

The

crawling

Thing

Ernest W. Rinehart

May 2---Carlson, Wash.

"What did it look like, Edward?"

"I didn't see it plain," the boy replied frankly. "I was playing down by the slough and one of the other kids said he saw the grass moving. You

know how some boys are afraid of snakes. Well, I looked over in the grass and something was wiggling away from the water."

"Yes?" I said pleasantly.

"Well, I thought it was a snake, too--but it wasn't. I could see the ground right through it. It looked like a piece of water moving up through the grass."

Strange how children notice things; that's why magicians don't like to perform in front of them. Their minds aren't disciplined, unfortunately. Sometimes they see too much.

"Naturally, you know it wasn't water, don't you?" I said. "Water can't run uphill."

Edward nodded. My eleven-year old nephew is very mature for his age, and doesn't seem that young at all. Often we have long talks about nature, physics and natural phenomena.

After he left, I walked to my study and sat down before the window. I looked out over the roofs of nearby houses, my own edifice being on a rounded hill at the edge of town. It is a good view--I can see the winding Snake river, and the tall willow and poplar trees growing at its brink. An early spring has flowered the poplars with bright green leaves. This time of year blackbirds dive and whirl around the slough where Edward and his little friends like to play.

I'll have to be more careful with my pet. It enjoys going to the river every morning for a swim. How could I know it would pick the spot where the boys were fishing?

There was another big hubbub in the papers this morning. I have to chuckle every time I think about it. Number three, this time. The last one is gone, and the slate is clean, damn their dirty souls! They laughed at my experiments and called them "silly." I needed money to further advance my learning, and they refused me. Old Creeper was the worst--as president of the bank he was in the best position to lend me money until I perfected my theories of atomic bombardment. Just because I chose a small town for my work (my only sister, Edward's mother, lives here), they call me a crackpot.

Creeper laughed at me, but he is not laughing now. He is lying cold and dead in his tomb, a dark welt around his scrawny neck. At least, I hope it is still there.

I'll never forget that interview.

E. A. Creeper called me into his private office and scowled over the rims of his thick glasses, shuffling papers on his desk.

"What do you want, Stillson? Why all this secrecy?"

"I want to borrow some money," I said frankly. "I'm very near something big right now, and if I find it, I'll be able to astound the scientific world."

"I've heard rumors, naturally. What's all this about building new forms of life with atomic blasting, or whatever you call it?"

"It's not a new theory, Mr. Creeper. Cosmic rays have been 'bombarding' the earth for millions of years, and some scientists believe these powerful rays are responsible for many forms of life we have on earth today. In fact, they are quite sure of it. I'm creating artificial cosmic rays--with these at his command, man may create new forms of life--giant fruits, novel beasts, super-humans, slave organisms to do our work! I have a lot of preliminary work finished. But I need help, and if you can give me some, I'll agree to let you in on some of the profits, if any."

"Why do you say, 'if any'?"

"I don't want to misrepresent. I haven't much for security--I might not get what I'm after--this time. But I will, eventually."

"Young man, you're tampering with the laws of God and Creation!"

"Not exactly...."

He frowned. "You sit there calmly and tell me you are going to create life?"

"I do," I said calmly.

"Where would the profit come from, if any?" he asked cynically.

"I'm not really sure. I'm a scientist, not an industrialist."

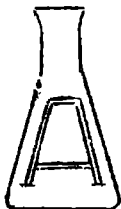
Creeper shook his head. "It's fantastic!"

"That's what they said about the atom bomb." Venom leaked into my voice.

"Don't you keep informed on recent scientific discoveries?"

He jumped to his feet, trembling. "Why should I follow the ravings of a bunch of nit-wits. Creating life! Balderdash...."

I didn't stay to hear any more.



week later I tried Thornton Wells, a prominent rancher. He refused, and so did Stanley Hill, big lumber tycoon.

Now all three are dead, blast their dirty souls!

I scraped along and finished my experiments regardless of their limited vision and clenched hands.

I did the impossible.

No need to go into technical detail. My plans were patterned after those of Dr. Robert A. Millikan, head of the California Institute of Technology, whose theory is that cosmic rays are light-rays freed from complete destruction of atoms in celestial spaces. With my betatron, resembling that invented by Dr. Donald Kerst, I made extensive experiments on rabbits. This betatron will turn out cosmic rays in greater quantity than nature.

One day, in the midst of routine work, (I had been unable to affect the development rate of rabbits) I noticed a commotion in a fish bowl that stood by the window.

Startled, I ran to the bowl and watched an amazing thing happen. The goldfish darted frantically about, wild with fear. Suddenly one of them stopped in the middle of a wild dash. It was halted as if by invisible fingers. Gradually, the middle of the fish began to contract, the head and tail expanded. Something was squeezing the fish to death, and I couldn't see it.

Finally the fish stopped quivering, its eyes popped out, its entrails burst from behind, and it was suddenly released. It drifted to the bottom of the bowl, quite dead. Entranced and horrified, I watched the other fish suffer the same fate. And all the while the water moved about strangely, of its own volition.

After the second death, I decided to investigate. Taking the bowl to a shallow pan, I poured out the water. Some of it was reluctant to leave the vessel. It squirmed. My eyes popped open. What I now beheld inside the bowl was a living, pulsing rope of iridescent water!

The thing was over a foot long and about an inch thick--its outlines rather vague because it was nearly transparent.

This was tremendous. Living, liquid life.

Tremblingly, I sank into a chair and watched the thing move around inside the bowl, nuzzling the dead fish. I had created life unexpectedly, to say the least. I had hoped to develop new types of monkeys or rabbits--but my experiments had led to life from inanimate matter.

Then, for some reason, perhaps because the excitement had been overwhelming, I suddenly cried:

"Get away from me, you beastly little killer!"

There had been cold inhumanity about the destruction of those two amazed, innocent goldfish, and I suppose the outburst was a natural reaction.

Instantly the watery snake slithered up out of the bowl and moved across the table, toward the laboratory door!

It crawled quickly down the leg of the table in a sort of fluid, inch-worm fashion, unlike any sane reptile I had ever seen; yet it seemed as vicious as the worst type of snake.

The door it headed for opened on the outside, and I leaped to my feet, ready to grab the thing, because I didn't want to lose it. No sooner had the thought of bringing it back entered my mind than it turned and came toward me!

I fell back in my chair, astounded.



reeper was easy--so were the others. I enjoyed reading accounts of their strange deaths. All three strangled in bed, the papers said. Smooth rope of some kind, in the opinion of the sheriff; but I knew better.

One detective called on me--it seemed someone had told him I had visited all three men a few months before they died, and had been unable to get loans. They had talked, I suppose, the way they do in a small town. I let the detective see my laboratory, look at my rabbits and other specimens. He seemed impressed, and asked quite a few intelligent questions about my work.

Just before he left we had a little talk.

"Then you never have created life the way you planned, Mr. Stillson?"

"Not yet," I said easily. "But I will."

"Did you ever get a loan?"

"Oh yes--from a friend back east. One not so stupid as others I could name." (Burglary is easy with a helper like my little slave--but he couldn't know about that.)

"I've been investigating these curious murders," he said absently. "Do you suppose you could have accidentally built something that would have caused so many deaths?"

I shook my head, emphatically. "Maybe you'd call it divine justice, though. All three prominent men laughed at my work--and now they are dead."

"Very odd," mused the detective.

Yes, it is odd, and lots of people have commented on it--but they can't prove anything. I was somewhere else at the time of the murders.

May 5---I let it out again this morning to go to the river, and it acted very strangely. It's been getting rather independent lately, and I wonder if I have it wholly under my control. Tampering with such a strange entity may prove dangerous. All it knows is death and destruction.

May 7---What I instinctively feared has happened. The being did not return this morning after going to the river, and I presume it will never come back. I must warn Edward to stay away from the slough. My experiments have collapsed; too much meddling with the accursed water being and getting revenge on people I hated. Now my revenge seems shallow, empty.

If this crawling horror goes on the loose, without a guiding mind, there is no telling what it will do. I know.

I have a positive fear of strangulation--thoughts of it drive me crazy. I suppose that's why I enjoyed those murders so much. I told the thing what to do to them. . . . Better put this away and get to work.

May 10---It killed innocent little Edward yesterday. My God! The town is up in arms--they think I'm responsible, think I've cursed the town with a terrible brand of witchcraft. This is not supernatural, however. It's a living, horrid reality.

Poor little Edward. So young and eager to learn. I'm not to blame, really. I accidentally created something I cannot control. Is it my fault?

Late last night I woke in a cold sweat, imagining I heard the thing slithering across my bedroom floor.

Is it going to get me next?

No, by God! I'm going to kill it. I think it's after me, but I'll kill it, I brought it to life--why shouldn't I destroy it?

I have a plan....

May 11---I waited for it last night, but it didn't come. I'm not so afraid in the daylight. I know its habits pretty well. Sheriff visited me today. Awfully curious--thinks I'm mad, I suppose. What is this

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The above notes were taken from the diary of Alexander Stillson, the eccentric scientist, who kept a detailed account of each day's activities. Some of the technical data has been deleted, because all facts are not known, but enough remains to piece the story together.

Stillson died the morning of June 11th, his screams having been heard by a neighbor, who reported to the police. When his laboratory door was broken down, investigators found him lying on his back in the middle of the room, an empty hydrochloric acid bottle clenched in his right hand. There was a deep purple welt around his neck (the coroner said he died of strangulation) and his face was not nice to look at. Some of the acid had spilled on it. There was a terrible odor in the room, and when police cleared his house a few days later they found a gummy patch of blackness on the laboratory floor.

The crawling thing he mentions has never been found.

