

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 6

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 405 Holiday Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice 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. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. T. 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. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

Contents for December, 1925

- Cover Design ----- Joseph Doolin
- The Tenants of Broussac** ----- Seabury Quinn 725
Complete Novelette About an Old Curse and a Gigantic Snake
- When the Graves Were Opened** ----- Arthur J. Burks 741
The Sepulchers Yawned and the Dead Came Into Jerusalem
- The Sea Thing** ----- Frank Belknap Long, Jr. 751
Out of the Ocean Came a Gulping Thing that Lived on Blood
- The Fan** ----- Frank Owen 758
Vampire Tale of China
- The Black Box** ----- H. Thompson Rich 761
Mystery Tale of Stark Horror

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

The Ghost Girl -----	William James Price	768
<i>Verse</i>		
The Valley of Spiders -----	H. G. Wells	769
<i>Through the Air They Drifted, Gigantic, Loathsome Spiders</i>		
Sir Rupert's Treasure -----	James Cocks	776
<i>His Grandfather's Ghost Astounded the Unbelieving Englishman</i>		
The Deadly Amanita -----	Eli Colter	781
<i>Poisonous Mushrooms—the Harsh Penance of Henry Wytten</i>		
Weird Story Reprints		
No. 6. What Was It? A Mystery ----	Fitz-James O'Brien	793
<i>Invisible Monster Sets Boarding House in an Uproar</i>		
The Consul's Bones -----	W. J. Stamper	801
<i>Ghost Story of the Eruption of Mont Pelée</i>		
Retribution -----	George T. Spillman	806
<i>A Two-Minute Tale</i>		
The Last Man -----	Douglas Oliver	807
<i>Strange Vigil Kept This Spectral Shape in No Man's Land</i>		
The Hour of Death -----	Grover Brinkman	818
<i>He Waited in Agonizing Suspense for He Knew Not What</i>		
The Haunted Palace -----	Edgar Allan Poe	821
<i>Verse Reprint</i>		
The Waning of a World (Part Two) ----	W. Elwyn Backus	822
<i>Serial Novel About a Voyage to Mars</i>		
The Eyrie -----		847
<i>A Chat With the Readers</i>		

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WEIRD TALES

406 Holliday Building

Indianapolis, Ind.

The Consul's Bones

By W. J. STAMPER

Author of "Lips of the Dead." "The Vulture of Pignon." etc.

THE *General Frisbie* of the Monticello Steamship Line had left Vallejo behind by about five minutes and was now ploughing her way through the green waters of San Pablo Bay, on her monotonous two hour run to San Francisco. Certain duties had obliged me to make this trip daily for three weeks and the everlasting sameness of the coast line as well as the businesslike air of all the passengers was getting on my nerves. After an unsuccessful attempt to get something out of my paper besides divorce scandals and politics, I made myself as comfortable as possible in the smoking room on the upper deck, prepared to glance at my watch exactly one hundred and fifteen times before finally beholding the tall white pile of the Ferry Building in San Francisco.

I had not scanned the face of my timepiece the tenth time, ere I was aware of the fact that a certain person sitting on the opposite side of the room was casting furtive glances at me. He was short and stocky, about forty-five years of age, with a countenance which I judged could only have obtained its extreme severity from a trip to the North Pole.

Any doubts as to his interest in me were dispelled when he arose, walked over, held out his hand to me and said, "My name is Adam Lawson, and I am a retired petty officer of the United States Navy."

"Very glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lawson," said I, extending my hand and repeating the very odd

and embarrassing cognomen which had been bestowed upon me by some thoughtless ancestor.

After the usual civilities required by polite society, Mr. Lawson seated himself beside me, and pointing to a small campaign bag which I always wear over the left pocket of my uniform blouse, began, "I take it from that bag, you have been to Haiti."

"Yes," I answered; "I was unfortunate enough to be involved in one of those countless petty broils so common in the Black Republic, and other than a stubborn and intermittent malaria, that is all I have to remind me of eighteen months of very distasteful duty."

"Do you know," continued Lawson, "that whenever I see anything to recall my mind to Haiti, it reminds me of one of the most momentous occasions of my life?"

"We have an hour and three quarters," said I, "and something in your face, Mr. Lawson, leads me to believe that there is many a worthwhile yarn in your career. Out with it."

After cramming an unbelievable amount of tobacco into his long pipe and leaning back against the seat at perfect ease, he recounted the following remarkable story.

IT WAS in August, 1902, to the best of my recollection, and I was a boatswain's mate aboard a certain American cruiser, the name of which, for a reason best known to myself, I shall not mention. She was taking

coal at Mole St. Nicholas on the western coast of Haiti, and we were hurrying up the job because she was slated to steam for Dry Tortugas the next morning.

The sun was just setting and I was congratulating myself on the good rest in store for me that night, when I observed the captain, surrounded by a group of officers on the bridge, talking and gesticulating excitedly. My first thought was that another Haitian president had been crucified, but presently the bugler sounded general assembly, and as all hands rushed above, I noticed that the captain held a cablegram in his hand.

We were under way in twenty minutes. Every boiler was in use, and on leaving the bay we headed at full steam southward toward the Island of Navassa, a bleak and barren rock that marks the westernmost point of Haiti. None of the enlisted men had any idea where we were going, and many a wild and fantastic guess was hazarded in the fire room that night as to our probable destination. Some said we were bound for Vera Cruz, others that we were hurrying around the Horn to protect the Pacific coast from the Japanese.

The second morning found the cruiser wallowing twenty miles off the Island of Martinique in the French West Indies, and the secret had leaked out. The volcano on Mont Pelée had erupted, destroying the city of St. Pierre, and we had been rushed to the assistance of the inhabitants.

My friend, I could never describe the inferno that lay off our port bow; but I will say this much—a great pall of gray smoke overhung the stricken island, a cloud so dense that land could not be seen. Fiery red streaks of forked lightning leaped and split through that gray mass. Peals of thunder, like the distant roar of artillery, were borne to us over the water. Huge waves smashed against

the ship and broke boiling over the poop-deck. Such was the immensity of the tidal wave that had accompanied the catastrophe, that dead fish and other dwellers of the deep were carried on to our decks on every crest. Even at this great distance a light ash or cinder sifted through our masts and covered the ship like frost.

For two days we cruised up and down that terrible coast, our minds dismal with thoughts of what destruction lay behind that ominous pall of smoke and dust. We did not dare approach closer until it cleared up, because deadly gases were undoubtedly present, gases that would burn the tender tissue of our lungs to a cinder such as that which overspread our decks.

The third morning disclosed a coffin of heavy rough lumber lying on the quarterdeck, and all hands were filled with wonderment. The pall had now dropped low over the city, and the top of Pelée was visible. We were, at this time, five miles off the coast, and the thunders and lightnings had ceased.

I was not a little surprised when the marine orderly notified me that the captain wished to see me in his cabin immediately.

He was pacing up and down excitedly when I entered, and without returning my salute, announced:

"Lawson, I have an errand for you. You will take my gig and eight seamen (you may pick your own men), land at St. Pierre with the coffin above on the quarterdeck, and procure the body of the American consul. From the bridge I shall observe the crater of the volcano for signs of further eruption. If there are any, three blasts from the ship's siren will be your signal to return. Stephen Young, a Jamaican messboy, who spent most of his life in the city, will act as your guide to the consulate. Be ready to leave in half an

hour. If there are no questions, that is all."

As I left the cabin my heart was heavy with the responsibility that had been thrust upon me. Why I had been singled out to execute this gruesome task, when there were scores of officers available, will probably ever remain one of the mysteries of naval history. Orders were orders, and I had never before hesitated for a moment to put my best efforts into the execution of the wishes of my superiors, however unjust they may have appeared to be.

AT THE appointed time the gig splashed in the water and I, with my chosen seamen, the messboy and the coffin, pulled toward that dismal pall.

When we arrived within a half-mile of the island, the water was as smooth as a mill-pond, so damnably still and sullen, my friend, that I cursed it inwardly. It seemed to betoken the misery and destruction that lay ahead, the co-mate of death itself. The smoke cloud hung so near above our heads that I expected it to lower any moment and suffocate us. Our lungs felt a strange and appalling constriction and the sweat stood out in great beads on the stern faces of my comrades as they bent to the heavy oars. The messboy's face was a study in terror, his eyes weirdly wild and rolling. There was such an odor that we were sick unto death, and it drifted toward us as we came in; but like men, we went to meet it. Here and there on the motionless bosom of the bay was strewn the sad and floating wreckage of what had once been a gay and prosperous city; carts and housetops, chickencoops and cradles, cats and dogs and—God forbid, my friend!—swollen, drenched and staring human beings, dead these many days, and the sullen waters had cast them up. There they hung suspended, some with arms out-

stretched, others with their bloated stomachs puffed above the glassy surface.

Once, and only once, we stopped. The stroke oar became entangled in the long black hair of a floating corpse, young and white,—a woman, and she had to be dragged alongside before we could extricate the oar. When we loosed her, she sank slowly and silently back into her watery bed and we sped on.

Now we had come to what had one time been the docks, a mass of tangled wreckage and debris. They had collapsed and it was only after much difficulty that we effected a landing and secured the gig to the single post that yet remained standing. Leaving two men in the boat with strict orders to listen for the signal, I directed the others to shoulder the coffin and follow the terrified messboy, and we set out in search of the consulate.

Everything looked the same to me. To the front, to the right, to the left, all was ruin, and above all that terrible cloud. Stephen led us up a street, if such it could be called, but I was soon convinced that the city had been so completely changed by the holocaust that he did not know where he was going.

A thick white ash covered everything knee-deep. All around lay heaps of charred and blackened bodies just as they had been caught in little groups the morning of the disaster. They had been overtaken and died as they chatted, I thought. Some were in a sitting posture against the tottering and crumbling walls, their faces were burned off and the ghastly, white cheek-bones sent a chill of horror through my body. Their hands lay at their sides, buried in the terrible cinder. There was not to be seen a single living thing. Ruin. Silence. Terror. Death reigned supreme. Not even the vindictive volcano uttered from its molten

throat a sound to break that awful silence. The buildings had dissolved and crumbled down. They were all the same, a terrible, twisted mass of wreckage that seemed about to shriek out in misery.

We were sick unto death following the cowering messboy, when he at length stopped before a great white mass of tumbled ruins and exclaimed in a hoarse voice:

"Here it is. The consulate."

To me it made little difference whether he was right or wrong.

There were no doors, no roofs. Nothing but parts of the tottering wall remained standing, and over all that ghastly ash. I clambered over a low gap in the ruin, and the ashes touching my hands were yet warm. The first sight that met my eyes made me shudder with horror.

Here the wall had only partly caved in, thus leaving a sort of shelter for what had once been a bathroom. The bathtub was intact, a huge affair, filled with water and cinders. The bather, a woman, lay floating among the ashes. The flesh had been cooked and now, after these many days, was dissolving. I turned away in disgust. I can see those bulging and blistered eyes today.

The coffin was deposited among the cinders and awaited the consul's bones. I knew the consul was a white man, but in that charnel-house there was nothing white save bones and ashes. With our spades we stirred that putrid mass. The bodies were so commingled and charred that recognition of any particular one was impossible.

Suddenly I stirred up some pieces of cloth entirely whole and uninjured. They were napkins. I thought if all the napkins in all the American consulates of the world were put in one heap, there would not be this many. I turned up the edge of one, read some words worked thereon and hurriedly covered them up before my

comrades saw what I was about. These were the words: "HOTEL DE FRANCE."

I picked up a charred skeleton and said to my men as I placed it in the coffin:

"I put some bones in this casket. Whose are they?"

"They are the consul's bones," they replied with one voice, husky and dry.

These had been the first words uttered since our arrival.

The American sailor is a discreet man. Each and every one grasped my meaning as plainly as if I had explained. They, as well as I, realized the utter hopelessness of seeking farther the body of the true American consul.

"Do you understand, Stephen?" I said to the messboy.

"I understand. Those are the consul's bones," he muttered.

AS FOUR of my men stooped to lift the heavy coffin, the dense cloud above descended upon us and I saw them but dimly. A hot current of nauseating air rushed upon us and I felt the perspiration burst from every pore as my lungs struggled for the oxygen they must have. Stephen fell groveling at my feet, grasped my legs and screamed in a wild and husky voice:

"It is the end! I am smothering! Let us flee!"

Then the long pent-up fury of the elements broke—the floodgates of heaven opened—a million ripping thunders shook the earth till we trembled—lurid sheets of flame-lightning rent the cloud to shreds—the waters fell as if the sea had been dropped upon our heads. I could not see one of my comrades. I held my hands over my nose and mouth to keep from drowning.

For one solid hour the torrents poured from the growling heavens.

Bedlam ceased as suddenly as it began, and the cloud rolled out to sea. There we stood, soaked, and shivering with fear, as we watched the storm move against our ship. We strained our eyes but the ship was gone. She had fled to refuge and left us stranded on this island of the rotting dead. Why? I do not know, my friend, but she left us.

I glanced at the coffin. It was filled with water. I soon discovered that the flood had made a veritable mush of the cinder and ashes and from this knew that we could never bear the coffin back to the beach. An idea suddenly occurred to me and I adopted it immediately.

I fished among the ghastly contents of the coffin, took out some of the larger bones and put them in my knapsack.

"Forward, march!" I commanded, and we struck out through the mire and slush toward the beach. White bones, washed clean of the ashes, lay on every side. Did mortal eyes ever look on scene so desolate before?

When we arrived at the docks our boat was gone. Its fate and that of our two comrades are written on the scroll of the mysteries of the deep.

All through that terrible afternoon, I stood and searched the great heaving bosom of the Caribbean for sight of the cruiser, but in vain.

With our spades and shovels we cleared a space of some twenty feet square, for I wished again to stand on solid earth. There we stood and stared seaward till the dark shades of night descended upon the noisome scene. I prayed for the blackness of Egyptian night to blot out the sight of those tottering, white ruins.

A great red and sorrowful moon, rising over the benighted city, cast its weird beams over the heaps of silent dead and the bleak, white ruins of the crumbling cathedrals.

I could never explain, my friend, the feelings that came over me as I

heard from far up in the city the measured toll of a church bell. You will say it was the result of my nervous condition, and the horrors I had seen that day. No. The sound of that church bell was registered as plainly on my ear-drum as the clug of the engine I now hear below. My comrades sat hunched there in the pale light, put their fingers in their ears, but uttered no syllable. I saw very plainly that no church tower was standing, but I could hear at regular intervals the measured toll. I did not then know as I do now, that there was but one survivor of the dread catastrophe and he a helpless prisoner, deep down in a dark vault, beneath tons of wreckage and cinder; but I do know that all through that horrible night, the church bell tolled the passing of the dead just as one may hear it any day when the coffin is carried from the hearse. Who tolled that bell? I do not know.

IT WAS 3 o'clock in the morning and my eyes felt like chunks of hot metal. It is the time when parties break up, the time when revelers go home, I thought.

Though the streets were blocked with wreckage, though soft mire lay knee-deep on the pavements, I heard the footfalls of a horse, sharp and clear. They drew nearer and nearer.

"Do you hear anything?" I whispered to my comrades.

No answer came.

From behind a white and crumbling column a half block away I saw a coach appear in the moonlight. It took a course which would cause it to pass close to us. My body felt chill and I was trembling, not with fright, my friend, but from standing in the awe-inspiring presence of the unknown, the unexplainable. Onward it came and the horse's footfalls were sharp and clear as if they fell on bare and solid marble. The

horse was as white as snow, and he seemed to glide along on top of the chalky ruins like a phantom. His eyes were two balls of reddest, blazing fire. The coach followed the horse although there was no attachment to join them together. It was of the transparency of glass and it did not roll but slid along noiselessly. The occupants were two men and two women. Their faces were as pale and pasty as death itself. The men wore black, the women white, and I saw the flash of jewels. It passed, continued on to the edge of the bay, glided out upon the water and on out to sea. I could still hear the measured hoof-beats of the horse. I saw

it melt into the red moon as that weird satellite sank beneath the waves, and all was darkness.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"Yes, we saw," they all replied.

There we sat huddled and silent till the sun came up and blazed over the city of the dead. Morning brought the cruiser back, and a boat to carry us away.

Once aboard I reverently delivered the consul's bones to the captain. I have heard that in a certain cemetery in the East there is a grave, rose-covered and mossy, above which stands a stone to the memory of the American consul who died at his post of duty on the Island of Martinique.