thickly.

I took him by the shoulders and pulled him to Martin's empty cot. It was impossible not to sympathize with the boy. His nerves were completely ragged. The mere sight of him caused me to forget my own doubts and fears.

"Tell me what's wrong," I demanded softly.

"I—I'm afraid," he mumbled, putting his hands to his face. "I can't forget what Gomez told that—that Maronga. I can't sleep. I've been sitting there, just waiting. And—and God, I *know* something will happen. It's so beastly dark!"

"You've left your wife there alone?" I snapped.

"Alone? No, no! The boy is with her. She's not afraid. She—she made me come to you. She said you'd help me, straighten me out. She said if I could talk to you——"

I did what I could for him. Fetched him a stiff drink and stood over him while he gulped it down; then talked to him quietly, reasonably, and told him there was nothing to be upset about. Nothing was going to happen to him. He had nothing to fear from Maronga. The darkness was only darkness.

"Only!" he echoed bitterly, clenching

his fists. "It's full of things, I tell you! Shapes——"

"Shadows," I corrected.

"And sounds! Every ten minutes I hear a screech——"

"Tarratjans," I shrugged, "on the river shore. Birds won't hurt you."

"And I hear human voices yelling——"

"Wah-wahs in the jungle," I informed him evenly. "And the scratching sounds on your roof are caused by insects in the thatch. And the ticking of unseen watches, every so often, is manufactured by a little friendly bug the size of your fingernail. Buck up, man. Forget it. We've all been through it, and it's only jungle mutter. It won't bite you."

He looked at me helplessly. Then he stood up and made a desperate effort, which would have been comical coming from anyone else, to thrust his shoulders back.

"I don't blame you for thinking I'm a fool," he said bitterly. "You haven't heard——it."

"Heard what?" I scowled.

"The voice that haunts this place. Ever since I came here I've heard it. A horrible voice——some poor devil in agony, screaming. That is, sometimes I think it's that, and sometimes it sounds like a demon shouting terrible curses and screaming revenge. But you wouldn't understand."

"I've heard it," I said quietly.

"You——you have? Then what——"

"Martin can explain it to you," I told him. "You'll probably thrash Gomez when you know the truth. Meanwhile, snap out of it. Buck up."

"I'm all right," he said, though he wasn't. "Thanks."

"Run along back to your wife," I advised him. "You'll laugh at yourself in the morning."

"Hope so," he said thickly. "I'll——"

He stopped talking then, very quickly, and we both stiffened at the same instant. The sound that came shrilling across the kampong was certainly *not* jungle mutter. It was packed with genuine terror, and it was a woman's voice.

I have never since seen a man transformed so quickly. At one moment young Trellegen was standing helpless in front of me, struggling to muster enough courage to carry him across the village, through the dark. There was nothing brave about him. He had been so terrified that his wife——his *wife*——had insisted on his leaving her alone and coming to me for help. Now, with that screech ringing in his ears, he hurled me aside and lunged headlong for the doorway.

How he got down those notched steps with such amazing speed and agility, I don't know. By the time I had reached the ground——and I was not too clumsy myself——he was half-way across the kampong, running madly.

He left me behind with comical ease. I stumbled and fell, and lumbered up again. I plowed through the darkness as fast as my stiff legs would carry me, but I could only reel after him, shouting.

When I reached the door of the corrugated-roofed house, the boy had already ripped aside the mosquito netting and rushed inside. The Malay boy was standing wide-eyed at the threshold, with both hands extended before him as if to push something away. And when I shoved past him, out of breath and grimly afraid of what I might come upon, Trellegen was on his knees near the wall with his arms around his wife's shoulders.

She was delirious. In the dark I could see her face only vaguely; but it was contorted, with all its patient loveliness transformed into a twitching mask of fear. She talked wildly, incoherently.

She was out of her mind. Her words were nothing but a jargon of moaning, screaming syllables.

"The window!" she cried, sobbing pitifully with her face buried in the boy's breast. "It's there at the *window!* Oh, Roger, it's there! It's *grinning!*" Then, in a rising wail: "Where are you, Roger? Roger! *Roger!* Don't run away! Don't leave me! Don't go, Roger! *Fight!* it! Oh, Roger, don't be afraid any more. Oh, it's grinning. It's grinning at me. It's—grinning——"

She fainted then, in his arms. I saw her go suddenly limp, and her head dropped, lolling pitifully. Young Trellegen looked across her, to the window. The aperture was black and empty; its covering of netting was unbroken. Nothing was out there.

Trellegen stood up. He carried his wife to her own bed and laid her there. He was muttering to himself, in an undertone. Then he swung on me.

"'Grinning,' she said!" he rasped. "You heard her." His voice was thick, hoarse, utterly out of control. "So that's his filthy game! Trying to make a gibbering fool of me with his hideous voices! Putting the Dyak to kill me, so he can come here and take *her*. That's what he wants! The ——!"

It was not a pleasant epithet. One might have called an animal that, but hardly a fellow white man. Coming from the boy's clean lips, it seemed even more vicious and terrible. But as I have already said, I did not consider Gomez a white man, or even a man. I did not interfere.

Trellegen looked down into his wife's white face for an instant. Then he straightened very deliberately and went to the table. He opened the drawer and took out a revolver. Without a word

he stood there, loading it as a man might fill a fountain pen.

Then he paced to the door. I doubt if he saw me or even realized my presence. He did not look at me. He simply walked out.

When he had gone, I stood stiff in the middle of the floor. Then, with a shrug, I walked to the galvanized water bucket which stood in the corner, and filled the shallow basin which hung there on its hook. I carried the basin to the girl's bed and began to bathe her forehead and face.

Perhaps two or three minutes later, while I sat there, she opened her eyes.

"Roger," she whispered.

"Roger is——" I began to say, and then stopped. I had expected to hear the sound of a revolver shot. Instead, I heard a cry that jerked me to my feet.

"Roger!" she pleaded.

"Roger's all right," I snapped. "He's coming back."

Then I lurched to the door and seized the arm of the Malay boy who huddled there.

"Stay here," I ordered. "No matter what happens, don't run away. If you do, I'll——"

Then I ran.

WHAT I expected to find, as I stumbled across the kampong in the dark, I don't exactly know. I thought of Maronga, who certainly intended to kill Roger Trellegen for the death of Monioa. I thought of the girl's hysterical outpouring about the grinning face at her window. I thought of Martin, and wondered where in heaven's name he was—though I should have guessed easily. And I thought also of the slithering, half-human thing which had driven fear to my heart only a few moments ago. Then I reached the door.

And whatever I thought, I did not anticipate the scene that confronted me at that moment. I did not dream such things could exist.

Trellegen was standing rigid, just inside the doorway. His revolver hung limp in his hand, and his eyes were fixed wide with unspeakable horror. Beyond him was the table, with the lamp burning upon it and an open book lying in the glare. Gomez had apparently been writing in the book.

Gomez lay on the floor. His chair was half-way across the room, up-ended, as if he had careened out of it in terror. He lay with his legs bent at the knees and his hands clawing the carpet. His shirt was ripped wide open from neck to belt. And there, on his naked chest, squatted a thing unnamable—a thing the sight of which choked the breath in my throat and tightened every muscle of my body with a convulsive jerk.

It was a head, a human head—the human head. It was the same horrible dead thing which had sat on the ledge in the hut which Martin and I occupied. But it was not dead! God forgive me, it was endowed with life! It crouched there, glaring at me with eyes full of triumphant malice and indescribable evil. Even as I recoiled from it, it moved. It had developed living, writhing tentacles. It was a human octopus!

Gomez, thanks to a merciful God, was already dead. Perhaps Trellegen had witnessed the method of it. I do not know; I did not want to know. I could only stand and stare; and in that moment I knew things, realized things, which no man should ever know.

This thing—this unspeakable living-dead horror—was the *voice*. Gomez was wrong; those midnight cries had not been created by the Dyaks to frighten him from the kampong. Martin, too, was

wrong; those inhuman shrieks had not been flung out to make a gibbering madman of Trellegen. This, this macabre monstrosity, was the voice. It had never died! Night after night it had squatted there on its wooden shelf, struggling futilely to walk on its ever-growing abominations. In its efforts to escape, it had gone through the torments of hell, moaning and wailing and screaming in its agony.

But why had Martin failed to discover the truth? Good God, Martin had inspected every corner of the hut—had picked this thing up in his hands and examined it! Why had he not learned its secret?

I stared at the thing, and realized why. Its pin-point orbs glared back at me, full of animal cunning. The thing possessed a mind. No wonder Martin had been blind to its awful powers. Those beady eyes indicated a brain cunning enough to deceive any man. There was but one answer. The creature had simulated death when Martin examined it. It had curled its abominable legs back into its body, concealed them from his gaze.

And now it was here. Those nights of agony had borne fruit. The thing had learned to propel itself, to escape from its high prison. Those squirming tentacles had developed to the extent where they provided a means of locomotion. It was here, in Gomez's shack!

Even as I gaped, I saw the thing crawl leeringly over Gomez's upturned face with the slithering motion of a huge slug. It squatted there a moment, watching us. From its writhing lips, bloated and obscene, jangled a hideous cackle of bestial laughter, hoarse with gloating and triumph. And then, writhing its way onward, it twisted over its victim's forehead and thudded to the floor, and retreated across the carpet with the scuttling haste

of a crab with uncouth legs. It moved quickly—so quickly that it was almost at the farther wall before either Trellegen or I moved.

Something possessed Trellegen then. He stiffened and jerked up his revolver. He pulled the trigger again and again and again. The slithering thing stopped and screamed. It half turned as a bullet thudded into it; then it seemed to shudder as a second and third imbedded themselves. Twitching convulsively, it rose an inch off the floor on stiff legs—if those gelatinous, embryonic horrors could be termed legs—and then sank back again, gasping. I saw its eyes; they were glassy and fearfully wide. A bullet had entered its brain. I saw it curl up and die. Abruptly I stepped forward. My groping hand scraped the open book which lay there on the table. I seized the book and would have hurled it. Then I looked down into the face of Gomez, and I shrieked.

You have seen a slab of red, raw meat, half eaten to the bone by human teeth? Gomez's face was like that. I looked at it once; then I seized Trellegen's arm and said harshly: "Your wife needs you. Go back to her!" And then I went away from there.

IRAN wildly across the kampong clearing, indifferent to mud and darkness alike. Straight to my own hut I went. And there, at the foot of the ladder, I found Martin.

I was immune to further horror. I merely stood and stared, and then dropped to my knees beside Martin's limp body. His head was smothered in that ugly, grinning Dyak head-dress, and he was unconscious. The hilt of a native parang, seven inches long, protruded from a jagged rip in his shirt. He

groaned when I lifted him. Somehow I got him up the ladder.

The knife, when I drew it out, was covered with blood. It was a murderous thing—a typical Dyak parang, straight-bladed and single-edged, with intricate carving on the hilt. It left a bubbling wound in Martin's side—a wound in soft flesh, which had escaped the lung by a matter of two inches or less. Martin moaned and opened his eyes while I was sterilizing the gash. He told me half an hour later, while he lay stretched on his cot stiff in bandages, what he had done. He had taken that Dyak head-dress from the wall, and put it on, and crept out of the hut. He had gone straight to Trellegen's house and prowled to the rear window, thinking to "cure" the boy with one good fright.

"It was your own idea," he said, smiling wearily. "That is, it was you who gave *me* the idea. You said: 'Scare a man half to death and then prove to him that his fear was groundless, and you make an utter fool of him. It might shame him into snapping out of it.' That's what you said. And *something* had to be done. Good Lord, in another day or two Gomez would have had his way with the boy. We had to use desperate measures!"

I nodded. He stared at me steadily for a moment, then said heavily:

"But something went wrong, I guess. I—I didn't think there'd be any danger. I just stuck my face against the window netting and groaned like a true demon. It was dark inside. I couldn't see who was in there. And the girl screamed."

"She'll get over it," I told him.

"I hope so. God, that scream startled me! I'm an utter fool. Forgot all about the girl being there. And then that damned knife burned into me, all at once, from nowhere."

"Maronga did it?" I asked quietly.

"Maronga. Yes." Martin looked at the knife and winced. "That devil must have thrown it. He was nowhere near me, I'm positive. The knife came like a bullet. He must have thought I was Trellegen, and followed me across the kampong."

"He also thought the knife killed you," I said, "or he'd have crept back to finish the job."

Martin made a wry face. He gazed at me soberly.

"It would have served me right," he shrugged. "Any time you're handing out medals for idiocy, don't forget me."

Then he closed his eyes and slept, leaving me to hold the parang and stare at him. If he anticipated any sarcastic remarks from me, or any condemnations, he was mistaken. The knife had hurt him badly; he had paid quite enough for his blunder without my inflicting further torment. Besides, I wanted to think. I had certain questions of right and wrong to settle to my own satisfaction, and they were not the easiest questions in the world.

Two days later, after young Trellegen and his wife had departed, Martin and I discussed those questions in ethics together and then sent our report to the authorities at Long Iram.

We did not include mention of the knife. Had we done so, Maronga would undoubtedly have paid the penalty with a sojourn in the penal colony at Soerabaya. The carved hilt with its telltale inscriptions would have convicted him without question. We told ourselves, deliberately, that Maronga was justified. His mis-

take had nothing to do with his motive. Any man, seeking the same revenge—and any decent man might have sought the same revenge—could very easily have made the same blunder.

As for Gomez, our report to the authorities was to the effect that he had died of drunken suicide. We buried him before we left, and we buried with him the ashes of that other thing, after we had burned it. We had no sympathy for Gomez—or with any man who could commit murder for a mere quart of spiked whisky. Whisky is cheap; life isn't.

Young Trellegen and his wife returned to the coast; and, according to reports which came back to us, they travelled both night and day. The night travel, in view of Trellegen's former fear of the dark, was rather significant and—well, gratifying. At least the ordeal hadn't been for nothing.

Finally, there was the diary. Martin and I studied it at our leisure, on the way up-river. It was a book of horror from beginning to end. Even the last entry, which was unfinished, revealed the obscene condition of the man's mind:

"My two temporary guests think I am very cruel. When I told them how I dealt justice to old Giana, the witch-doctor, they were shocked terribly. Before they go I will tell them what Giana said to me before he died—how he swore he would return no matter what I did to him. They will be much afraid, then. Even now, if they knew that the head of old Giana is sitting on the beam of their hut, they——"

