

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 32 CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1938 Number 3

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East 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 rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, 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 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Gavern

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN and
GERTRUDE GORDON

A brief story about a doomed man who seemed to bear a charmed life

We tread the steps appointed for us; and he whose steps are appointed must tread them.

—*The Arabian Nights.*

THE old fortune-teller had done with her prattle about crossing water and receiving letters full of money. She gathered up her grimy deck of cards and shuffled away, leaving Stoll and me to finish our dinner under soft lights, accompanied by soft music. I sighed and wondered aloud why the hag had singled us out of all the patrons in the crowded restaurant.

"Because she knew I believe," replied Stoll as he poured wine.

I was amazed and a bit shocked. "You believe in fortune-tellers? Nobody of education and intelligence can possibly——"

"Granted that I have no education and intelligence, but I believe." He was quite solemn. "I've seen one come true."

I dared hope for one of Stoll's rare stories. Why do men like Stoll, who have seen so much and behaved so well in far places, keep their mouths shut? I waited, and eventually he added:

"It wasn't my fortune, but Swithin Quade's."

"Swithin Quade," I repeated eagerly. "The African Quade? The one in the Sunday feature sections?"

"Right. I met him on his first day in Africa."

SWITHIN QUADE was the sort of budding empire-builder Kipling used to write about [began Stoll]. You know what I mean—broad shoulders, long legs,

golden-brown curls, eyes like the April sky, close-clipped young mustache, close-clipped young attitudes, and adventure hunger enough for all the explorers since the launching of the *Argo*. His people had no money, but they had managed to educate him well, and through influential friends he'd been signed up to cut his teeth on the tomb of a priest-noble of the Hyksos, up Nile a way. I was camp and digging chief on that job, under Thomson, the big Egyptology pot.

Alexandria was even more garish then than now—there was considerable tourist money, and no war scare. As soon as Quade hit the dock he wanted to see dancers, snake-charmers, mosques and all the rest of it. I took him 'round, because Thomson was busier than I and didn't know so many places. Quade and I wound up late the first afternoon in a loudish spot, with striped awnings, and mutton stew, and hashish in the coffee. A bunch of vicious-looking blacks were belting away at drums and wailing on pipes, and a very dirty and ragged old Arab sidled up to whine for "*Bakshish!*"

I warned him off with the traditional "*Mafish!*", and tried to ignore him. But the old duffer—bent he was, and dried up like a bunch of raisins—began to plead for a chance to tell fortunes., Quade asked what it was about, and I explained.

"Good egg," said Quade at once, his face as bright and happy as a child's behind that trim mustache. "Have him tell mine."

The walking mummy understood

Quade's enthusiastic manner, if not his English, and right away set down his little tray of polished wood on the edge of our table. Then he poured sand on the tray, from an old tobacco pouch. He began to fiddle with his scrawny fingers, making little rifts and ridges and hills.

"Good egg," Quade repeated. "This blighter is just what I hoped to run into. Picturesque and all that—hurry up, old fellow!" And his smile grew wider.

But the sand diviner did not smile back. He only paddled in the sand, and stared out of ancient eyes that looked dim and foul, like pools with scum on them. Finally he mumbled something.

"What's he saying?" asked Quade, and I translated:

"Death sits waiting in a cavern. . . ."

The old bat had waited for me to pass this along. And now he added something on his own hook. "This other *effendi*," he said, turning his dim gaze on me, "shall be witness, and will know that I have not lied."

QUADE'S grin faded into a frown of intense interest, and he leaned forward to look at the sand on the tray. It was all smoothed out, under those dirty claws, and in the middle was a little hole. Funny that it should look so deep and dark, that hole; there wasn't more than a handful of sand, yet you'd think the diviner had made a pit miles deep.

I saw that Quade was suddenly repelled, and I gave the old vulture a piece of silver, a shilling I think. He bowed and blessed us, and gathered up his tray of sand and scabbled out. Quade drank some coffee.

"I say, that was nasty," he mumbled to me. "Let's go back to the hotel, eh?"

So we went. But he found it was close and hot there, and stepped out to take a bit of a stroll by himself. Back he came

in half an hour, and he looked quite drawn and stuffy.

"These swine are pulling my leg," he said angrily, and then he told me what had happened. Down in some narrow alley full of shops and booths, he had come upon another fortune-teller, a baggy old woman who spoke English. Probably he hoped to hear something conventional about a blond wife and a journey across deep water, to take the taste of the other prophecy out of his mouth. So he stuck out his palm for her to read.

"And I swear, Stoll," he told me, "that she gave one look and then screwed up her face, and said the same thing."

"What same thing?" I asked him.

"What that filthy old Johnny with the sand said. 'Look out for the cavern,' or 'Death waits in the cavern,' or the like. See here, I jolly well don't like it."

I advised him to keep his chin up and not bother about natives. Finally he managed to make light of the business, but not very convincingly. And when we got to Cairo—Thompson had to stop there for a big row with the officials—he gave the business a third try.

It was in a cool, conventional little tea garden—run by a smart Scotswoman, who knew how a place like that would catch homesick English travelers. She had native waiters dressed like Europeans, and crumpets and all that, and a very lovely girl in a stagy gipsy costume to read the leaves in the cups. Quade wanted to test fate again.

The girl came to our table when he beckoned, and she was plainly intrigued by his grin and his curls and his youth. I think she intended to give him such a reading as would fetch him back later—maybe not for tea alone. But as she turned the cup and squinted at the tangle inside, her handsome face grew grave, and its olive faded to a parchment tint.

"You must take care," she said husk-

ily, in accented English. "Take care of the cave—the cavern." Her eyes grew wider, and she looked at me with them. "You, sir, will see a terrible fate that is his. . . ."

That night Quade packed his bags, and told Thomson and me that he was chucking his job.

"I'm not having any of that cavern," he said. "Three warnings are quite enough."

"What cavern?" I demanded, smiling a little.

"Cavern or underground tomb, what's the difference?"

"You can't take such prophecies seriously," put in Thomson.

Quade replied, very tritely, that there were more things in heaven and earth, and so on. "I know you chaps think I'm afraid," he added.

"Neither of us said anything like that," I replied at once.

"And no more am I afraid," he almost snapped back. "I'll stay in Africa—but in the open. Call me idiotic, or superstitious, or what you will. Better safe than sorry, is my motto."

He was as good as his word for ten years, and he thrived enormously on African danger.

Today he is a tradition, a legend even. Everybody has heard about how, in Jo'burg, he walked up on a mad Kaffir with a gun, who had even those tough Transvaal police buffaloes for the moment; the Kaffir fired twice, stirring Quade's curls with both shots, and then Quade knocked him loose from the gun with one straight dunt on the mouth. Some sort of foundation wanted to give him a medal, but he wouldn't accept. He went instead with some romantic Frenchmen who tried to find the Dying-place of the Elephants—sure, people still look for it; I, for one, believe it exists. But all Quade got was a terrible dose of

black-water fever. He recovered from that and complications, though eleven men out of twelve would have died.

Next he got up into West Central, and visited the Lavalli-valli. Instead of thinking that he was a missionary and eating him, they thought he was a god and worshipped him. I understand that Quade had to fight one skeptic, a big brute about seven feet tall, very skilful with the stabbing-spear. But Quade dodged the first thrust, got in close and took the spear away, and gave it back right through the fellow's lungs. That made him solidier than teak with the Lavalli-valli, who love a fighter better than anything else in all the cosmos. Quade might have ruled there forever, but all he wanted was to trade for the native rubber they had. He got a whole caravan-load, and lost it to Portuguese gamblers in Benguela. Broke, he accepted an offer to help the inland Boer settlers fight off a Gangella uprising. He had more escapes than Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Then he went to Ethiopia, just as the Italians pushed in. Quade took up for Haile Selassie, who dubbed him "Ras Quedu" and put him in command of a kind of a suicide division. His men—Africa's tallest and finest, as I hear—were slaughtered almost to the last one, in the fighting around Jijiga. But Quade was captured by some of Mussolini's Moslem auxiliaries. While the chiefs were arguing whether he should die as an infidel or live as a prisoner of war, Quade throttled a sentry and escaped. He fled clear through the interior, safe into British territory.

That and a thousand other things made him news. Lowell Thomas began talking about him on the radio, and W. B. Seabrook or somebody of that sort wrote a biography, *Quade the Incredible*. I daresay he'll be a solar myth before the century is out.

I CUT his trail just about a year ago, on the fringe of a rain-forest somewhere in the 'tween-mountain country of Portuguese West. If we had a map I'd show you where. His boys and mine entered a little village from opposite sides. I, following in, heard, "Hullo there, Stoll! This *is* a lark!", and there was Quade. Not the curly golden boy any more, but a tough-tempered, lean-cheeked hunter. He had grown a short beard, into which the toothbrush mustache had lengthened and blended. His rosy face had been baked brown, and his was the ready way of moving and standing that comes from harsh life gladly met. The one thing that made me remember the old Swithin Quade—or, rather, the young Swithin Quade—was his bright blue eye, as happy and honest under his worn slouch hat as it had been that first afternoon in Alexandria.

When we had crushed each other's hands and slapped each other's backs almost purple, we quartered our outfits side by side, just at the gate of the village stockade. Then we went together to buy beans and manioc, and he invited me to supper at his fire. After eating we swapped yarns, and of course Quade's yarns were by far the best.

"You still remember those Alexandrian fortunes?" I asked at length.

He smiled, but nodded, and said that he had more than remembered. He had asked fortunes from varied seers—Kaffir witch-doctors, Moslem marabouts, and ordinary crystal-gazers in Cape Town and Durban. "And they've been strangely unanimous," he summed up. "I give you my word, that again and again there's been something about a cave, or a cavern, or just a hole. And I'm always told that I'd best stay out."

"And have you stayed out?" I prompted.

"I have that," he chuckled. "I must

say that, if death waits for me in a cavern, it has remained there. Mine's the traditional charmed life."

"Don't forget," I reminded, "that I'm supposed to witness your fate in a cavern."

"I haven't forgotten, Stoll. But I'm here to hunt—hippopotami just now, I've been too busy all these years to get one—and if you come along tomorrow, we'll take care to stay clear of holes. Then, when we separate in a day or so, I'll be safe again, what?"

I joined in chuckling over the conceit.

But he was dead serious on one point—staying in the open. That night he slept in a tent, not the snug hut that the solicitious villagers had built especially for him. His gun-bearer told my headman that Quade always slept that way; that, when in the settlements, he, Quade, never sat in a house without the windows open, and had twice refused to take a job in the diamond country for dislike of entering a mine. I heard all this at breakfast in the morning, and made bold to ask Quade about it when he came over to renew his invitation to the hunt.

"My bearer's a gossipy chap, but he's telling the truth," Quade confessed cheerfully. "I go into precious few houses except when it's necessary, and into no cellars whatever. Now then, what heavy rifles have you? . . . Oh, I see, Dutch guns. Two nice weapons, those. Well, shall we start?"

Away we went, with our gun-bearers and a leash of villagers for guides. Down valley from the camp we approached a great tangled belt of the forest, and one of the local hunters pointed to a tunnel-like opening among the trees and bushes, the "hole in the jungle" made by nothing but a hippo.

"I say, that looks as if it might be the cavern you and I heard about once," said Quade, and not in a joking manner.

He hesitated, but only for a moment, and then led the way in.

We traversed the leafy passage, and I felt as jumpy as Quade. But the closest approach to danger along the entire way was an ineffably beautiful little snake, that struck at a village boy and missed. My bearer killed it with a stick he carried.

At the other end of the tunnel we came out on the banks of one of those African rivers unknown and uncharted—deep, swift, tree-walled, as dark and exotic as the one in the poem about Kubla Khan. As a matter of fact, Quade muttered a phrase from that very poem about "Alph, the sacred river," but I refrained from adding the bit about "caverns measureless to man." Meanwhile, the villagers poked into a clump of sappy-leaved bushes, and drew into view a brace of dugouts, very nicely finished and perfectly balanced. Quade and his bearer got into one of them, and I with my bearer took the other. Each of us had a pair of villagers to paddle. Together we dropped downstream.

It was I, a little ahead of Quade, who saw the hippo first.

He was floating like a water-soaked log in a little bay where the current slowed down considerably. His nostril bumps were in sight, and his ears pricked up to show that they heard us, but he kept perfectly still, hoping we'd pass him by.

My bearer snapped his fingers backward to attract Quade's attention in the rear boat, and I, sitting in the bow, set my elbow on my knee and aimed for what I could see of the hippo's narrow, flat cranium. He was no farther away than the door yonder—I couldn't miss. And I was using a three-ounce explosive slug, big and heavy enough to go through a brick wall.

I couldn't miss, I say. But I did miss.

No, not quite; I must have nicked an ear or grazed an eyebrow. For next instant the hippo, stung and furious, swung round in the water like a trout, and charged.

He didn't charge me. He didn't even notice me, then or later. He tore past me in the water—perhaps it was shallow enough for him to run on the bottom—straight at Quade's boat.

I heard Quade curse in Umbundu, and his express rifle roared. Whatever the bullet did, it was not enough to stop the hippo. I, snatching my second rifle from my bearer, saw the great lump of a head dip down under the keel of Quade's boat. The hippo tossed, as a bull might toss, and the canoe with its four passengers whirled lightly upward in the air. I've seen an empty bottle tossed like that, by a careless drunkard.

The three natives, shrieking horribly, flew in all directions and splashed into the water. Quade must have been braced or otherwise held in position at the bow, for when the boat came down he was still in it. There was a great upward torrent of water, and through it I saw the bottom of the stricken canoe. The hippo, close in, bit a piece out of one thwart, as a boy nibbles ginger-cake. I had my second gun and was aiming. This time I wouldn't miss; but before I could touch trigger, Quade came to the surface, right in the way of my shot.

"Down! Down!" I yelled at him, and he turned his face toward me, as if mildly curious at my agitation. And then the hippo had him, in a single champing clutch of those great steam-shovel jaws. Quade screamed once, and I saw him shaken like an old glove by a bulldog.

I fired, and the hippo sank on the instant. He took Quade with him. The ripples were purple with blood—Quade's or the beast's. And we got for shore and

safety. Later we tried to recover Quade's body, but we never did.

* * * * *

STOLL was silent, and sipped wine to show that his story was finished.

"But the cavern," I protested. "What

about the cavern, where death was waiting for him?"

Stoll lifted his eyebrows, as a Frenchman might shrug his shoulders.

"Did you ever see a hippopotamus open its mouth—wide?"