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The Brain-Eaters

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

'A shuddery tale about the dead men who sat in the boat, and a weird horror from four-dimensional space

STEPHEN WILLIAMSON, anthropologist and archeologist, stood at the rail of the *Morning Star* and watched the dim gray shape of the long boat shed its hazy indistinctness as the sun penetrated the fog and threw ruddy curlicues athwart the gleaming gunwales. From where Williamson was standing the occupants of the boat were

distinctly visible. They sat immobile, in grotesque attitudes, and when Williamson hailed them they made no response. Williamson craned forward over the rail, studying them intently out of bloodshot eyes. Then, suddenly, his body went tense, and a cold horror descended upon him. He turned abruptly, cupping his hands, and shouted out a frantic warning



"They came for Thomas last night, but they did not take all of him. He is sitting before me as I write."

to the first mate, who was standing rather nonchalantly amidships with his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

"Keep away from her! Ease her off! For God's sake——"

"What's that?" The mate strode to the rail and glanced anxiously over the side. But from where he was standing the boat was not visible. He was obliged to repeat his query to Williamson, who occupied, for the moment, the position of ship's guardian. Below in his cabin the captain was raving impotently, his brain unhinged by liquor and fever.

"What did you say, Steve?"

"I said—stay clear of her!"

"Why?"

"Cholera, I think. Anyhow, it's awful! A death-trap. Keep clear of her."

In a moment the mate was by Stephen's side, staring with horror at the boat and

its contents. It was drifting aimlessly in a long swell, its rudder askew and trailing sea-moss, its oarlocks sodden with caked salt and a darker, more disturbing ingredient that looked, from a distance, like caked blood. The mate gripped Williamson's arm. "They've been dead for weeks," he muttered, hoarsely. "Every man of 'em. They're nothin' more than skeletons." He spat to conceal his emotion. "Every man of 'em. God, Steve——"

"Look there!" Williamson had raised his arm and was pointing excitedly at the tallest of the seven skeletons.

The mate grew dizzy with horror. A choking, gurgling sound issued from his throat, and his hand tightened on his companion's arm till the latter cried out in shrill protest. "Steady, Jim." Then, after a pause, "It was cannibalism. Nothing else. But I can understand it, Jim. If

the poor devils were insane, crazed——”

“But his *head*,” the mate protested hysterically. “They couldn’t eat that. Why did they cut off his head?”

The headless man sat bolt upright in the boat. He was clothed in stained gray trousers of woolen texture and a coarse seaman’s shirt of alternating black and white stripes open to the waist. His feet were bare and sun-scorched. One arm, severed at the wrist, dangled forlornly from beside the oarlocks, rising and falling with the slow oily swell. The other was outstretched, as though it had been endeavoring, at the instant of death, to ward off the attack of something malign and unspeakable. On several parts of the hairy, exposed chest were dark and ominous stains. The muscles of the torso stood out so rigidly in the half-light that they were discernible at a distance of fifty feet.

But despite his mutilations and imperfections the headless man was easily the most commanding figure in the boat. The other occupants were pitiable in the extreme. They sprawled against the gunwales in attitudes of abject despair—mere husks of flabby skin over protruding bones, with skull-like faces and rigid, immobile arms. The sea had had its way with them. They were not merely dead; they were beginning, slowly, to blacken and shrivel and putrefy.

“It isn’t cholera,” said Stephen grimly.

The mate nodded. “You’re right, I guess.” His voice sounded hollow and unfamiliar even to his own ears. The strangeness of its timbre appalled him. He glanced almost hysterically at his companion. How, he wondered, could the man remain so cool? He had hitherto been so emotional, so easily upset. Yet now, somehow, the scientist in him was rising to the occasion, was astonishing the mate by his assurance and poise.

“We may as well lower a boat,” said

Stephen decisively. “I want to know precisely what happened. It’s utterly ghastly, but I’ve got to know.”

THIRTY minutes later a decidedly ill scientist crossed the deck of the *Morning Star* in a strangely indirect fashion; crossed the deck in a semi-daze and gripped the rail till his knuckles showed white. For a moment he stood watching a Portuguese man-of-war scudding over the oily sea, his gaze remaining riveted on the weirdly beautiful polyp till it disappeared in the purple haze fringing the horizon. Then, abruptly, he wheeled and met the inquisitorial scrutiny of the mate.

“Well?”

“I told Harris to put—sew sheets on the bodies,” said Stephen in a cold and lifeless voice. “The least we can do is give them a decent burial.”

The mate shivered. “I hope we can get it over with soon. A crew of dead men don’t suit my fancy. If the captain should see ‘em—in his condition, you know, it wouldn’t be pleasant. I told Simpson to keep watch on the old man.”

“I’m more concerned about the crew,” said Stephen slowly. “They’ve been whispering and muttering ever since we brought the bodies aboard. Frightened blue, I guess. I don’t know as I blame them. If they could see this diary”—Stephen tapped his pocket significantly—“they might—run amuck. To tell you the truth, Jim, it’s got me frightened. I don’t know what to think.”

The mate moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. “It’s crazy gibberish, Steve,” he muttered. “They went through hell, apparently, and it’s my guess this fellow Henderson cracked up under the strain. Bein’ an officer and a gentleman—well, any one could see he was ‘only a frightened kid. I don’t think I ever saw a man’s face so drawn and despairful-lookin’.”

Stephen removed a weather-stained memorandum book from his pocket and began nervously to finger the pages. "There are things here, Jim," he said, "that you can't argue away. Descriptions, details. I'm convinced those men encountered something appalling. No thirst-crazed lunatic could have been so devilishly, inhumanly *logical*. Henderson remained courageously cool-headed to the very last. This entry shows what stuff the kid was made of."

Stephen had opened the book, and as the mate stared silently down into the almost motionless sea he began, slowly, to read:

"**T**HEY want our *brains*. Last night one of them got in touch with me. It laid its cool face against my forehead and spoke to me. I could understand everything it said. A terrible death awaits us if we do not obey them implicitly. They want Thomas. We are to make no attempt to thwart or resist them when they come for him.

"Later.—They came for Thomas last night. *They did not take all of him*. He is sitting before me now. I can see his broad shoulders and back as I write. They are limned very terribly against the glare of the sunset, and they obtrude with a terrible vividness. His presence is a perpetual horror, but we dare not throw him overboard. *They would not approve*.

"I am perfectly sane. The horror has not dulled in any way my perception of the visible realities about me. I know that I am adrift in the Pacific, fifty miles perhaps off the coast of Salvador, and that I am compelled to endure the presence of a headless corpse and five cowardly fools who gibber and moan like baboons merely because they lack guts and haven't sufficient water. My own stoicism bewilders and amazes me. Why is it that my hand does not tremble as I

write, that I can remain so observant, so calm? It may be that I have lost all capacity to suffer. We have passed into a strange world—an alien and utterly incomprehensible world which makes the fears and agonies of common life seem curiously impersonal and remote.

"We have abandoned all hope of a possible rescue. Nothing can save us from *them*. It is amazing how completely I have resigned myself to the inevitable. Three days ago we were as confident as the devil. Why, we actually jested when the *Mary O'Brien* went down. Red Taylor called it a natty dive. She went down bow first. It was an enormously impressive spectacle. The water about her was a white maelstrom for fully five minutes.

"'It's only a few miles to the coast,' I told them, 'and we've enough water to last a fortnight. We'll row in relays.'

"*They are aquat and slimy, with long gelatinous arms and hideous, bat-like faces*. But I have reason to suspect they can change their form at will. For hours our ears were assailed by a horrible, maddening droning, and then—*we saw them*. We saw them glistening in the moonlight. All about us the sea was carpeted with their luminous, malignant faces. There was nothing we could do. We were helpless—stunned.

"*They are not animals*. They are indued with a cold, unearthly intelligence. We have drifted into strange waters. Our compass revolves so maddeningly that it is useless as a guide. I have a theory—*incredible, fantastic*—which would account for all that has occurred, but I dare not confide it to the others. They would not understand. They are convinced, even now, that the things are fantastic fishes. They do not know that I have communicated with *them*. They did not see me last night when I left the boat and went with *them* into the abyss.

They were deceived by the presence of my physical body, which remained with them in the boat. They did not suspect that I had descended into the dark, cold abyss.

"They were strangely reticent. They merely confided to me that they wanted Thomas' brain. They feed, it seems, on human brains, and of all our brains Thomas' is the most finely organized. It is compact, imaginative, sensitive. He is a semi-illiterate A. B. S., but his brain is first-rate. What interests them primarily is not so much the culture or cultivation which a brain has acquired, but simply its naked intelligence. They experience strange, vivid new emotions and sensations when they feed on unspoiled human brains. But they do not really eat our brains. Rather, they suck, absorb them. They wrap themselves tightly about human heads, and suck out the contents of the cranium through the eyes and nostrils.

They do not always carry away the heads which they desire to use in this fashion. Occasionally they merely extract the brain while the victim is asleep. In such cases the poor wretch is certain to awake a raving maniac. Sightless—and a maniac. The other way is more merciful. I am glad that they severed Thomas' head and took it away. The presence of his body is a horror and a madness—but it is reassuring to know that he has ceased to suffer. The men are showing the effects of the torture. Brett has been whimpering pitifully for hours and Lang is as helpless as an infant. They want to throw Thomas' body into the sea, but I won't give my consent.

"They live at the bottom of the sea and are not a part of our familiar world. They inhabit another dimension. By some ghastly and inexplicable mischance we have passed into another dimension of space. We have passed into an exten-

sion of the three-dimensional world. The existence of these creatures confirms the wildest speculations of theosophists and mystics, who have persistently maintained that man is not the only intelligent inhabitant of the globe—that there are other worlds impinging on ours. Above the familiar seas of the world are imposed other invisible seas inhabited by strange and hideous shapes utterly unlike anything with which we are familiar. There is not one Pacific Ocean merely. Occupying the same space in another dimension are invisible Pacifics inhabited by strange shapes with hidden, malevolent powers. We have, unaccountably, sailed into one of these invisible worlds. We have passed from the coast of Salvador to the seacoast of an alien world.

"It is a very terrible world. Its denizens are more malignant than vampires. They raven on the brains of lost travellers from the three-dimensional Pacific.

"I had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion when they came for me and compelled me to follow them down through the blue depths to their strange, blue-litten city on the sea's floor.

"My body remained in the boat, but my brain was with them at the bottom of the sea. They can separate the brain temporarily from the body without any physical sundering. They were careful to explain to me why I should not share the fate of Thomas. They need me. I have been enjoined to guard Thomas' body—to keep the others from throwing it into the sea.

"Another ship has passed into this strange and hideous world. On it there is a brain which they covet—an extraordinary brain—the brain of a scientist and poet. They desire to absorb it, and they desire to absorb it while it is aflame with curiosity and maddened by fright. When they can absorb a highly evolved brain that is keyed up to a pitch of wild ex-

citement they experience the most intense ecstasy and rapture. So peculiarly are they constituted that they are capable of deriving the most piercing pleasure from highly evolved, highly inflamed cerebral tissue. In our world rare or alien manifestations of energy like radium, cosmic rays and things of that kind react most violently on terrestrial organisms and it is very conceivable that in this other world animal tissue—especially such highly evolved tissue as one finds in human brains—reacts with a similar intensity upon the alien body-substances of these creatures.

"The scientist—the man who is coming—has a brain which excites them immeasurably. They are determined to frighten and inflame it, and they think that if its possessor encounters Thomas sitting upright in the boat, headless and ghastly, it will become a rare delicacy and afford them the most exquisite rapture. They have asked me to help them and I dare not refuse. But I can at least record what I know and suspect in this book, and if he is not a blind fool he will strive to escape.

"I fear, though, that he is lost—hopelessly and irremediably lost.

"Like us he has in some mysterious way passed into another world. The ship which bears him has been drawn—sucked into some great vacuum or vent in three-dimensional space and is now in an utterly alien world. A black and abysmal world. Nothing *on earth* can save him. His naked intelligence, perhaps—but nothing on earth. The brain-eaters will not spare him.

"They will fasten upon his skull and drain it dry. His eyes will be drawn from their sockets, and his brain will melt and dissolve like tallow in the sun. Their moist, dark mouths—

"I am very ill. The ocean about me

is carpeted with leering, malignant faces. The others see them, too. Brett is cringing and whining and foaming at the mouth like an epileptic, and Adams has collapsed against the gunwale. Blood is trickling from his nose and his eyes are drawn inward. His face is a mask—a corpse-mask. There is nothing we can do or say. We sit lifelessly by the oars and stare at Thomas' ghastly body, which has become a mockery, a menace. I have resigned all hope—"

WILLIAMSON closed the book and glanced anxiously at the man beside him. "Wouldn't you say, Jim, that there was *something* behind it?"

Jim looked exceedingly ill. "I don't know. It's all so very queer—uncanny. If there's any truth in it it's *your* brain they're after."

Williamson nodded. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Jim. I'm going to sleep on deck tonight. I'll bring up my cot and sleep here. I'll feel safer, somehow, on deck."

The mate lowered his head. "I'd do that," he said, simply.

It was after midnight when Williamson awoke and sat up. The moonlight lay in bright, luminous stripes on his cot and the wet planks of the deck. The lifeboats stood out boldly in the silver light, and from where he lay three huge water-barrels and a great pile of tarred rope were plainly visible. At first Williamson saw only these dim, familiar shapes; the water-barrels, the rope, the lifeboats swaying reassuringly in the wind. Then, slowly, he became aware of something dark and cumbersome, something opaque that obscured his vision and concealed a portion of the second barrel, something that made a pie-shaped dent in the pile of cordage. He rubbed his eyes; slowly, at first, then violently,

hysterically. *A dark shape was clinging to the heavy netting above his bed.*

For a moment he stared at it in stark bewilderment. Then a great horror came upon him and he shrank back against the pillows. It was clinging to the netting and moving backward and forward like a great, slow-moving beetle. It was a moving blot, concealing the stars—a fetid dark blot against the spectral moon.

Nausea welled up within him. He started to rise, and then, suddenly, grew sick with terror incalculable. The strength ebbed from his limbs and his mind refused to function. He lay supine upon the coarse sheets, too stricken to move or cry out. The thing was slowly changing its shape. It was assuming a more definite contour, was waxing more malignant and agile. Stephen's eyes followed it helplessly as it moved up and down the netting. It was acquiring sight. It was acquiring the loathsome capacity to return his stare. Two luminous spots glowed malevolently down at him from its crawling bulk.

It was globular, and *wet*. From its dark sac-like body depended eight squirming tentacles. Or were they limbs? It was impossible to be certain. They were so maddeningly weaving and indistinct, at one moment swelling in girth, and then becoming so incredibly wire-like that they seemed to merge with the mesh of the netting which sustained them. But that the arms ended in thin, claw-like hands he did not for a moment doubt. The hands were too constantly visible, too patently sinister. They fumbled with the netting, as though seeking to draw it apart.

He managed, somehow, to rise upon his elbows, to extend, invitingly, his exposed throat. It was not death he feared. It was the torture, the suspense. He could no longer bear to look into the horror's

eyes. He had endured with agonized fortitude the sight of its drooling, bat-like mouth, and the odor of putrefaction, the sea-stench which surged from it; and even the fetid, fleshless hands with their long luminous fingers had not incited him to complete surrender. But its eyes held a threat which could not be evaded or endured. He did not want them to come any closer. If the hands broke through and the eyes came closer—

It was better to surrender unreservedly to the hands. So he raised himself on his elbow and bared his throat. It was a full minute before he perceived that he had been mistaken and that the hands were not seeking his throat.

They were busily engaged in recovering from the wet deck a large, round object of disturbingly familiar appearance. The thing had evidently been compelled to lay this object down for a moment in order to facilitate its ascent to the netting above Williamson's bed, and it was now intent on recovering its gruesome trophy. Slowly, deliberately, it raised the object in its terribly thin arms, caressing and fondling it, holding it very close, for a moment, to its moist and bulbous mouth. And in that same instant a hideous droning, that was like the thrum of huge engines in some vast and reverberant power-plant, smote menacingly on Williamson's ear. It was not the droning, however, which drove Williamson shrieking from the bed and across the deck in a straight dash toward the rail. It was something much more unendurable than any sound on earth.

It was the sight of a face, blue-cheeked and tortured, with matted red beard and white, papiless eyes—a face distraught, yet immobile—a face that grimaced and glowered, and yet remained strangely, alarmingly impassive—the face of a dead man, the face of a corpse. There were dark stains above the temples, and the

matted hair and beard were clotted with blood. The head was neckless—*untached*. It seemed to float upon the air. In reality, however, it was being held very firmly in the terribly thin arms of something that wanted Williamson's brain, that wanted to do to Williamson what it had done to the object it was so proudly exhibiting. It was displaying the object unashamedly to Williamson because it wanted to terrify him—to appall and terrify him utterly. It wanted to drive Williamson mad with fright so that it could fasten on his inflamed brain and drain it dry.

THE mate, standing unsteadily upon the bridge, was alive to Williamson's peril. He had watched the scientist awake from a troubled sleep and had seen the dark shape moving backward and forward above the latter's head. He had also observed, with an actual physical retching, the round dark object on the deck, before the horror had reclaimed it. He was an imaginative man, and his brain, at that moment, was as agitated as the one which the horror coveted. But a mighty wave of fury against the thing that had come up from the sea blotted the fright from his mind. The barrel of the rifle in his hand glowed like a long blue taper in the moonlight. Slowly, with an almost hysterical deliberation, he raised the weapon to his shoulder and took aim.

The horror screeched twice shrilly as the bullet plowed through its dark body. It fell from the netting, twisted itself into a ball and rolled diagonally toward the scuppers. As it passed over the deck it left a thin blue trail of phosphorescent slime on the wet planks. Williamson turned from the rail, against which he had been clinging, and raised a stricken face toward the bridge, "It's no use,"

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he shrieked. "Too many of them! All about the ship! I'm going!"

He started to climb upon the rail; and then, suddenly, his foot slipped and he went down with a thud. When he raised himself again to a sitting posture he was holding something dark and round between his hands and gibbering insanely. "No top to it! No top at all!" he screamed. "The brain-pan's gone! All sucked dry—nothing inside! Oh my God!"

Two strong hands descended upon the mate's shoulders and abruptly, ruthlessly, he was pushed aside. A tall form in wet, glistening slicker took his place upon the bridge. The mate's eyes widened bewilderingly. "Captain Sayers," he muttered. "Captain Sayers—"

But the captain ignored him. He was shouting out commands at the top of his bursting lungs. "Put every stitch on her," he shouted. "Jump lively there!"

Part of the crew had emerged from the hatches and were running rapidly backward and forward in response to the captain's orders. After a moment he turned to the gasping mate. "We'll get out of this. Do as I say, and we'll get out of this. I know what's happened. We're in the wrong dimension. I was in it once before—years ago. Nothing to fear—if you'll do as I say. I know how to steer her. Five tacks to the right, a twist to the left and we'll be out of it. I *know*. I've been in touch with them for years. I'm psychic."

"Mad," groaned the mate. "Stark, raving mad!"

The captain had left the mate's side and was running frantically toward the wheel. "Keep them at it!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Tell them to square away. Can't put too much sail on her. Can't put too much—do you hear?"

The mate nodded. "Worth tryin'," he muttered to himself. "Follow him im-

PLICITLY. Nothin' to lose. He's in touch with 'em, maybe. Crazy people *are* psychic. They know things we don't." He raised his voice. "For God's sake, men, be quick. Do as the captain says. It's our only chance."

There ensued a race with destruction. The great ship hove to and trembled ominously, every sail on her taut with the breeze, while from the ocean there arose a screeching and a droning such as no sane man could endure with fortitude. The mate felt his reason tottering, even as the reason of the captain had departed, even as the mind of poor Williamson had succumbed—poor Williamson, who squatted hopelessly on the deck, his right hand supporting a horror of horrors, and his face a distorted mask in the spectral light.

But eventually they won through. The ship, under the captain's guidance, veered strangely on the dark waters. It veered about and rose on a mountainous swell, and even as the captain shouted orders into the attentive ear of the frightened helmsman the droning and screeching diminished in volume. One by one the hideous luminous faces faded from the luminous seas. The wind went down, and the ship floated serenely on a three-dimensional ocean.

FOUR hours later the sun came up over the coastal hills and flooded the ocean with a saffron light. Williamson, serene and at peace, stood silently by the rail and gazed with gratitude at the prone form of Captain Sayers. The captain lay asleep on the bed which the scientist had vacated on the previous night under circumstances which the mate could not bear to recall. But Williamson was the courageous one now. He dared to recall them. He gripped the mate's arm and smiled wanly.

"I'm glad you decided to obey the cap-

tain," he said. "Nothing else could have saved us. It was an heroic decision. The captain *knew*, I am convinced. Men whom the world calls insane—sick people, lunatics—are often *en rapport* with the invisible, the hidden. The fourth dimension is an open book to them. They see things which are hidden from us. And the captain *knew*."

The mate nodded. "I'm glad that they didn't take your brain, old fellow. It's too valuable an instrument. Aside"—he added with an ironic smile—"aside from friendship, I'm glad. You can go on with your work now. You can get all that dope on the Mayas you missed last trip."

"I'll not write about the Mayas," said Stephen decisively. "I've much more important information to convey. My next book will deal with—with *them*."

The mate scowled. "No one will believe you."

"Perhaps not. But I'm determined to put that horror on paper. Some one, somewhere, may read it and understand."

The mate shook his head. "You'll lose caste. Your scientific friends will gibe and jeer at you."

Stephen's face set in grim lines. "Let them jeer," he muttered. "The knowledge that I'm in the right will sustain me." He drew himself up. "God, but it was a great experience. It nearly did for me, but I *know*, now, that the world isn't the pretty little affair we've always thought it. *Out beyond* are whetters of cosmic appetites. I've a cosmic appetite, Jim. I like to venture and explore. Perhaps, some day, they'll get my brain, but in the meantime—"

The mate smiled sympathetically. "I can guess how it is," he said. "There ain't any sailor this side of the Horn wouldn't understand. You're always hankerin' for what lies just around the corner."

"Or on the dark side of the moon," amended Stephen, with a wistful smile.