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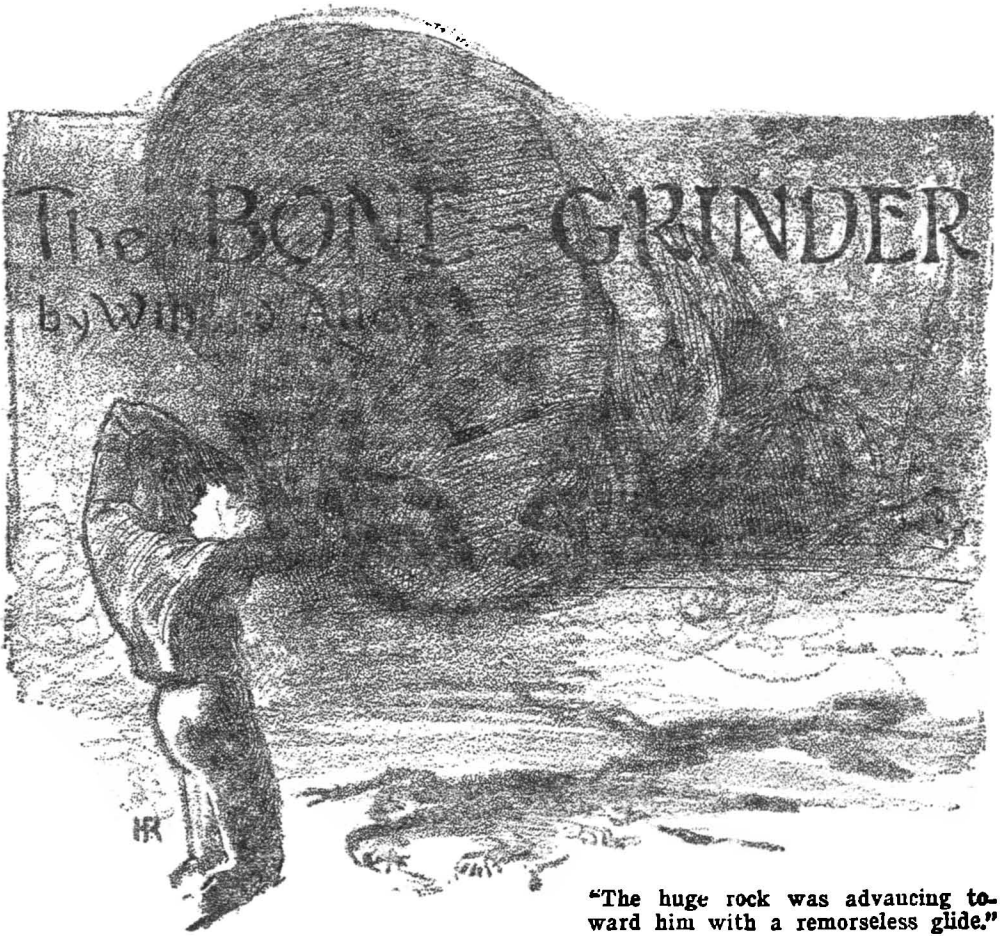
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"The huge rock was advancing toward him with a remorseless glide."

THERE was a legend in the mountains of the upper corner of Sonora. If the four had ever heard of it, or rather, if they had known what gave the legend its basis, probably they would have stayed away. Perhaps, being the adventurers they were, they would have gone the sooner. But they had never heard—never have yet, for of the four, only one came out alive, and he, fearing madness if he allows his mind to dwell on the horrors of that trip, will not let anyone even speak of Sonora in his presence.

But among the natives, ninety-nine parts Indian, one part Spanish—though they will savagely resent any implication that theirs is not the pure

blue blood of the Castilian—the legend was whispered, with a fearful crossing of the heart and an appeal to the Virgin to precede and follow the whispering. For the legend represented more than a legend to them. It was a very real and present danger; though today, thanks to the good God who had at last answered their prayers and sent the strong-willed gringo to break the power of the Bone-Grinder, it is only a legend of past horror.

Bert Alldyne it was who organized the hunt. Bert was always organizing some sort of a hunt or trip. He had heard that a species of the bighorn was found in scanty numbers in the more inaccessible parts of

the mountains of Sonora. Perhaps the horns would not be any finer than those which adorned the heads of the more northerly sheep, but the difficulty of obtaining them was a great charm. So, gathering three friends, he made up the party.

The little collection of adobe huts which was the point at which they left the railroad was hardly cooler than the rickety train which had carried them down. But it meant activity, and within an hour the four had obtained and saddled their horses, including a pack burro to carry the necessary supplies. The sleepy place, which for a time had been disturbed by the unusual intrusion, was again going to sleep, only a few of the natives hanging about to watch the departure, when with the suddenness of a stroke of lightning, it happened.

The first warning was when the other two heard Jim Nelson's startled voice: "For God's sake, look at Tom!"

Turning quickly, the others saw Jim's brother, Tom, standing beside his mount, his eyes toward the hills behind the little place, his face contorted as though it were the battleground of demons. Before any of the others could move, he sprang on the horse and was off at a mad pace, the few Mexicans in his path scurrying aside to cross themselves as though it were the devil himself who was dashing off at break-neck speed. The very dogs which usually ran yipping and nipping at the heels of one's horse seemed to cower and slink away in terror as though recognizing the presence of some unseen force.

The three who were left turned to each other in consternation. It was Alldyne who broke the silence as he leapt toward his horse with a muttered exclamation.

The other two followed his lead in a flash, when one of the Mexicans who had been in the cowering group

stepped forward quickly and grasped Alldyne's reins while he spoke with a curious mixture of terror and urgency, "No, *Señor*, do not go. It will be enough that that poor man should die, for now we shall be free for another year. If you go you can not save him and only would it mean that you all should die too."

The earnestness of the Mexican's manner, in strange contrast with the evident terror which paled his red skin to a sickly yellow, caused the rider to halt for a moment. Then, without speaking, he tore the reins loose from the trembling fingers of the Mexican, and turning his horse's head, was off after the fast-disappearing figure of Tom Nelson, his companions at his heels.

THE way the fleeing man had taken did not follow the main trail, but rather a faintly marked trail which was to all appearances abandoned, at least so far as modern travel was concerned. So deeply worn that it had evidently been a well-traveled path at one time, that time must have been long ago, for it was overgrown and so filled in places with gravel wash that it was plain its ancient users had been almost the last to travel over it. Yet while in its condition it was a dangerous way to travel on horseback at faster than a walk, the flying figure ahead was urging forward recklessly at a pace that was leaving his pursuers far behind, although in their desperation they themselves were far exceeding the speed which ordinary caution would dictate.

A half hour passed, and the small dot moving ahead dodged out of sight around a turn of the ridge, and by the time the three had reached that point it had seemingly vanished in the distance. Yet they followed on, pausing only in one spot where a sycamore tree showed a spring of water, for they knew too well that it might be some time before they saw another sycamore. The trailing be-

came fearful, for at each turn there was the fear of seeing a dark blot lying beside the trail to tell them that at last the unbelievable luck of the horseman ahead had failed, and that he had been thrown, to break his neck in the rocks and chapparal. But no blot showed, and the marks in the untraveled trail where the flying horse had sent the gravel flying showed with unending regularity.

Night found them with their own horses exhausted, far into the mountains. The heat of the lower country had disappeared, and the chill of the coming night warned them that they must stop for the night. The fugitive was still ahead, though the hoof-marks of his horse showed that it was even nearer exhaustion than their own mounts were.

THERE was little talk about the fire that night. Of the two topics brought up, the first met short shrift. It was Tom's brother who brought it up, and he only asked, "What did that Mex say to you, Bert?"

Alldyne started. "Just some of their crazy superstition."

But Jim kept on. "I thought I heard him say that Tom would have to die and they would be free for another year. Do you think those Mexicans did anything to Tom?"

"I tell you that was just some of their crazy superstition," Alldyne repeated. "How the devil could they have done anything? Something struck Tom, maybe some quick fever, and he went off his head. Better not talk of it unless we have to."

And he refused to talk about it any more.

Bud Carson brought up the other thing. He pulled on his pipe in the darkness, with his head turned toward the stars, seeming to make his remark to the universe at large rather than to the others.

"The whole damn country is queer. Did you notice that the hills here are all scarred as though rockslides were

occurring daily? This may be an earthquake country for all I know, but did you notice that some of the rocks had not made their trails through the chapparal straight downhill as a rock should roll? I saw one that went horizontally along the side of a hill!"

Alldyne cursed uncomfortably. "Shut up! If you get to seeing things, that's no reason for bothering the rest of us."

"'S all right, Bert," Carson answered. "I was just sort of thinking out loud. And I saw you looking at that path of broken brush, so you've got nothing to say about my seeing things."

Which was all that anyone felt like saying.

In the early morning they resumed the trail. The remarks about the rockslides were in the consciousness of each, so that they noted the trails through the chapparal which had seemingly been made by some huge boulder being dragged or rolling over the hills. Over, for as Bud Carson had said, the trail did not always lead downward. Finally, coming to where such a trail crossed the path, Carson dismounted to inspect it, remounting with a worried shrug.

"Find out anything?" Bert asked, bitingly.

"Nothing more than you saw. Only something with legs could drag a trail like that. Unless they've got perambulating boulders around here."

"Find any marks of feet of any kind?"

Carson looked off for a moment as though he had not heard the question before he answered, "Not a mark. But if something is dragging a big rock around, the rock would wipe out its tracks."

"Sure, that's sense."

"But then—what kind of a thing would it be that would be dragging a hundred-ton boulder over these

hills for the fun of smashing the chapparal?"

"For God's sake, shut up!" Jim's voice came throatily. "We've got to get Tom before it's too late."

THE sun was on its way down the second day before they found him. All day the strange paths through the brush had become increasingly numerous, and at last the hills seemed to have been plowed up by the rocks. Rounding a last turn in the trail, they saw ahead a slightly sloping bare spot which occupied an amphitheater in the high hills. The soil seemed to have been stripped off the bedrock, which lay like a great gray floor. It was marked by lines which seemed to be the outlines of the walls of houses which had been ground down in the same strange manner as the chapparal about.

The appearance was so suggestive that the same word came from the mouths of each, as they reined up in surprise. "Ruins!" Anyone who had seen the pueblo cities of the southwest Indians could recognize the outline stenciled on the rocks, though of the walls, the buildings themselves, there was nothing left. Forgetting for the time the object of their search, they pressed forward, and in the moment of forgetting, they found it.

Near the center of the bare rock floor of the ancient town was a bloody mass which at first they did not recognize. The terrible truth came to the brother first, and he rushed forward with a cry, to stop and draw back in horror as he got near enough to see the details. The others pressed on and passed him, until they looked shudderingly down on the pulpy mass that had been Tom Nelson and his horse. A trail of blood and ground rock-dust led down to where the thing was standing, a huge long boulder, fully fifty feet long and a quarter as high, shaped more like a

gigantic worm which had crawled over and ground its victims to death.

Nauseated, they looked from the rock to the dead man, then into each other's eyes. There had certainly been no earthquake of such intensity as to move that huge block of basalt, though possibly a weak shock might have passed unnoticed while they were riding. What then had moved that rock, ground Tom Nelson to death?

Their horrified speculations were cut short by a cry of terror from the brother of the dead man, who had stayed back, unable to bring himself to approach more closely. They turned toward him, to see him standing as though petrified, the same look of insane struggle on his face that his brother had worn as he sprang on his horse for the fatal ride. Following his glance, they saw a sight which robbed them too of the power to move.

The huge rock was moving again, not to continue its downward path, but turning as though it were indeed a worm, turning toward them. Paralyzed, they watched until it had turned completely around and was advancing toward Jim Nelson with a remorseless glide, crunching and crackling as it ground the lesser rocks under it to dust.

Of a sudden Carson screamed and ran, followed by Alldyne. But Nelson stood still, directly in the path of the oncoming juggernaut. Torn between horror and the necessity for helping Nelson, they hesitated, started, turned, and leapt to his aid. But something interposed itself—something which neither could see but which barred their path with the unyielding opposition of a solid, immovable body. In an excess of terror they beat against it as though against a solid wall, until their fists were broken and bleeding. But it would not yield, and in another instant the realization of the horror

broke over them and they turned madly toward their horses.

They were almost beyond earshot in the mad flight when the stricken cry in the distance behind them told that it was over.

TEN minutes perhaps, they tore on, ten minutes that might have been ten hours. Then Alldyne, who had been in the lead, heard the hoofbeats behind him slacken and cease. He turned in time to see Carson turn his horse's head and urge it back toward the town of death. He yelled desperately, but as the other paid no heed, he turned his own horse and followed. The other kept ahead, traveling at the same break-neck pace that Tom Nelson had set the day before, and when Alldyne rounded that turn again he saw Carson standing, already as though by command, in the center of the bare-ground rock. The huge, wormlike rock of death was far off, on the other side of the place, but coming toward the waiting man.

Alldyne rushed forward but again met the resistance of the invisible wall. Sagging to his knees beside it, as the horror weakened him, for the first time he saw that the white, stick-like things which littered the bare floor of the prehistoric city were not what he had thought at first, bleached pieces of chapparal, but the remnants of the bones of others from which the flesh had been ground. There were now two bloody things, and beside them, in sight but utterly out of reach, Bud Carson stood as though hypnotized, awaiting the same end.

For the second time Alldyne turned and fled in mad terror.

In that flight back to the little Mexican town the terror rode behind him. At times it fell back until it was out of feeling, behind the last turn. Again it gained until it was at his elbow. Then it would reach over and touch his neck, its cold hand would swipe against his face. And in an added frenzy he would strike

the spurs into the terrified horse, which tore on down the trail with only blind luck to keep it on its feet.

When night came on he did not dare go so fast, but neither did he dare to stop. So through the night the flight kept on, and at dawn the horse staggered into the town, bearing, it seemed to the inhabitants, a fugitive escaped from hell itself.

Far down the track the morning train was creeping along. In hysterical relief he swallowed the water which the natives brought him, the while he kept his eyes on the slowly approaching train. He paid no heed to their repeated questions, until finally as it penetrated his mind that they were asking after the others, he looked straight into their faces with the single word, "Dead!" at which all fell back and crossed themselves again.

The train was nearing, whistling, and he could hardly wait for it to draw up to a stop. So intent was he in watching its approach that he did not note at first the presence of something beside him. Until again it reached out and touched his neck, and the chill ran up and down and quivered in his brain. An insistent urge to turn back into the hills came over him, compelling him to turn and move. But the strong personality which made Bert Alldyne the leader he was would not die without a fight, and it was reinforced by his memory of the others, ground to a pulp beneath the crunching juggernaut.

HE NEVER knew how he resisted, but he fought as though it were another being who opposed him, wrestling, striking, crying. The Mexicans drew back in fright, all but a few running into their mud houses to hide. He fought on, but he felt that he was losing. The desire to flee back into the mountains began to drive out the repulsive consciousness of the fate that was waiting there, when help came from a source which

he had forgotten. The train drew up with a screech which echoed shrilly in the hills, and in an instant he felt firm hands upon him, holding him down.

In the moment the presence was gone, and the train crew which had thrown him down thinking he was a maniac, decided that he had only had a touch of the sun. His appearance as he lay limp and colorless, like a man suffering from surgical shock, seemed to confirm them in their opinion, so they placed him on the train to hurry him to the doctor down in Hermosillo.

As the train vanished down the track a sudden mania of rejoicing broke out in the little town, as the

realization came to the Mexicans that he had actually opposed successfully the spell of the Bone-Grinder.

For the legend, coming down from long ago, when the long-dead dwellers in that city of death back in the hills had been wiped out by their fiendish enemy, was that it would have power to take its toll on the country until a day when some man should successfully defy its power. Then it would vanish, and with it even the scars on the high hills over which it had dragged its life-crunching juggernaut.

Alldyne has never heard the legend, for he knows too much already and would rather believe that it was a hallucination.