

# Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

**NOTE**—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. **FARNSWORTH WRIGHT**, Editor.  
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# The CAVE of SPIDERS

by WILLIAM R. HICKEY.



"Over him they crawled, a veritable army of the bloated, venomous creatures."

**T**HE whole affair from its conception was extraordinary. A strange adventure into an unknown region of the world, a strange discovery, and a strange conclusion. It had no equal in any fiction that I knew, and the actors were like characters in a drama.

Of Mrs. Seton I had learned much. Nowadays, when one reaches that indeterminate age which really tactful people designate as "over thirty," one doesn't fold one's hands and settle down to a grave, dignified old age. The modern woman refuses to grow old. It was not denied that Clara Seton was beautiful. Her eyes

sparkled with the fire of life. She had not lost that priceless charm of youth. From a girl, red-blooded, daring, eager for a life of constant thrills and excitement, she had matured, only to crave even more the popularity, admiration and applause that follow the victorious participation in certain fascinating events.

But it was Graves in whom I was interested. I knew Mrs. Seton had long been infatuated with him. As he chatted with her in the lobby I went outside and waited. I did not want to lose him. I had met him in France, and there was something about him—he had been one of us.

He came out walking rapidly and was well past the hotel when I caught up with him. He stopped and looked at me patiently while I was trying to think of something to say, but I hesitated and he walked on. I kept up with him and finally suggested we might dine together. My idiotic mumble seemed to please him. He surprised me by accepting. I don't pretend I understood him. His views were not mine—yet in the end he rang true.

Graves with Seton and his wife had gone into South America on some hare-brained rumor of a lost civilization. A Philadelphia museum had sent them as a scouting party, that could move swiftly and cover the ground. If they found what they sought, an elaborate expedition could go in later, equipped to meet the conditions that existed.

Graves and Mrs. Seton had returned—alone. They brought back some story of spiders. At least Mrs. Seton did. And Graves corroborated her. Yet I knew Seton to be a reliable man, painstaking and methodical in the field. This I had learned from the museum. I had only met him twice myself. He was older than his wife and of a more quiet bearing, and there was a noticeable difference between them. There had been talk, too. Breath of scandal! But their story had been accepted by all—except the museum.

I knew Mrs. Seton was in love with Graves, or pretended to be. Since their return they had often been seen together. On one occasion as I was leaving the apartments where Graves was staying, I heard a soft rustling on the stairs—intimately feminine. There in a darkened corner of the landing she cowered, a slim figure in a clinging silken gown. Her hat shadowed her face, but could not hide its startling beauty, could not mar the brilliance of her skin, nor dim the wonderful eyes of this modern Delilah.

I paused and looked at her sharply as she took a step forward, her eyes filled with defiance, her lips parted.

“Oh!” she panted; “why don't you let us alone?”

It is with some shame that I confess her charm almost enveloped me like a magic cloud. Her beauty was wholly intoxicating. But I had thrust her away.

“You have no claim to mercy,” I replied unfeelingly. “Do not count upon any.” I left her pale and trembling.

I had returned to the States shortly after the collapse of the ill-fated party, and was staying at the Jefferson House. Graves dined with me there. He talked soberly, with a sort of composed unreserve and quiet bearing that might have been the outcome of manly self-control or of gigantic deception. Who could tell? He seemed of the right sort, and he had been one of us.

“**WE** LEFT Guayaquil,” he spoke slowly in answer to my question, “and went down into the disputed territory of northern Peru. Toward the end of that semi-arid plateau which stretches for miles between two spurs of the Peruvian Andes lies a land that God forgot. High in the air it is, as men measure things—a matter of two vertical miles above the slow lift of the Pacific out beyond the sunset. Tumbled and stark, too, a dumping-ground of the Titans, a scrap-heap from which the world was made.

“Up toward this sky-top world we rode on a day as glittering and telescopically clear overhead as it was harsh and soggy underfoot, up through the green rankness of the jungle coast toward a land of illimitable space. To the condor swinging a thousand feet overhead we must have seemed like ants crawl-

ing in single file toward a rugged border.

"That night we camped in a ravine on a little grassy flat protected on two sides by the crumbling walls of the cut. We were not yet out of the jungle, and the surrounding wilderness, with its screams of winged creatures and its dank tropical odors, was in direct contrast to the country above, where the mountains swept up and up into a cap of the clouds."

Graves paused. The marble floor in the middle of the dining-room was filled with dancing couples whirling around in a flash of colors to the strains of voluptuous music emanating from among the gilt and brocades where a concealed orchestra played unceasingly. One wondered who they were and where they all came from, these expensively dressed, apparently refined though only veneered girls, whirling about with the pleasantest-looking young men who expertly guided them through the mazes of the one-step and waltz and a dozen other steps that I knew not of. All around us the atmosphere seemed vibrant with laughter and music. But it went unheeded. We were in a different world.

My companion looked at me doubtfully as he lit a cigarette. He seemed perplexed, as if he was about to make some extraordinary statement, something I could not imagine or believe.

"That night," he shot out, "occurred a strange thing.

"We had built a huge fire in the opening of our rocky shelter, that any prowling animals might be kept at bay. Beyond the fire, yellow-green spots of flame appeared, moved about restlessly, disappeared and reappeared, accompanied by hideous growls and screams as the hungry beasts and screeching night birds were attracted by the light of our campfire.

"But to such things we had be-

come calloused. We talked unconcernedly, as we might have done in more domesticated surroundings. The fire crackled cheerily. The owners of the yellow-green eyes raised their frightful chorus to the heavens.

"Suddenly the moon, which had been shining brightly, was obscured by a cloud. Darkness enclosed us like a shroud. And then as though the hand of death had reached out and touched us, we all tensed into rigidity, being frozen by some strange species of terror or awe. Above the diapason of the teeming forest we heard a dismal flapping of wings, and overhead through the thick night a shadowy form passed across the diffused light of the flaring campfire. I felt a strange creeping sensation run over my flesh as the horrible something flapped itself across the sky. An eery wail floated down from above, and the apparition, whatever it might have been, was swallowed up by the darkness. For several minutes we heard the sounds of those dismally flapping wings lessening in the distance until they could no longer be heard.

"I glanced toward Seton, who was gazing into the darkness above. He mumbled something about a vampire bat and walked toward the tent with an air of finality. Clara was still silent, but when I turned to her I found her big eyes fixed upon me with an expression in which there was pleading, in which there was something else—something indefinable, yet strangely disturbing.

"'It is a sign,' she said, slowly, 'someone is going to die!'

"Though I don't think I am any more cowardly than the average man, I wasn't feeling any too comfortable that night. The very atmosphere seemed charged with something sinister. Secret and malign forces seemed to throb about us—forces against which we had no armor. As Clara Seton spoke, I felt as one bound upon an Aztec altar,

with the priest's obsidian knife raised above my breast.

"Vaguely I remembered seeing Clara to her own tent, and after piling more wood upon the fire, falling exhausted upon my own cot beside Seton. There are few states, I suppose, which exact so severe a toll from one's nervous system as the anticipation of calamity. And it came soon enough."

I studied the man's face attentively. He was at least candid. But it never came home to him how wholly he was caught in the spell of this woman whose real character was so inscrutable, whose beauty and charm masked the cunning of a serpent.

I watched him light a fresh cigarette and exhale a heavy swirl of smoke.

"Two days later we were in the higher altitudes," he continued. "We had not yet reached the part of the country we sought, but decided to rest here a day or so before moving on. We could, perhaps, pick an easier access to the plateau above.

"The morning of the third day Seton and his wife set out together. It was noon when Clara returned alone. Disheveled and torn, she came running toward me with a wild look in her eyes. It was patent at a glance that something had happened—something horrible. There was an ashiness in her cheeks that even her rich coat of tan could not conceal. It was the one time that I noticed, for all her amazing beauty, she was sinister! There was cruelty about her quivering mouth, in the terror of her speech—not conscious cruelty, but the more terrifying, careless cruelty of nature itself.

"'Quick!' she gasped; 'he is being killed!'

"Her very looks and speech demanded action, and quickly procuring my automatic I prepared to follow her at once without further questioning. Clara still carried her

own lightweight 30-30. She led off through the thick foliage of cane which seemed to be the particular vegetation at this altitude; off to where the side of the mountain sloped to a steep pitch that dropped far below to the valley floor; across a tangle of interlacing stems and offshoots that reached a height of three or four feet and was in some places strong enough to bear our weight.

"As I struggled along behind Clara I seemed to sense a subtle change in her attitude toward me—a new intentness, a doubt plainly tinged with apprehension. What was it? What had happened to Seton? But it was no time now to ask questions. I set down her expression of fear and bewilderment as the result of her husband being in danger.

"It was rough going. On hands and knees we could crawl along for a few yards over the tangled mass of bamboo, then strike a weak place and mash through to the ground in a smother of tangled leaves and hampering tendrils—scramble out and go on. By the time we were five hundred yards across that slope we were soaked with perspiration and nearly fagged out.

"It was nearly sunset when we reached a comparatively level stretch beyond which the mountain dropped away suddenly as though to make up for lost time. Across this place the cane was unusually thick, and it was here, a few yards short of the steep slope, that Clara, her face blanched to the hue of dirty parchment and her forehead dewed with cold perspiration, stopped and pointed.

"I reached her side and looked down into a sort of pear-shaped cave perhaps a dozen yards in diameter and about half as high. Daylight filtered through a ragged hole at our feet, pitifully weak, but enough to disclose the mingled rocks and earth that formed the walls of the enclosure and the whitish, diseased-looking vines that twined up them

to the opening. The exuding air was hot, steamy, and loaded with the smell of rotting vegetation.

"On the floor among the rocks and moldy roots lay Seton. Yet it was not this fact alone that caused me to stiffen, that almost caused my eyes to bulge from their sockets. Was it madness, this gruesome fascination that held my eyes to the bottom of that horrible pit? Was it a nightmare, these huge apparitions with loathsome heads and misshapen bodies that crawled over the body of my friend?"

"Spiders! Enormous spiders! Black, with yellow stripes. Legs that fairly bristled with spines. Ugh! God, it was awful! I could see them clinging to the irregularities in the slimy walls—the most gigantic spiders I had ever set eyes upon! I tried to close my eyes—or to turn them away from the poisonous well. It was useless. I must look.

"Into that black cavern I stared—to feel my scalp tingle horrifically, to know the crowning terror of this fateful journey. The blackness was spangled with watching, glittering eyes—with tiny eyes that moved, upon the walls, upon the floor, and upon the now inert body of Seton. Over him they crawled, a veritable army of the venomous creatures; bloated, unwieldy, so great of body that their hideous, hairy legs could scarce support them.

"Their mouths dripped blood and flesh as they tore at their unfortunate victim. Already part of the body was eaten clean to the bones. What monstrosities of the insect kingdom constituted that obscene host I do not know; I only know that my skin tingled from forehead to feet, and I experienced a sensation as if a million of these unclean things clung to me. I could hear them moving, crawling, tearing, with a sort of rustling sound—a faint sibilance indescribably loathsome.

"A choking cry rose to my lips,

but I was unable to utter any save mumbling sounds. With an effort I withdrew my gaze from that hellish scene as there came a low moan in my ear. Clara Seton, wrought upon past endurance, with a sobbing cry sank at my feet and lay still.

"Panic plucking at my heart, I gathered her up in my arms and stumbled from that place of gruesome horror."

Graves dropped the stub of his cigarette into his empty cup and passed his hand across his forehead as if to clear it. "I remember little of that journey back to the coast. I only know that we both were strangely silent. Our nerves were overwrought by Seton's untimely end. When we reached Guayaquil a full report was sent to the museum, explaining how he had accidentally fallen into the cave, and lying stunned had become an easy prey for the spiders before aid could be summoned."

"But," I objected, "you didn't examine the body. You should have been more thorough."

He looked at me strangely. "There are times," he said, "of which no man can recall his mental impressions, moments so acutely horrible that, mercifully, our memory retains nothing of the emotions they occasioned. The time I stood looking into that pit was one of them. Afterward in my calmer moments I realized it would have been folly. The man was unmistakably dead."

I studied him awhile. Perhaps I am somewhat of a woman-hater. Anyway I said scornfully enough: "No woman is worth that!"

Graves' eyes bored into me. He jerked himself upright. The light of comprehension seemed at last to have seeped through his brain. He darted his hand across the table, and clutching my arm, glared fixedly at me.

"You lie!" he gritted.

I saw he was sincere. I had always thought so. But I had to tell him.

He had risen to leave me, anger flaring from his eyes.

"Wait," I said, and a curious hesitation seemed to hold him. "The museum people sent me down there. They weren't satisfied with your explanation. I followed your trail to your last camp. It took me three days to find the cave—and the body. The spiders were there, but I managed to remove the body. And I found what you would have found had you recovered it. Seton was not killed by his fall or by the spiders. He had been shot through the brain with a bullet fired from a special 30-30 rifle."

**F**OR a long time Graves gazed at me. I do not know whether anyone around us noticed him. I don't

think so. His face—I could never describe it, but it was as grim as death. There was some mental struggle going on within. He seemed to be conscious of many aching sensibilities. To have gone wrong and to have been set right makes a double trial for man's vanity. The realization of his own weakness and unfaith had staggered him to the heart and increased the bitterness of surprise.

Finally he stuck out his hand and said: "Thanks, old man!" Then he was gone.

The next morning I received two telegrams, one to the effect that Graves was on his way to California and the other that Clara Seton had been taken into custody.