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Weird Tales

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A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XVII

NUMBER 3

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 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Dust of Death

By HUGH JEFFRIES

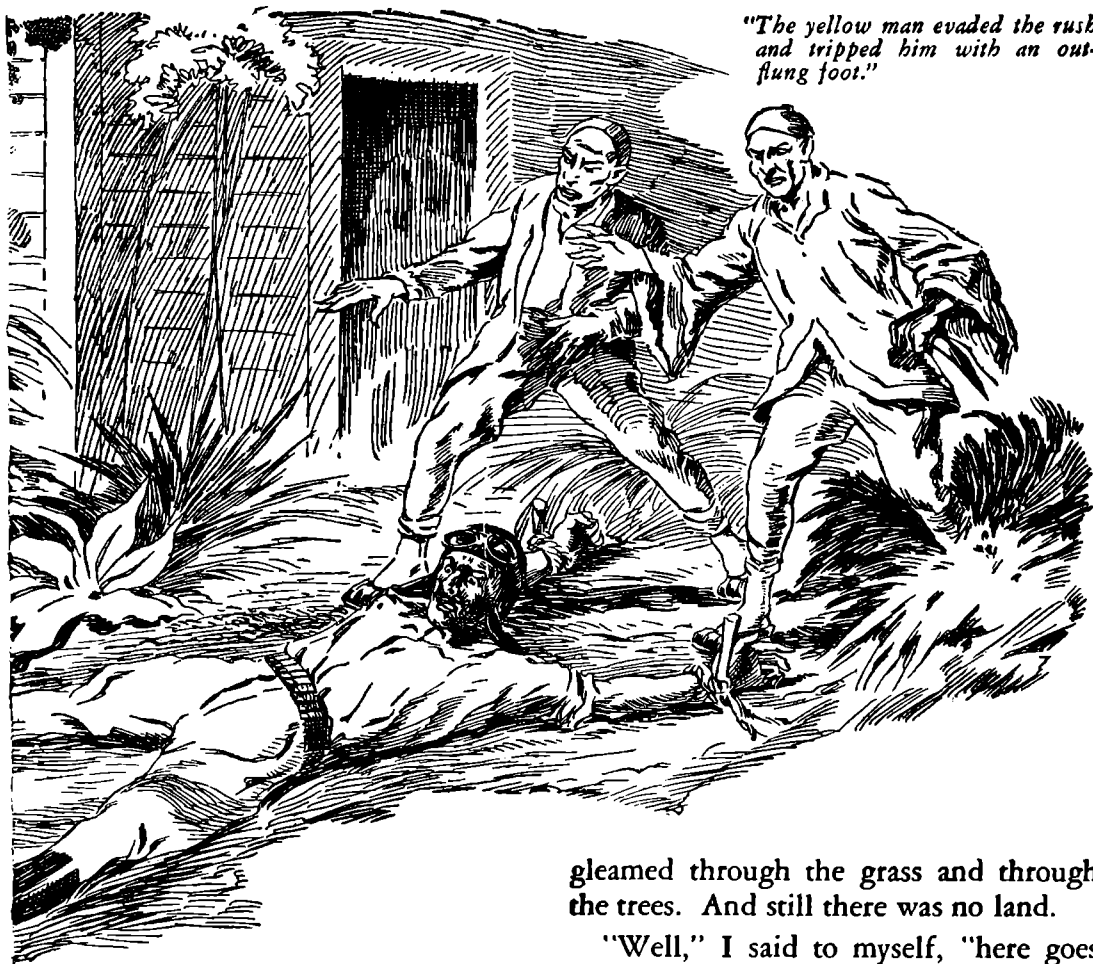
Gigantic puffballs—a scourge of death from fungi—the evil genius of a Chinese scientist—and the dread death that menaced America

ONE man dreamt of empire, and half a million Americans died. One yellow man aided by the stolen brains of a white man of science came close to wiping out of existence the civilization of North America. One man against a hundred and thirty million—odds enough—yet that one man was Doctor Tsu Liang, and on his side was

the fungoid scourge. Fighting for him were the puffball and the death that turned men into walking vegetables until at last it killed them—half a million.

It seems strange to write dispassionately about it now. It is difficult to start from the small beginnings to describe the growth of that great menace which held the United States helpless while cancer-

"The yellow man evaded the rush and tripped him with an out-flung foot."



like it ate further and further into its vitals. Yet that is my task and I shall try to fulfil it.

Out of small beginnings—yes, things start out of small beginnings. An accident; a careless mechanic at the Miami airport saved the United States. For it was the result of his negligence that my motor conked out, and there I was two thousand feet up and no landing-place within fifty miles, as far as I could see. For I was over the Everglades. And below me were mud and water; tall reeds and more water, stunted, twisted trees standing in water—water—that is all I could see. Certainly no firm land.

I circled the bus over a mile radius, while the wind whistled a sharp dirge through the edge of a piece of loose isinglass at the cowling. Still the water

gleamed through the grass and through the trees. And still there was no land.

"Well," I said to myself, "here goes Greg Morris—may his bones be found by other than by alligators." And I swooped down upon an open glade of water-covered marsh.

Flamingoes, a dozen lanky-legged pink birds, rose with a burst of flapping wings. Blue and white herons squawked alarm as I glided down upon them. Ten feet from the treacherous surface I levelled off. I brought the nose up and tried to pancake softly into the mud.

I remember feeling the ripping tear as the undercarriage broke off my Swallow. And then my head snapped forward against the instrument panel.

It must have been an hour later when I came to. Swarms of mosquitoes had settled on my face and on the back of my neck. I believe that it was the pain of their bites that brought me back to consciousness, for my head was on fire.

I brushed them off and gingerly felt myself, but apart from an aching weal right over my eyes found nothing to be wrong. My helmet and unbreakable glasses had saved me from punishment.

So far, so good. I unhooked my safety belt and put a leg outside the cowling. A huge brown buzzard croaked in dismay and clumsily flopped away from the wing tip where he had been sitting.

"Not yet, brother," I called after him. "Come again later on."

It was not a pretty prospect. For almost exactly a hundred yards around me was nothing but grass and reeds whose tops bore cottony seed pods. Under them was ooze, black mud which bubbled every so often as if something was drowning under it. And the gas that came up smelled of rotten things.

I looked over the Swallow and found that the right lower wing was broken and trailing along one side. The wheels and the undercarriage were just back of the tail, only a stub of bright red painted metal showing where they were sinking in the ooze. No, decidedly not a pretty prospect. And to make it worse, as I reached for my cigarette case, I found only two butts left. An ugly outlook.

And yet within five minutes it changed. Distantly I heard a halloo. I looked around but saw no one. Then I thought of the pistol I always carried in the plane, found it, and sent three shots into the sky.

Again came the cry. Then silence for a few minutes and again repeated. This time it was much nearer. Once more I blazed away three cartridges and lit my last cigarette. Apparently the Everglades were not quite as deserted as I had imagined. Already somebody who had seen me descend was coming to the rescue.

There was a final yoo-hoo—and then a red canoe eeled its way through the trees

on one side. A red canoe, just as if from some summer camp. And what's more there was a pretty girl in the canoe; a girl whose fair hair shone like a golden helmet on her head; a girl whose dress of silk was just the same as those of the girls I had left behind me at Miami.

True, with her was a dark-skinned man who wielded a paddle. Indian, I decided when I saw the long straight hair falling to his shoulders. But my eyes were on the girl and stayed on her, as she smiled impishly and called "Welcome to the Everglades," when the canoe bumped gently against the torn right wing as if it was a landing-stage.

I threw up my hands in mock despair. "Out of character," I said, "entirely out of character. You should be wearing buckskin or—or——"

"Alligator hide," she suggested with a twinkle. "They tell me it's fashionable, and deer are rather scarce here, you know."

That is how I was rescued. The girl was Polly Houlton. The Indian was Joe Big, a Seminole working for the Houltons in the Everglades. Me—I was Greg Morris, gentleman of leisure, God save the mark, but most at ease in a 'plane, though not in one such as the Swallow was at that moment.

2

CAREFULLY I lifted my club bag out of the forward cockpit into the canoe and then climbed down myself. The wonder of seeing a pretty girl dressed as Polly Houlton was in the midst of the Everglades had not yet died down.

"But how can you dress that way—bare arms and all?" I voiced the question aloud: "By rights you should be all bloated with mosquito poison."

The girl laughed. And yet was she

merry? The laugh seemed to have a feeling of bitterness in it.

"I'm afraid that if any 'skeeter bit me now he'd just naturally curl up and die. I've got enough of their virus in me to be immune from swelling." Then with a touch of recklessness she added, "You can't live here for two years without getting your system used to mosquitoes."

"Two years!" I gasped. "You don't mean to say—you can't mean that you've been buried here for two years?"

"Buried—yes, that's a good word," she said. "And it's exactly what I do mean. It is two years since I saw any one outside our research group or a few occasional Indians."

"Research group!" The words had a strange sound. What kind of research could be going on in the Everglades? What kind of research that would keep a beautiful young woman confined to the swamps for two years?

I asked. And for a moment I thought that I'd asked in vain. For the girl stared straight ahead and through me, while her eyes seemed to fill with horror and loathing. For a minute she was dumb and then she dug her paddle into the water with furious energy.

"I hate it. I hate it all," she burst out. "I want to get away from them. I—I'm afraid of Doctor Tsu Liang. You are a flyer. Will you take me away when your airplane is fixed? Will you take me north to New York? I want to see Father there."

The request startled me. The rescuer wanting to be rescued. But the girl gave me no time for a reply.

"I am sure things are going wrong here," she cried. "I am sure that Dad wouldn't approve. And Tom—he's my brother—he's acting so queerly that I think he must have been drugged or

hypnotized or something by the doctor. I want to get away from them."

I was stunned. What mess had I fallen into?

And then a new voice broke in. "Yellow man he's devil," said deep tones behind me. "He's devil. Me—I know! All devils." The canoe leaped forward again.

It was the Indian, Joe Big, who had spoken.

Polly Houlton laughed nervously. "Poor Joe doesn't understand what they are doing," she said. "It is weird enough, too, in a way. You see Father had an idea that he could turn the Everglades to great economic value by growing mushroom rooms here. And then he became interested in experiments with polarized light on fungoid growth and some strange chemical which he has made up.

"He calls it accelerating fungoid development, and already he has some puff-balls that are close to four feet in diameter. That is what the Indians can't understand, and then, of course, they don't like Doctor Tsu Liang and his servants.

"Doctor Tsu came to us a year ago from the University of South China, where he had heard about the work that Father was doing. Father, you know, is Professor Howard Houlton, who used to be at Columbia."

"The Professor Houlton?" I asked, for even to an idle rich man's son the fame of the noted savant was familiar.

"Yes, people call him that," admitted Polly Houlton. "But he's away now and has been for the past two months, and Doctor Tsu is concentrating with Tom on some creepy experiments with a fungus that attacks caterpillars and turns them into vegetables. The Chinese eat those things," she said with a shudder.

I knew. I had seen the delicacy at a

Chinese dinner which I once attended. It is an ivory-white caterpillar about five inches long. And I remembered even then with horror the pale whitish stem that rose from immediately behind the caterpillar's head and ended in a little club-shaped spore-container.

Polly Houlton was speaking. "He—I—the doctor seems to be concentrating on this awful fungus and—I don't know—but I heard him talk with my brother once, and they seemed to think that it would be good to, what they call 'enlarge its scope of action,' whatever that means."

I shuddered in sympathy with her at the foul horror of which she was talking, and then instinctively ducked to the bottom of the canoe.

Something had splintered the gunwale less than an inch from my left hand, and then had buzzed venomously into the reeds. I knew what it was, although there was no report from any firearm. It was a bullet, a bullet fired from a pistol or rifle with a silencer fitted to it.

3

POLLY HOULTON and Joe Big had stopped paddling. For a moment the canvas canoe hissed on through the reeds and grass, and then it lost way.

"Who shoot?" bellowed the Indian. "This Joe Big and Miss Polly."

His voice seemed to die away in the steamy heat, and then I heard a distant splashing and the knock of a paddle against the side of a canoe. Somebody was coming.

Through a screen of reeds I caught a flash of deeper green. The reeds parted and a canoe slid into sight; a green canoe, and in it was a man wearing whites and a solar topee.

He came closer and I saw a yellow face. Black eyes stared at me intently, and I felt hostility in that gaze. Then

an apologetic smile changed the man's appearance.

"I say, Miss Houlton," he called. "Most frightfully sorry. Didn't know you were about at all, and I just took a pot shot at a bally alligator. Sorry no end if I came near you."

Yellow skin and Oxford accent! Startling combination. I suppressed a smile.

Polly Houlton indignantly pointed at the white scar on the oaken gunwale.

"You came close to killing our guest. Too close for comfort," she snapped angrily. "You were not trying to discourage egret-hunters from coming too close to the island again, were you?"

Again the Oriental apologized.

"Please don't be angry," he said, his eyes soft on Miss Houlton. "Awful damn' fool, I admit, to be shooting without making sure of where you were. And it won't happen again. 'Pon my word it won't."

And then he swung to me and stretched out a brown muscular hand as the canoes rubbed sides.

"I can guess who you are," he said with a smile under his little black mustache. "You must be the aviator whose airplane I saw coming down. I hope you have not bunged up your machine too badly?"

"It's done for," I said bluntly. "I don't see how I can repair the undercarriage in this marsh. Anyway, it would need pontoons to get out."

"So sorry," lisped the Chinese. "But I fear that Miss Houlton still is angry with me. She has forgotten introductions. I am Doctor Tsu Liang. And you?"

"Gregory Morris," I said. "Long Island. Flying from Miami to Fort Myers when my engine died."

"Ah, so?" smiled the Chinaman. "Too

dashed bad for you, yet, what shall I say?—lucky for us that you—ah—dropped in on us. We have few visitors, you know, and we'll try to make you comfortable at the laboratories. But now we should hurry if we wish to be home in time for tea."

And so the Oriental dipped his paddle and drew ahead of us through the curtaining reeds.

Polly Houlton saw my raised eyebrows. She laughed. A strained laugh it was. "He was educated in England," she said in answer to the question on the tip of my tongue.

Joe Big spat viciously overboard. "Red," he grunted, "red no good for color. Boat show up too far. No good." Then he paddled on.

THREE times in the course of the next half-hour our canoe halted at the up-raised hand of Doctor Tsu Liang. Three times we waited while his rifle slowly stole up to his shoulder. Each time a compressed "thutt" sounded like a muffled sneeze, to be followed at once by angry thrashings among the reeds where the Chinese scientist had spied an alligator.

"You know, Miss Houlton," the Oriental once called back over his shoulder, "this, in a way, is a revenge I am taking for your dog. I am sure poor Prince has been killed by one of them. They like dogs very well."

Polly Houlton turned pale. "Oh, I hope not," she cried. "Prince has been here long enough to learn how to avoid them. He can scent one a hundred yards away.

"I was looking for Prince when I saw your 'plane come down," she confided to me in an aside. "He's an Irish setter of whom I'm very fond, and he's been missing for the last two days. And for

days before that he seemed dopy and strange. I'm afraid he's crawled away somewhere to die."

And then, with hardly any warning, I saw firm ground on one side. I craned around and saw a tree-covered island, no higher than four or five feet above the marsh at its highest point.

The canoes were making for a stoutly built wooden landing-stage. We climbed out and proceeded up a well-worn path that led around patches of palmetto and bristling stands of cane to the center of the island, where I saw a group of buildings and the metal skeletons of large and complicated pieces of apparatus in an open sandy glade.

A long sprawling building in the Spanish style seemed to be our goal, a long building crouching under gigantic cypress trees and in an ordered wilderness of scarlet poinsettias and flowering oleanders.

The path wound between clumps of bushes and Doctor Tsu Liang preceded us by some ten yards. He was out of sight for a moment and I heard the "thutt" of his rifle. Then we rounded a bush and he was in sight once more, his rifle lifted and pointed toward the left.

"Don't look," he called to Polly Houlton. "Another one of the slimy brutes—right on our grounds here. I see that I'll have to wage a campaign of extermination against them soon." He took her arm and mine and hurried us past the bush.

The next few feet brought us to the patio, where Joe Big dropped my bag and vanished. Then we were in a cool hall furnished with wicket armchairs and chaise-longues.

A clap of the hands and a gigantic Chinese clad in black trousers and shirt coat shuffled into the room.

"Hung Lee, my Number One boy,"

Doctor Tsu Liang waved his hand gracefully. "Anything you want, he will get. I am sure Miss Houlton will excuse me if I assume the part of host and tell you that everything in our poor household is at your disposal."

"A smoke," I suggested. "I've burned my last butt."

"Well, ra-ather," said Tsu Liang. "Why didn't you mention it before?" His hand held out a golden cigarette case. "And how about a cooling drink, a most charming drink that I've found down here—a—a mint julep, what? Two of them, Lee, and a lime crush for Miss Houlton, what?"

And so, five minutes later, I was puffing luxuriously and looking with unbelieving eyes at the tall and fragrant glass that I held moisture-beaded in my hand.

So this was the man of whom Polly Houlton was so terribly afraid—this man who seemed to combine in himself the perfect courtesy of two civilizations.

Half an hour later I was in the room to which the doctor had himself conducted me, and I was looking at the dinner jacket which a deft-handed Chinese had taken out of my bag and laid on the bed as a hint of what was expected for the evening meal.

"Good Lord," I thought to myself. "Formality in the middle of the Everglades!"

I heard a soft tapping on the door—tapping such as somebody drumming his fingernails on the wood makes. And then, before I could call out, the door silently opened.

Joe Big stood there, glowering at me. From his hand swung a burlap bag. Silently still he closed the door and beckoned to me with a swarthy finger.

"Yellow man shoot 'gator outside house," he said in a husky whisper. "See—look at 'gator."

A twitch of his wrist and out rolled what was in the sack. It was a dog, a silky-haired brown setter; its head squashed by the blow of a blunt-nosed bullet, but—the horror will not leave me yet—immediately behind its skull rose a blood-spattered something. A horn—no, it was a stub of pale yellow fungus, an inch in diameter and six in height.

I shrunk from it with a cry of revulsion. My stomach protested at the sight. It was—there was no doubt about it—it was the same horrible fungus which attacked the wretched caterpillars thought such a delicacy by the Chinese.

"My God!" I cried. "What does this horrible thing mean?"

My eyes were questioning Joe Big.

The Indian shrugged his shoulders. "Yellow man is devil. I say so before," he whispered. "Look, feel, dog Prince still warm. No flies in him. He live with that thing growing in him, but he die too, just like trees with Spanish moss or air plant die."

I could not bear to feel the wretched body. Yet I knew the Indian to have spoken truth. If I remembered correctly the explanation of a Chinese friend, at the dinner where I first saw the fungoid monstrosity, the body of the animal should be filled with the mycelium roots, the actual body of the fungus. The projecting spike would only be the spore cap—the fruit of the horrible plant.

"Look," the Indian was merciless in his observations. "See the rope around neck of Prince. Dog he tied up some place. He chew rope. He break it. He crawl to door to see Miss Polly and he get shot. See—look."

I looked. I saw. The Indian was right. A grim rage against the unclean work of the Chinese began to rise in me.

The Indian was rolling the body of Prince back into the sack.

"What are you going to do with it?" I cried angrily.

"Take him back where he killed," answered Joe Big simply. "Yellow devil find him there. Not know that we know. Give you time. Got to have time to take you and Miss Polly away. Ten other men here call yellow devil chief. I go now."

Joe Big did not wait for my consent. He opened the door and noiselessly slipped out. In truth I did not know what to say. Ten other Chinese here, all servants of Doctor Tsu Liang. No wonder that Polly Houlton wanted to escape. Escape! But how?

4

I MET Tom Houlton, Polly's brother, a few minutes after Joe Big had left me. It seemed to me that the horror which the Indian had brought into my room had tainted the air there, and I was driven out into the sunny patio, where I walked up and down while trying to find an escape for Miss Houlton and myself from the island.

Several turns I made on the scarlet tiles, and then I saw a fair-haired young man, standing under the pillars at one side. The family resemblance was there, and I promptly went over and introduced myself.

Tom Houlton showed no curiosity about my coming and no interest in plans for going. He simply stood there and toyed with a cigarette while I tried to make conversation and judge whether to tell him of his sister's appeal to me. His pale gray eyes, slightly bulging, stared dully at me, until I felt a shiver run down my spine, for there was something terribly inhuman about them.

I talked of this and that, but could rouse no interest in him until I asked him to explain the nature of the work on

which he and Doctor Tsu Liang were engaged.

Then there rose a gleam of vivacity in his face and for a few minutes Tom Houlton was really animated.

"Come along with me," he suggested. "I'll show you our culture sheds where we ray the mycelium and the spores, and where we use the chemical fungoid stimulator that Dad has discovered."

I walked with him across an area of sand that was white and powdery and dry as salt and saw that we were under one of the frameworks which bore a number of disks, now shielded with black cloth.

"Mirrors," he said, "catching my wondering gaze. "It's complex to explain to a layman, but they are of special material and curvature. They catch the polarized light of the moon, from which we separate out certain wave lengths by means of color screens and prisms.

"The wave lengths are the ones we find most suitable for our work, and they are concentrated on certain beds in whatever one of our fungus houses we are working.

"Look," he pointed to the intricate branching of the mechanism and to a number of chain-drive belts as well as to an electric motor at the base of the central column.

"That's our clockwork system—electric, of course—which keeps the mirrors following the motion of the moon so that we can be sure of our rays as long as there is moonlight. It is practically the same as that you will find in any large astronomical observatory where the telescope can be mechanically set to follow the motion of a celestial body that has to be studied for any length of time."

I nodded understanding and Tom Houlton continued talking, addressing me as if I was a classroom audience and he the lecturer.

His face shone with interest as he went into details of construction and operation—details which I have forgotten. Yet even then there was something strange about his actions; something theatrical and exaggerated about his gestures.

"You have doubtless heard old-fashioned beliefs that corn and wheat should be sown in the full of the moon," he stated. "It is an ancient superstition and one spread all over the world. It is often found bound up with various religions, and I am sure that your and my ancestors were very careful to observe it.

"They did rightly in doing so," he cried loudly. "For the moon, fair Luna, is more than mistress of the skies. She helps, when she chooses, in the germination of seeds, in the growing of plants, and no type of vegetable matter does she control more than the fungi. It is by making the most of her aid that we succeed in what we are doing. We have analyzed her light, which, as I have said, is polarized. That is, all the rays are parallel, as they would be when reflected from a mirror, and the moon, of course, is the mirror of the sun. We have taken out those rays which are valuable—and here you see the result."

We had reached a low shed, whose wooden walls, now down, evidently could be lifted like shutters at night to give the moon rays access. Tom Houlton threw open a door.

Dim light and musty odor met me, also heat as of a bake oven. I entered, and, as my eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, I saw a long row of huge white balls.

I knew what they were, for I remembered what Polly Houlton had said. Yet even so it seemed incredible that these objects, some of them three feet in diameter and others four feet, should be the same as the ordinary edible puffballs, the

largest of which grow to but little more than ten inches in section.

"These puffballs are eatable, of course," continued Tom Houlton. "They are the finest of foods. And we have already succeeded in accelerating them to such a point that one of the big ones will mature in forty-eight hours. They weigh about four hundred pounds apiece when ripe as these are now, and can undoubtedly be made the world's cheapest food."

"What do you mean by 'accelerated'?" I asked. "I thought that your ordinary puffball would mature in less than forty-eight hours anyway."

Tom Houlton smiled as one of my teachers used to smile when he saw glimmerings of intelligence in my class.

"Quite right, quite right," he said. "But you must remember that the larger any vegetable object is, the longer it took to attain that size. That's a general rule, and of course there are exceptions. But we had to overcome that condition, else insect pests might riddle our puffballs before they grew large enough, and we believe we have succeeded even to the extent of passing on that acceleration to several generations of the mushroom."

We walked through the shed past rows of the puffballs, which to my startled imagination seemed to be swelling and growing bigger even as I watched them; came to the end of it, and walked out through another door.

Listlessly Tom Houlton waved his hand toward other and similar buildings stretching away on the burning sand from under the palm trees.

"You've seen all there is to see," he said in a colorless voice. "The other buildings are all the same. All have puffballs in various stages of growth and drying. All are due to our silver lady of the night."

His voice for an instant regained its

freshness, and in that moment I visioned him as the high priest of some pagan cult that worshipped Selene, the goddess of the moon. Surely in those few seconds he had on his face some of the high zeal of the priest.

But then I thought of something else. I thought of another superstition connected with the moon. And rashly I put it into words.

"My grandmother used to tell me not to sleep with the moonlight shining on my face," I said. "She was certain that the moonbeams would steal my wits away—and they might have some effect too. Isn't the word 'lunatic' derived from the Latin '*luna*', for 'moon'?"

I regretted my words a moment after I had spoken them. Tom Houlton's face was contorted into a mask of rage. Before I could guard myself he leaped at me and tripped me to the ground. I struck heavily and then was fighting for my life, for his hands were gripped tight around my throat and his thumbs were pressing on my windpipe.

My fall had half dazed me, yet I clasped my hands together under those of Houlton and with all my strength struck out, forcing his hands apart and breaking his hold on my throat.

Deep lungfuls of air I drew with sobbing breath and then scrambled to my feet again to ward off Houlton should he resume his mad attack.

But Houlton was lying on the sand. A thin trickle of blood came from his nose and mouth. Suddenly frightened, I stooped over him. I loosened his collar and put my hand inside his shirt to feel whether his heart was beating.

And at that precise instant I heard the shrill of a whistle and the patter of running feet. Before I could turn around I felt a savage impact of knees in the small

of my back, and I was flung several feet away.

Hands gripped me and twisted my arms painfully behind my back. And then I was unceremoniously jerked to my feet and turned about.

Before me stood Doctor Tsu Liang, a little golden whistle shaped like a section of bamboo rod in the fingers of one hand and a stubby automatic pistol in the other.

"Now, now, Mr. Morris," he purred. "How am I to interpret this unprovoked attack of yours upon my colleague? No—don't deny it. I saw it all, and I say that it was unprovoked. Allow me to hope that poor Tom is not as badly injured as he looks. For if it should happen that he dies—I may decide that summary justice here would be better than that strange legal farce which you hold in the United States in cases of murder."

He broke off into a swift flow of Chinese. I felt the hands of his servants pulling out the automatic from my hip pocket. And then I was being half pushed and half carried toward a back entrance of the house.

Dumb with dismay at the turn of fate and the treachery of the Celestial, I allowed myself to be hustled down a flight of stairs. And then I was thrown headlong into a cellar whose thick oaken door closed out all light as well as hope of escape when it was slammed and locked.

5

How many hours I crouched there in that coral rock walled cellar I can not tell. My wrist-watch had been broken in the struggle and the luminous hands were stopped by the jagged glass. There was no light. There was no window. Even the door was almost air-tight, and after I had sat on the cold floor for—it must have been hours only, although it seemed like days—I began to fear that

the air was becoming vitiated and that I would die from lack of oxygen.

Horrors enough there were on mushroom island, but this thought—that I would choke to death; that like a rat in a trap I might be dead before I was sought for again—nearly drove me frantic.

I groped to the door and threw my body against it until the bolts that studded it bit deeply into my flesh. The door was as firm as rock. I shouted for help, and my voice filled the cellar with sound. Again and again I shouted, and then managed to hold myself back from the brink of hysteria.

"I've got to stay sane," I muttered to myself. "I've got to keep my senses."

And so I drew off one shoe, leaned against the door and started flailing it with the heel. Somebody, surely, would hear the noise of my knocking. Somebody would come down and open the door. That was all I wanted.

I beat the door, using my right hand until it was tired. Then I changed to my left. And then back again to the right. Nobody came. Then I started counting the strokes. My pounding became a grim game. I swore that I would knock a thousand times more. I did. The number passed and I kept on pounding. My right shoe had split and broken. I pulled off my left and resumed the hammering. The noise must have drowned all others in my ears, for I heard no one approach the cellar. Yet suddenly a key grated in the lock. Tumblers clicked, and the door was flung open. I crouched head down, blinded by the glare of a high-powered electric torch. I tensed myself for a leap.

"I wouldn't do it, if I were you," advised Doctor Tsu Liang from behind the source of radiance. I saw a gleaming pis-

tol barrel moved into the light for an instant, and then withdrawn.

"You are a bally persistent blighter," he continued. "That confounded knocking of yours got on my nerves, and was too hard to explain to Miss Houlton."

I caught at the straw. "Then she doesn't know that you've imprisoned me here?" I cried.

A slow chuckle came from behind the light.

"I decided that it would save trouble if I said that you had rushed off into the swamp after killing Tom Houlton."

"He—he is dead!" I faltered.

"Yes—what does the poem say?—you now see in me the lord of all I survey. But then, of course, you really can not see me."

"But how could I have killed him?" I cried. "You know that I only hit him once, and that was to save my own life, for he was strangling me. How could he have died from that?"

"With your rough temper you spoiled a very pretty experiment I was making," said Doctor Tsu Liang. "I'm afraid poor Tom was already considerably weakened by it, and of course I realize that his mental condition may have affected the course of the experiment. Therefore I am, in a way, rather glad that I find in you good raw material to take Tom's place. You may consider it a form of expiation, don't you know, to take Tom Houlton's place."

Sickening misgivings were stirring in me. Somehow I knew what the answer would be to my question. Yet I asked it.

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"I heard your conversation with poor Tom before the—the murder." The fiend laughed when he saw me wince at the term.

"I heard your remark about the old superstition that moonlight has an effect

on the mind. 'Out of the mouths of babes'—you know the context of the quotation. You had put your finger on the one element which I saw was upsetting the experiment. Tom Houlton had been so zealous in working over his father's bally puffballs that he had exposed himself for many hours at a time to our refined rays.

"And if they affect fungoid generation and development why should they not also affect the mind? I am quite satisfied that they do, and that poor Tom was well on the way to becoming insane. And that, of course, was unfair to my experiment. I thank the spirits of my ancestors and my native caution that I exposed myself as little as possible to the rays.

"But the experiment? Of course that is what you asked me about. I will tell you, for doubtless you will have the honor of being the first American to bring my pet fungus to complete fruition. I shall administer certain cultivated spores to you, and we will see what will happen. I had already done so to Tom—oh no, he didn't suspect it—and I think that he died so easily because the fungus had already sapped his strength to a great degree."

Cold perspiration ran down from my forehead, and then with a cry of desperate rage I leaped at the mocking voice behind the light. I saw a spurt of fire and felt a sharp impact on my face. And then I was choking, strangling in the acrid fumes of the liquid that splattered my chin. I felt a blackness descending upon my mind. The torch seemed to recede to a tiny pin-point of light, and far, far in the distance I heard the mocking laugh of the yellow man.

6

THE world was red. It swirled into whirlpools of blood which attracted me. I struggled against them, and yet I

dived through the center of one vortex after the other. And the blood changed to fire; to orange flames which licked at my body and burned it.

I screamed with agony and opened my eyes. I was in glaring sunlight. I was lying in the hot sand. To either side of me I could see one of the long mushroom culture sheds.

My mind was still whirling, and I was terribly sick with a nausea that I had never felt before. I tried to roll over onto one side but found that I could not. I was staked spread-eagle fashion on the hot sand.

Then a shadow fell across my body. It was that of Doctor Tsu Liang, who stood comfortably at ease in his spotless linen and sun helmet, while he regarded me with the calm interest of the vivisector studying a bound puppy.

"Ah," he said, "you are awake? That's excellent, Mr. Morris, excellent! It shows that you have a robust constitution. Other men that I have been forced to shoot with my little gas pistol generally take the full twenty-four hours to come around. You took but twenty. It means that you will provide most excellent material for my study."

My tongue was a piece of sandy leather. It rattled against my teeth. Yet I managed a tight-lipped grin and a few words.

"Hope you'll find a Chinese hell as hot as this," I croaked.

"Well—really!" Tsu Liang cried out in tones of shocked protest. "I thought that you had resigned yourself to expiate your offense. This is no torture, allow me to assure you. Warmth, intense warmth may help the success of our little experiment, though I doubt if it is absolutely necessary. That is why I had you put in that position, which, I admit, may be a trifle irksome."

Painfully and with great effort I began to curse. I thought of the vilest names that a man could be called, and I used them. I cursed Tsu Liang and his father and mother. With great detail I described what refuse his ancestors had been and what kind of offal they were now. I stopped only when I had no more breath.

Tsu Liang was laughing quietly. "How childish, how very childish of you!" he choked through his merriment. "I suppose you had an idea that I would lose my temper and kill you quickly? But you do not know me yet. And for your information, I may as well tell you that English is a poor language to swear in. You have not the wealth of imagery to be effective. I wish that you could live long enough to learn Cantonese. You would appreciate the difference.

"Don't think," he gibed, "that I'm merely trying to torture you. I have sent one of my boys away to bring me the choicest of the accelerated Cordyceps fungi I have. It is a fungus which attacks caterpillars in my country and it has grown to ripeness on a dog which I was forced to use.

"It is its spores which I wish to sow in you, although I am doubtful of the exact method to follow. In the case of Tom Houlton I fed them directly into the blood stream. He cut his finger rather badly about a week ago, and was trusting enough to let me bandage it."

I heard a noise in one of the adjoining sheds and tore the skin off both my wrists in a wild effort to pull the stakes from the sand, for I knew that it must be the Celestial's servant coming with the horrible caterpillar fungus.

"You might try breathing in the spores," continued the yellow man musingly. "Though I doubt whether it would serve unless you had some lung disease or a sore throat bad enough to have

broken the membranes. Ah—I have it! I must burst a ripened puffball before you. One of my men nearly choked to death last week when he touched one off. The spores are very much like snuff, you know, and they irritate the throat and lungs most mightily. By Jove!"—he was rapt in admiration of his new idea—"why, that would be absolutely perfect. The puffballs can prepare the way and the Cordyceps can follow. It's perfect——"

I heard a rush of feet behind me and an exclamation of surprize from the Chinese. Somehow I twisted my neck and saw—saw Tom Houlton, or his shade, charging head down like a bull at Doctor Tsu Liang.

Agile as a toreador the yellow man evaded the rush and tripped Houlton with an outflung foot. Houlton sprawled and fell, but turned even as he was falling and so received on his coat sleeve the charge of liquid gas which had been flung at his face from Tsu Liang's pistol. He seemed to bound like a rubber ball from the ground and once more came hurtling at the Celestial, this time butting him on the chest and falling to the sand on top of him.

One hand, I saw, was gripping the yellow man's little pistol, while the poison saturated sleeve was pressed against the Chinese savant's mouth.

There followed a brief struggle and then I saw Doctor Tsu Liang's body go limp, and, tied as I was, I could not help chuckling at the poetic justice of his capture with the very poison which he himself had discharged.

But the next instant my fears were once more aroused, for I knew the potency of the strange liquid used by the Oriental. And Houlton was scrambling to his feet much too slowly.

"Houlton," I husked. "Houlton! Throw

off your coat. Take it off. It's got poison gas liquid on it. Quick, man, before it gets you. Quick!"

Tom Houlton turned his face to mine, and I saw that he understood. He wavered to his feet and drew off his coat, dropped it near Doctor Tsu Liang, and then leaned against one of the sheds while his chest heaved convulsively.

"I heard. I was in the next shed," he gasped. "I heard what that dog had done to me. I know what that means. I—I am a walking dead man."

Madness and sanity too, and the knowledge of his awful doom were tragically visible in Houlton's eyes.

GRADUALLY he breathed easier and came over to me. He cut the cords that bound me to the stakes, and then stared intently at me, as if he was trying to remember who I was.

"My head!" He cried suddenly and lifted both hands to his temples. "My head aches. But I know you. You are the flyer who disappeared yesterday afternoon. Polly was looking for you most of the night in the marsh. The doctor said you had run away because of something—something."

And then I saw both memory and complete sanity return at once.

"I remember now," he said slowly. "I hit you. I must have been out of my head. Maybe this vile thing that Tsu Liang has done to me is already affecting my mind.

"I hit you. We struggled, and then I fainted. I am not as strong as I used to be. And you had run away when I woke up. You were in the marsh somewhere. And this morning we were sure that you had been either drowned or killed by the alligators. Now I find you here. I suppose that Tsu Liang had you kept prisoner somewhere by his men?"

"Yes," I said. "His servants overpowered me. He said that I had killed

you and that he was going to make me take your place as—as experimental material."

Tom Houlton paled and swayed. "Yes—that's right. That's what I heard him say," he half whispered. "It's true, then. It's true. It isn't a dream like all those other dreams I have been living for the past few weeks."

Suddenly he gripped my arm. "You must escape," he muttered. "You must take Polly away with you; take her north to her father. Joe Big, the Indian, will help you."

"And what about yourself?" I asked. "Why not come with us? Maybe there is some way of stopping the growth of this thing."

For a moment I thought that Tom Houlton would agree, but then he shook his head resolutely.

"I know," he said quietly. "I know what is wrong with me. And that can never, never be cured. I shall die, anyway, within the week, and if I came with you I would bear the spawn of death behind my head. I would pollute the world with millions of spores. No. I know my duty. I will attend to it. I shall wipe out this devil's mess which I have helped——"

A startled yell and a high-pitched gibbering in Chinese interrupted him. A dungaree-clad Oriental was advancing upon us with a gleaming knife in his hand. I could hear other falsetto cries answering him.

Swiftly I scooped up the poison gun that lay by Doctor Tsu Liang's hand, and fired at the Chinese. A wet stain splashed his blue overalls on the chest, and he collapsed on the sand.

"To the house," I ordered Tom Houlton. "Quick to your sister. We have to get away from these Chinese."

And then began a deadly game of hide-and-go-seek between Tom Houlton and me on one side and the yellow men who

owed allegiance only to Doctor Tsu Liang.

Time and again we escaped detection only by the narrowest of margins as we dodged toward the shrubbery that surrounded the house. Once I felled a Chinese before he could give the alarm by hitting him with a huge conch shell that I had found. I used it as a knuckle-duster, for the pistol was noisy, besides being precious.

At length we were in the shrubbery while the Chinese still searched with excited cries in and around the mushroom sheds. We crawled through it, once seeing a venomous little coral snake flash away from the spot where I was just about to put my hand. And then we were ten yards from the patio.

"Listen, before we go in," Tom Houlton grasped my sleeve. "Don't tell Polly about—about what's the matter with me—I don't want to hurt her. I'll pretend that I'll go with you—only I won't."

His gray eyes were pleading on mine, while a muscle in his left cheek twitched with emotion.

"All right, Houlton," I said. "You've got more guts than I have if you intend to stay here."

"You have forgotten that I am a dead man," said Tom Houlton harshly. "Dead—except that I can take revenge before I die. It takes no courage now, for I intend to kill myself—feed the alligators—burn in one of the sheds—anything, rather than become a walking vegetable to further the ambitions of Tsu Liang."

There was nothing of the weakling, nothing of the muddled mind about Tom Houlton now. I could sense a steel-strong will as he continued in his whisper.

"I must tell you now, while my head is still clear, what I picked up by hints and by deduction from that yellow villain while I've been helping him with his experiments on the Cordyceps—the caterpillar death.

"God knows why I did not tell any one else before, or kill the treacherous dog. I believe he intends to release the deadly spores in several cities of the United States. I believe he has a great plan to wipe out all human life in our country and so create new land for colonization by the Chinese. That is his scheme—and I—God help me—I aided him although I suspected what he wanted to do." His voice broke with shame.

I was dazed by the far-reaching nature of the plan; by the devilish cunning of Tsu Liang.

"Promise me," Tom Houlton whispered insistently, "you'll take Polly away, and then you'll come back with Dad to check up on what I've done. Every spore of that caterpillar fungus must be destroyed, and even the puffballs are dangerous if left to spread unchecked."

"I promise," I whispered.

Then Tom Houlton had leaped forward and darted across the last patch of grass into the house. Ten seconds later I had joined him there.

"Quiet!" He breathed, with his finger to his lips, and tiptoed through the cool living-room. I followed, turned a corner into a passage and dashed the conch shell into the face of the gigantic Number One house boy who soundless on his slippers had come through an open door.

One prong of the heavy shell caught him on the temple and I distinctly heard the bone crush in. Then he toppled to the floor. A moment later Tom Houlton reappeared with his sister, who greeted me with a cry of surprise.

"Oh—how did you get here?" She chattered delightedly. But Tom Houlton stopped her with a broad palm which he laid gently over her mouth.

"Hush up," he whispered. "We must find Joe Big and get a canoe. We are escaping."

"Thank God," said Polly Houlton.

"Thank God you've decided at last. I'll find Joe Big. I know where he is."

She turned and ran down the passage while Tom Houlton and I dragged the body of the huge Chinese further into a corner whose darkness had hidden it from Polly when she met me.

"I must get some shoes for you, and Tsu Liang's rifle," panted Tom Houlton. "No time to lose."

He dashed into a room and emerged with the silencer-fitted rifle and a pair of shoes which I found to fit me while he was breaking open a box of cartridges and stuffing the shells into his pockets.

"Now let 'em all come," he crowed as he stepped to a window of the living-room which commanded a view of the mushroom sheds. The next instant I heard a startled oath from him.

"They're coming!" he cried. "Four of them. They're carrying Tsu Liang to the house."

Then I heard the muffled sneeze of the rifle. Once. Twice.

"Got one of them anyway," he gloated a moment later. "And I think I hit Tsu Liang too, but the others have dragged him behind shelter. I guess we'll have a few minutes now to get you into that canoe. Where is that Joe Big anyway?"

A pistol started firing from the mushroom sheds and two round little holes appeared, as if by magic, in one of the closed windows. The bullets buried themselves in the opposite wall.

POLLY, closely followed by Joe Big, ran into the room and cried out in relief at seeing that nobody was wounded. Houlton thrust his rifle at me.

"Watch out of the window," he said. "I want to talk to Joe Big."

I leaned against an embrasure and peered cautiously out of the window. The mushroom sheds swam in heat haze that

shimmered like flowing water over the dazzling sand. But I could see no one.

Tom Houlton had taken Joe Big apart and was giving him orders. The Indian was objecting to something and Houlton was fiercely insistent until the Indian finally nodded his head.

Then Houlton called me. "Ready now. You three will make a dash down the path for the landing-stage; take one of the canoes and smash the other, and paddle around to the southeast point, where you'll have a clear view of the eastern sheds."

"But what about you?" cried Polly Houlton in alarm.

"You'll pick me up there. I've got something to do here after you leave."

"Let me help," I cried impulsively. "Two can do it better than one."

Tom Houlton grinned at me—a manly grin it was—and then put out his hand.

"Thanks for the offer," he said firmly. "But you know you have other duties. So long." I knew then that I had said good-bye to Tom Houlton. Good-bye in this life.

He pecked Polly on the cheek, cupped her golden head between his palms while he stared down into her eyes, and then warned her whimsically, "No protests now, young lady. There isn't time. And for once you do as you are told."

Then he flung off into a side passage while Joe Big herded Polly and me swiftly out of the house and through the bushes to the landing-stage.

7

WE GOT unobserved to the water and the Indian viciously drove his heel through the canvas bottom of the red canoe until it filled with water and sank down into the mud.

Polly Houlton and I had already scrambled into the green one and when Joe Big joined us we worked our way through the

tall reeds and grass to the southeastern tip of the island. Here, behind a screen of reeds we sat, watching the long row of sheds, Joe Big and I in silence and Polly in fidgeting anxiety.

Presently we saw Tom. He was carrying a five-gallon gasoline can in one hand and the rifle in the other. He poured gasoline along the baseboard of one long building which Polly identified as the spore shed—the place where ripe puff-balls were kept in a moistened atmosphere so that their thick covers should not split and release the clouds of spores with which they were filled.

Joe Big contributed another piece of information.

"Wind from east," he said. "Fire burn up all sheds if it gets started."

Tom Houlton had already worked along one hundred feet of the narrow shed. He was close to the center point. Then we heard a yell of discovery and a group of blue-clad Chinese appeared a hundred yards away from him, rounding the corner of another building.

Houlton dropped the can, ran several yards toward the yellow men and then stooped to fumble with a match at the base of the shed. Flame—a long flickering pale yellow line—sprang up both before and behind him. The gasoline can exploded with a roar. Black smoke and liquid fire showered over the shed. For an instant Tom Houlton was hidden from us by the smoke, and then Polly screamed shrilly.

"He's burning—he's burning!"

Tom Houlton, his clothes afire in several places, was running toward the Chinese. His rifle was spitting death at them, and I heard their alarmed yells as they tumbled back into safety behind their corner.

Polly Houlton seized her paddle and drove the canoe toward shore.

"Cowards," she cried bitterly at Joe Big

and me. "Why don't you do something to help him? Why don't you save him?"

Tom Houlton was still running along the wall of flame, which now roared twenty feet high. I could see that the back of his shirt was eaten away. I imagined that I caught flashes of his blackened skin and flesh. Then Houlton stopped. He examined the flame-hidden wall of the mushroom shed. He found what he was looking for, because his foot swung out and a rectangle of blackness appeared in the fire. He had kicked in a door.

For ten seconds, maybe, he stood looking into the shed, and then he turned toward us and saw the canoe almost touching the white sand of the island.

"Go back," he cried. His voice was unnaturally shrill over the roaring of the flames. "Go back—and say good-bye to Dad for me, Polly."

The girl in front of me screamed again and covered her eyes.

Tom Houlton had put the muzzle of the rifle into his mouth. He was poking the trigger with a stick. I saw a gush of smoke from the back of his head. The rifle fell from his hands, and Tom Houlton's body tumbled into the black aperture. He had fallen into the funeral pyre which he had lit for himself.

Polly Houlton's shoulders were shaking with sobs.

"Oh why—why did he have to do that?" she cried. "We could have picked him up."

Tenderly—as kindly as I could, I explained what was the matter with Tom Houlton, and how he had decided to kill himself rather than bring pollution upon the world. Joe Big grunted corroboration, for Tom Houlton had told him all in orders.

Her sobs ceased and her tears dried up as she listened, and when I had con-

cluded, the golden head sat proudly on her shoulders.

"It is the sort of thing I would expect of the Tom I used to know," she said firmly. "He did right, and Father and I will always be proud of him."

Vague dull explosions were coming from the burning mushroom shed. With each strange report a brown cloud gushed through the flames and swept westward with the wind.

"They are the dried puffballs exploding—bursting from the heat. Those are the spores," cried Polly in alarm. "Oh, I do hope that Tom's sacrifice was not in vain. I do hope that everything will be destroyed."

A group of Chinese, their mouths and noses enveloped by wet cloths, appeared once more. With them was a directing figure in clothes that before the fire had evidently been white. It was the evil genius of the island—Tsu Liang.

Whether there was some means of resuscitation from his poison gas that was known to his servants, or whether he had been put to sleep for but half an hour because he had only breathed the gas from Tom Houlton's sleeve, I can not tell.

Yet there he was, and evidently he was directing his men in salvaging some of the contents of the mushroom sheds. A bloody bandage wrapped around one forearm advertised where Tom Houlton's shots had found a mark.

Our canoe was in plain sight on the sandy beach. He saw it and instantly darted down the side of the flaming shed to where the rifle Tom Houlton had used lay on the sand.

"We go now," said Joe Big, rather hurriedly for the Indian.

He pushed off with his paddle. Four strokes and we were again among the reeds. A few more and we had changed our direction.

Bullets snapped through the reeds

W. T.—4

where we would have been but for the Indian's change of course.

"Green," he observed, "much better color for canoe than red."

It took eight hours of hard paddle work through a maze of channels that led through the Everglades to bring us to the cement causeway that runs through the marsh and bears the name of the Tamiami Trail.

Joe Big refused to come with us when Polly and I boarded a bus for Miami.

"You come back," he said bluntly. "You come back to kill yellow devil. You send telegram to my uncle Jim Blue at Fort Myers. He get me and I meet you. We go together and kill him."

Then he stepped into the canoe again and a moment later had vanished among the reeds.

8

POLLY and I had almost reached the end of our journey. One of the swiftest trains on the continent was bearing us through a district of back yards. Intimate snatches of squalid home life through unshuttered windows streamed past us like a strange film made up of unrelated snapshots. We were in New York. Soon we would be in the cathedral-like station.

Polly put the question which had been burning in my mind ever since we left the island of horror.

"What are you going to do, Greg?" Our friendship had progressed far by this time. "Doctor Tsu Liang is still alive. He has the island to himself now. I know that Tom did his best—but do you honestly believe that Tsu Liang has been made harmless—that his horrible plan to depopulate the United States is done for?"

I did not like to admit it. Yet I remembered the parting words of Joe Big. And the Indian had a strange faculty for

driving through cloudy arguments and thoughts to the core of truth.

"No!" I exploded. "Tsu Liang will be a danger until he is dead. I'm sure that his mind, too, is warped by those moonbeams of your father's. He will have to be dealt with."

The train had pulled up in the vaulted station, and we swept out with other passengers to the red-capped welcomers of New York. Barriers passed behind us, and then we saw the crowd of those who waited for friends and relatives.

Off to one side I saw a tall, white-haired man, slightly stoop-shouldered as one who spent much time over a microscope would be. I nudged Polly and she flung herself at him, laughing and crying at the same time.

It was Professor Howard Houlton. I recognized his face now, for I had seen it in the newspapers almost as often as that of the President.

Affectionately he greeted his daughter. He patted her glossy head. And then his keen eyes sternly examined me. I must have passed muster, for at last he smiled and thrust out his right hand.

"I am glad to know you," he said simply. "Your telegram said much, but I will want to talk to you at some length. You have a residence here?"

"The Yale Club, sir," I answered.

"Good," he said. "My temporary apartment is small. Can you come to see us for dinner? You will find my address in the telephone book. At seven o'clock, then."

"Very well, sir," I said.

A taxi was waiting for Professor Houlton, and I was crowded by a burly man as I handed Polly in to her father. The man stepped on my toes. He was as clumsy as a bear.

"Don't forget now—seven o'clock at our flat," cried Polly.

"Dead or alive," I answered dramat-

ically, concealing my annoyance. "I shall be there."

The man who had bumped into me was standing only a foot or two away. A big man he was, hard hat, and dead cigar in the corner of his mouth.

"Stage police detective," I said to myself, and then, as he was obviously staring at me, I spoke to him.

"Did you want to talk to me?"

The fellow flushed and turned away. "Naw," he grunted. Then he was swallowed in the crowd.

I stared after him, marvelling at his insolence, and then summoned a cab for myself.

At the Yale Club I blessed my tailor for having sent two suits which I had ordered before leaving for my flying trip to the south. I wrote a check for Joe Big and mailed it to him in care of his uncle at Fort Myers, and then had a shower and changed into one of the new suits. Doctor Tsu Liang's little gas pistol I put into my coat pocket, for I had a strange feeling of uneasiness. The episode with the man at the station worried me a little.

Yet even so I was fool enough not to telephone a warning to Professor Houlton. How different things would have been had I done so! Half a million lives would have been saved.

I LEFT for the Houltons' flat in plenty of time. Yet the taxi became entangled in innumerable traffic jams, and I was fully ten minutes late when I drove up to the modest apartment house in which Professor Houlton had established his ménage while conducting his researches at the university.

The latch of the lobby door clicked as soon as I had rung the bell under the scientist's name. Carelessly I walked up a flight of stairs and knocked at the designated door. Then I fell back in surprise.

A Chinese attired in a white steward's coat had opened it.

"Mist' Mollis?" he questioned briefly. "Plofesso' Houlton wait inside."

Suspicious, and yet scoffing at my doubts—for why should the scientist not employ a Chinese house boy?—I entered. My hat and cane were in the Celestial's hands. He threw open another door. And so I walked in, like the fly to the spider.

There, his legs spread apart, and immaculate in gray tweed, stood Doctor Tsu Liang. His wounded arm was in a sling. At once my hand dived to the pistol in my coat pocket, but the gesture was halted by the feel of a revolver muzzle in my ribs. The house boy had followed me into the room.

"You are late," Doctor Tsu Liang smiled reprovingly. "Seven o'clock was the hour, according to the report of my hired investigator. Indeed it must have been, for Miss Houlton never doubted that it was you when I rang the bell shortly before the hour."

I glanced wildly around the room. There, in a corner, lay the figures of Polly and her father.

A wild cry of rage burst from me and I leaped at the Chinese arch fiend, only to have him glide eel-like out of my way.

"Careful now—careful, I say, old chap," he gibed. "They're not dead. Just asleep as you have been and as you will be again unless you excite my man and get a bullet instead of the gas."

I stood still. Tsu Liang wanted to talk. It was his failing. He wanted to gloat over me, else I would already be unconscious or dead. Perhaps I could learn something from him, forlorn hope though it was.

"Well," I said, "what do you want of them and me?"

"Ah — reasonable!" breathed Tsu

Liang. "That's a virtue not often found among you Nordics in spite of your silly faith in your own cool-headedness. Too bally often you lose what poor wits you have in moments of stress. And so I will answer you.

"The professor can still be useful to me. I am forced to admit that he knows considerably more about fungi than I do. He's for utility.

"Now Miss Houlton" — his eyes watched me narrowly while his tongue licked his thin lips—"Polly—she's for pleasure."

God knows how I choked down my wrath.

"As for yourself, my dear Morris, you know more now than you did on the island, and even then it was dangerous to let you go, in view of my plans for the future. So I have once more cast you in your old rôle.—What do the Germans call it? Ah—er—a '*Versuchskanickel*', a rabbit, a guinea-pig to try things out on."

"Interesting!" I managed the word casually, although I seethed with rage. "And how do you propose to get us back to the island?"

"How but by the means we used in coming here?" said Tsu Liang. "We flew here in an airplane from Miami, after some Indians attracted by the fire had been persuaded to take us out. We will fly straight to the island from here. I have already rented an airplane—an amphibian they call it—together with a pilot. Both can be made to disappear after they reach the island."

I heard an ambulance come clanging up the street. Tsu Liang smiled at the sound. He nodded his head approvingly. "Ah," he cried, "here it comes. Your lateness almost upset my working-schedule. This is the means of transportation for the Houltons and yourself to Long Island Sound, where our plane is waiting.

What could be less suspicious than an ambulance into which to load your bodies?"

Fiercely I whirled and lashed out with my left at the receding chin of the Chinese behind me. I hit him hard enough, but he must have pressed the trigger at the very same instant, for I felt a heavy blow on the left side of my chest—a blow that whirled me around and knocked me down. Dimly I saw a vision of Tsu Liang's face; a snarl twisting his lips and a poison gun in his hand. And then even this faded.

9

VAGUE recollections of white walls and yellow sunlight; of a man in a white coat who did painful things to me—that is all my memory retains of the period that followed.

Then came a time when I opened my eyes and looked about me. I was in a hospital room. Nowhere else could the walls be so harshly glaring; nowhere else that pungent smell of medicines.

I was alone in the room. Near me was a chair on which a magazine and a little bell were lying. Evidently my nurse had gone out for a while.

For minutes I lay there, my eyes closed against the dazzling brilliance.

"I am Greg Morris," I said to myself. "But why am I here—a crack-up?"

And then a flood of memory engulfed me. I had been shot. Tsu Liang had kidnapped Professor Houlton and Polly. Or had he? Did the shot raise any alarm?

Stiffly, and yet my feeling of fitness surprized me, I rolled over for the bell. While I still was shaking it a stern-eyed, deep-bosomed matron—not the pretty nurse of fiction—entered.

"Good," she barked. "Out of it at last. And let me tell you, young man, it was time you did snap out of it."

"Tell me—what happened?" I begged.

The Amazon needed little urging. She made some professional gestures. She felt my pulse and stuck a thermometer under my tongue.

"Take it easy," she said, "and I'll tell you all I know."

She consulted the card at the foot of my bed. "You were admitted here on May 22," she said. "It is now June 24. So you've been unconscious for over a month, and a mystery, too, what was the matter with you besides that bullet wound."

A month! I groaned. What could not have happened in a month?

"You're a lucky young man, Mr. Morris," continued the nurse. "That bullet came within the thickness of a fingernail of your heart, and clean out through your back. It was a nasty thing to patch up, but the wound is nicely healed now. Yet what bothered us was your being unconscious for so long.

"It wasn't shock, and your heart seemed to be all right, but we were fair up a tree until the doctor got curious about that dirty little gas gun you carried in your pocket. He worked out what the gas was and then got what we should do to wake you if you'd had a dose of it yourself. And that was this morning."

I recalled Doctor Tsu Liang's rage-distorted face hovering over me just before I became unconscious, and I knew that it was quite possible for him to shoot me again, even although he thought that I was dying.

"That gas idea sort of tallied with the story told by Tompkins, the intern, and Sutton, the driver of the ambulance," continued the nurse. "They said they were called to Professor Houlton's apartment and that they were met there by a Chink who shot them down. When we sent the police to get them because they didn't

come back, they were found with their uniform coats off and you were lying in a corner. By the mercy of God you hadn't bled to death, and so you were brought here in an ambulance. That's all I know."

She whipped the thermometer out of my mouth and scanned the column of mercury.

"You'll do," she said.

"But what about Professor Houlton and his daughter and Tsu Liang?" I cried from the bed.

"I don't know anything about them," said the nurse. "There was nobody else in the flat. The ambulance was discovered next day in Long Island Sound, where somebody had driven it into the water."

Tsu Liang had succeeded. The yellow man had won all the way along. Polly and her father were on the island of horror in the Everglades. I almost wept with despair, and then startled the nurse with an exclamation.

"Bring me newspapers," I cried. "Any kind of newspapers. Quick. It's important."

She looked at me without understanding and then smiled as one who is about to humor a sick child.

"Lie quiet," she called from the door, and then stiffly rustled out of sight, somehow like a starched sailing-ship.

I DID not mind what she thought or failed to think, as long as I could see the news, and grabbed the paper out of her hand as she once more came to my bedside.

There it was. Spread over the front page of the tabloid. I groaned again, for Tsu Liang had worked well during the month I was in hospital.

"FUNGOID DEATH SCOURGE SPREADS." That was the caption over the pictures, which were explained to have been taken at great personal risk by

the sheet's star camera man. Inside, the story was set out in large type:

ALL FLORIDA QUAILS UNDER DEATH DEALING MUSHROOMS

Miami, Palm Beach, Fort Myers and Tampa are cities of the dead. Scourge rides air to Jacksonville.

CATERPILLAR PEST STRIKES THOUSANDS

Buildings, roads, railways, all crumble under attack of giant puffballs from heart of Everglades.

Then followed the news story. Lurid and sensationally written as it was, it could do no more than tell me what I feared; what I expected:

Death, horrible death, rides the wind in helpless Florida, and is advancing further and further north.

Twelve thousand have already died from the terrible caterpillar parasite which first attracted attention three weeks ago when cases of it followed the appearance of giant puffballs in Florida cities.

Untold other thousands will die too. They harbor within them the spores of death. They are bringing them north. New York may have the caterpillar death in it any day now.

The president has refused to put a quarantine on those leaving Florida. Every refugee, however, must be medically examined every day to make sure of his health. No cure has yet been found for the caterpillar death, and where it is undoubted, victims must be gassed before they can spread spores.

Scientists warn that the caterpillar death comes mostly to those who have their lungs irritated by giant puffball spores. Puffball spores are like mustard gas. Police orders are to keep away from ripe puffballs.

Scenes of unparalleled horror were witnessed by this paper's representative on his visit to the deserted areas of Florida.

Hundreds of unburied dead lie on the streets of Miami and Palm Beach. From behind their heads rise long mushroom stalks. Spores—the seeds of death—blow from them. But the bodies do not rot. They stay preserved. Perhaps they still are alive!

Puffballs are growing wherever there is moisture. They have blocked up water mains, and stick up through the shattered concrete of the roads. Water from the broken mains has seeped into the cellars of buildings. Puffballs have grown in the foundations, and big structures are being torn to pieces by them. They ripen within thirty-six hours. They burst in the heat of day and the wind blows their spores away.

All southern Florida is deserted now but for the government scientists studying the mushrooms. They live in rubber clothes and behind gas masks, as the writer had to do in making his visit, otherwise they too would breathe the dust of death!

There was more of it, but I had read

enough. Tsu Liang was accomplishing his fiendish work. But was he? The question struck me. He had planned to release the spores in several different cities. Yet the newspaper said that Florida only was invaded.

Quickly I glanced through the paper again. I was right. Florida alone was the center of the struggle against the fungoid cancer. This opened other possibilities. Had Tsu Liang altered his plan? Or was the outburst in Florida due to accident? Perhaps the spore clouds that blew out of the mushroom sheds when Tom Houlton set them on fire were responsible.

But then how could Tsu Liang and his men, and Polly and her father—how could they live on that island of horror with the fungi enclosing them on every side? Were they marooned, or—horror of horrors—had they themselves fallen victims to the scourge? Had they supplied the culture bodies for the caterpillar death?

My mind reeled at the thought and I seized the tabloid to look at the pictures.

There were houses whose walls were bursting asunder from the terrific power of the swelling puffballs. There were ghastly pictures of bodies lying on the streets of Miami—and the date of the paper was June 18. It was a week old!

I flung it on the floor and shouted for the nurse. I ordered her to get some of that day's papers. And when she brought them I read that the scourge was sweeping northward. Already the death toll was over a hundred thousand. The mushroom clouds had crossed the border into Georgia. Atlanta was being evacuated. Preparations to move all the people from New Orleans were under way. Government statements bluntly said that so far no way of stopping the advance of the puffballs and the caterpillar death had been discovered.

Tsu Liang was winning! He was winning! And Polly was in his hands!

I must still have been a little weak, for I fainted then, and later drifted off into a nightmare-filled sleep in which I was a caterpillar that crawled and squirmed, and crawled a thousand miles to get away from a nameless fear which rode behind its head.

10

THE nurse was shaking my shoulder. I struck out blindly and then sat up, blinking while dazzling sunlight chased the dreams out of my mind.

"There's a man to see you, Mr. Morris," cried the nurse. "Some kind of a colored man. Will you see him?"

Dazedly I looked at her. Then I remembered. What did anything matter now? But a colored man?

"Is he Chinese?"

"Lordy, no," laughed the nurse. "He's got a brown skin, but he doesn't look like a nigger. His name is Joe Big."

"Let him in," I cried. "Let him in at once."

Joe Big entered the room. He was a bewildered Indian. Yet frightened by the noise of the city, by the traffic and by the smells of the hospital, he had managed to find me. And his natural dignity slipped over him like a garment when he recognized me in the bed.

"I come," he said, "because everybody gone or dead in Fort Myers. Uncle dead. All Seminole dead. Me—I last of my nation."

"But how did you find me?" I asked in puzzlement.

"You send me paper for money," said the Indian. "On cover it say Yale Club, New York. I come to Yale Club, New York, and they tell me you in this hospital. They get me taxicab. I come here. This still New York?"

"It still is New York," I said with a

lopsided smile. Then I rolled out of the bed.

"Joe Big," I declared, "I am going back to the Everglades. Tsu Liang has caught Professor Houlton and Polly. I go to rescue them. Or perhaps avenge them."

"You kill yellow devil, too?" asked Joe Big. "Six of my nation come when they see fire on island. They come to help. They take yellow devil in canoe to Miami when he follow you. They go back to island again to help more, and yellow devil catch them when he come back and they die the same way Miss Polly dog die. Rest of my people die soon, too. Joe Big, only he alive because he see yellow devils wear wet rag, breathe through wet rag. He do same, but all others die. You kill yellow devil?"

"So help me God," I swore. "I shall kill him."

"I come with you," said Joe Big.

I felt strong again. Once more life had a purpose.

It took time to free myself from the hospital. Doctors and superintendents appeared and were horrified at the suggestion that I should get up and go on the spur of the moment. Yet they had to admit that my wound was healed. There was no good reason why I should still stay in the institution.

I can not say that I was entirely sane in what I did. Perhaps things could have been arranged more sensibly. But I was under a terrific mental strain, and the thought did not occur to me. I have nothing to be sorry for now.

My plan was made. It was suddenly in my mind when Joe Big entered my room in the hospital. The Indian acted as one chemical does on another. The scheme was crystallized on the moment of contact.

Together we two boarded a taxi and rushed downtown. One store only did I

visit—one of those giant emporiums whose sales rooms hold the contents of the world on their shelves. There I got my supplies.

Four gas masks I bought—the new kind that are really meant to filter smoke out of the air and permit the wearer to talk and hear with comfort; a collapsible canoe and two hunting rifles. Other things, too.

Then on again by taxi to Roosevelt Field, where the Mallard Aircraft Company officials suddenly found a slightly crazed man and a somber Indian demanding immediate delivery of one of their famous cabin planes that seats six people and has wheels recessed in the floats so that the machine can settle on both land and water.

Twenty minutes did it take for the purchase, for fueling and all other preparations; and then Joe Big and I grimly hopped off for the south.

IT WAS early afternoon when we left, and by dark the Mallard was swooping down upon the airfield of some small town in Virginia whose name I never troubled to remember. We had burned our gasoline almost to the last gallon.

Here I found trouble and delay. Although there was a landing-field, no airplane gas was available, and Joe Big and I stayed overnight in a small hotel while an enterprising garage man undertook to bring a supply in five-gallon cans from the nearest large city.

Dawn found us on the field, but the garage man did not show up. Hours passed, and still he did not come. The sun was high in the sky when his service truck rattled up loaded with the cans and a profusely apologetic mechanic who explained that an accident had delayed him.

In my mind I cursed the man, yet I found him useful, for I entrusted to him

the sending of a telegram to an old war-time friend of mine, Dicky Sharp, at the naval base at Colon, which guards the entrance to the Panama Canal.

And then we hopped off again, and once more were winging our way southward.

Within an hour's flight Joe Big noticed the first effects of the mushroom invasion from the south. He touched my shoulder and pointed downward through the triple glass.

"People go north," he said. "Look at roads."

I brought my gaze down and marvelled at the sight. Tiny ants marched along broad tracks cut straight through fields which adjoined a highway. The ribbon of concrete itself was completely hidden from sight by a treble stream of cars which, hub to hub, and fender rubbing fender, rolled northward like an endless glistening snake. Outside the marching pedestrians was another broad lane of traffic that showed brown against the fresh green of the fields.

Cattle had cut that wide brown rut. Cattle and horse-drawn wagons loaded with the pitiful salvage of humble homes were slowly crawling northward.

I had never seen anything like it before. The world has never seen anything like it. For this was the movement of a people. This was the migration of five million souls; an ordered evacuation of the United States to an enemy who could not be fought.

In spots I saw little companies of men in olive drab toiling at the tearing-down of barriers, at the filling-in or bridging of water courses. They were the soldiers who could not be used for fighting, but could help in the evacuation, could see that the migrating millions moved with the precision of a machine.

Then we passed over the great artery of traffic and saw it no more.

It was near Jacksonville, I think, that the masses of puffballs first became apparent from the air. It had been a very damp spring, and so had provided plenty of moisture for them. We were two thousand feet up, and could see below us the fields strangely patched in brown and white. Along creek beds it seemed almost as if great snowdrifts had formed. And in other places where the mushrooms had ripened more evenly we could see a brown fog of spores drifting in the wind.

Further and further south we drove, now over inland Florida, and we swooped low over beautiful Orlando to see the desolation wrought by the puffballs among its buildings.

Great cracks zigzagged down the brick walls of school and college buildings. In them puffballs had found root, and, somehow, were finding nourishment. Perhaps we passed just at the right moment, or maybe it was the vibration of the motor that shook walls already thrust out far beyond the point of balance. But we saw no less than two whole brick façades dissolve into dust and broken rubble as I shot over them, only a hundred feet from the ground.

But it was dangerous to fly through the death-tainted air, and so we climbed again. Yet we had not yet passed over the city, when Joe Big once more touched my arm.

"Dead people there——" His brown hand pointed.

I saw a sight of horror. There were bodies laid side by side in a street, at least a hundred of them. Perhaps they had been gathered by some heroic health servants who had finally either fled or been stricken down themselves.

Men and women lay there—children, too—all horribly prone on their stomachs,

for projecting from behind the skull of each of them—the point where the cerebellum is cradled on the spine—was a slender yellow rod. It was a spike, four feet long, that ended in a club as big as my fist. And from these blew gray streamers of taint—the ripened spores of the caterpillar death.

All this my eye had taken in in a fraction of a second. And then I noticed something which made my stomach rise. Around the bodies sat a long oval of gorged and drowsy birds; large brown yellow-taloned buzzards—the scavengers of Florida.

I gave the engine all the gas I could and we shot up and away from the sight. Up and up we climbed until the needle of the altimeter showed 10,000 feet. The Mallard, I had been told, had a ceiling of 15,000 feet, and I continued climbing slowly to that height, for I had a use for it.

Florida was a broad belt of green mottled with white below us. The white was sand—and also puffballs. On either side I could see water; the Atlantic to my left and the Mexican gulf far to my right.

Distantly the tall towers of West Palm Beach came into sight, and beyond them the buildings of Miami. I held to my course, for I knew that the island of horror was almost in the center of the Everglades, and almost due west of Miami.

Joe Big was staring excitedly onto the relief map of the Everglades, as it unrolled below us. Now and again he called out the Seminole name for some familiar piece of prairie or lagoon, and then he cried: "Ten mile more now—see—there is the island."

I looked ahead and nodded. Some one had left uncovered one of the big mirrors on Professor Houlton's moon-ray apparatus. The reflector was a miniature sun. Again I gave the motor the gun and

swooped up as far as I could. I circled so that the 'plane was in the setting sun to the eye of any chance observer on the island, and then cut off the spark.

Slowly, slowly the Mallard settled while it glided ever nearer to our objective. I could distinguish the tall cypress trees on one side of the island, the blackened wreckage of the mushroom sheds on the sand beyond, while the silent 'plane swooped downward.

Half a mile from the island, and screened from it by a clump of trees on firm ground, I saw a three hundred yard long lagoon. It was made to order for me. I swung the 'plane very slightly and we splashed lightly onto the water.

11

ALL my attention had been concentrated on the landing, but now I glanced outside the cabin window and marvelled at the strangeness of the landscape.

Immediately before us was a little island behind whose trees the Mallard was sheltered from sight. Now I saw that there were many dead trees on the islet, and many sagging until their bare branches swept the sand. For they bore huge and cumbersome fruit.

Gigantic puffballs had gained footing in a place of decay on the stems and were weighting them down. The actual puffball, I remembered, was but the fruit of the mushroom. I knew that the interior of the trees must be a mass of mycelium.

Many of the puffballs too were ripe. We saw one of them, but fifty yards away, explode with a report like that of somebody clapping his hands. The outer casing split like inch-thick chamoic leather and brown smoke gushed out and spread. I thought of the underwater ink-screen of the cuttlefish. Brown, smoking fuzz, like loosely woven felt, was exposed in the

gaping puffball when the wind had moved the first gush of spores.

Joe Big winced at the sight, and then he and I started to strip off our clothes while still within the almost air-tight cabin.

Every stitch did we take off, and then we plastered our bodies liberally with vaseline, as if we were long-distance swimmers.

But I was taking no chances with the fungi, and I meant to close even the pores of our skins lest one of the caterpillar death spores should lodge in a trifling scratch or a mosquito bite.

Then we clothed ourselves again, slipped the gas masks over our heads and opened the cabin door. It took time to assemble the canvas boat, and the brief dusk was already setting in when we started off to the island of horror.

Strange and grotesque we must have looked in our snouted headgear, and strange and grotesque was the country we traversed. Once during the trip Joe Big lifted his hand as a signal. An alligator at least fifteen feet long was swimming ahead of us in the channel we were following. We waited until the beast had branched off, for our canvas canoe was not strong enough to risk contact with the creature's thrashing tail.

Another time both Joe Big and I crouched low in the bottom of the boat and paddled with our hands because there was no room to wield the paddles. Overhanging our route were half a dozen brown and bulbous mushrooms which might explode at a touch. And we were not anxious to put our gas masks to extreme test at once.

Dimly, through the trees, I saw a light shining. It was from the house on the island. I pointed it out to Joe Big, but the Indian did not even stop paddling. Probably he had seen it long minutes before I

did. Then sand grated under the canvas bottom. We had arrived. We were on the side of the island nearest the house, but some distance from the landing-stage.

Cautiously we disembarked and took out our rifles. Joe Big's muffled voice was near my ear. "Stay here," he said. "I go see that road clear." He faded away like a dark ghost among the bearded cypresses.

I waited. Time dragged. Then I jumped to my feet. There had been a rifle shot and a gurgling scream of horror that broke off sharply at its peak. For several seconds there was a silence as heavy as the darkness under the trees, and then a faint splashing.

I was peering blindly into the dark behind me, thinking that Joe Big must have fallen prey to an alligator, when I felt his hand on my arm.

"Bad luck," he said. "Yellow man keep watch. He see me and shoot. I kill him with knife. Come to house quick."

Silently we stole toward the light. And then I crashed against a tree. The light had gone out. We heard a gabble of voices on the twisting path to the landing-stage, and ducked behind the shelter of a bush. A bobbing lantern appeared. Four men, clad in gas masks and tightly fitting suits of gayly flowered oilcloth ran past us. Each man had a rifle.

"Up to the house," I cried, and jumped into the path.

Swiftly we stole up the track and then the black shadow of the house loomed before us. Joe Big pulled me to one side.

"Me—I lead," he grunted. "We go through window in my old room."

We crouched behind other bushes, for a man carrying an electric torch had stepped out of the patio, and was coming down toward us and the landing-stage, his torch swinging wide arcs of light as he moved.

Silently we crawled through another screen of bushes, and then Joe Big lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"Yellow devil!" he snarled.

I knocked up the barrel before he could fire.

"First we must find Polly and her father," I cautioned.

Then, while I still clutched the Indian's sleeve, I did a bit of rapid calculation. Tsu Liang had been master of ten servants when I was last on the island. But I had killed his big house boy, and Tom Houlton another. Now Joe Big had killed one, and four had left the house, as well as Tsu Liang. There could be no more than three Chinese in the place. I explained this to Joe Big, and we turned into the patio to try the living-room door.

But as I fumbled for the latch I found nothing but smooth steel. The door had been changed. I felt all over it, and found not a single projecting point. Somehow in my over-anxiety I must have grown careless, for my rifle butt knocked against the portal.

At once a sharp voice challenged in Chinese from the other side. There was a doorkeeper. Probably he alone could open the door. Again the voice asked a question. We could not get in. But no, there was a chance—a slim one.

"Don't be silly," I drawled in affected tones as near those of Tsu Liang as I could make them. "The idiot was frightened by a bally alligator."

THE trick worked. I heard the click of tumblers, and the drawing of bolts. A door squeaked open, but it was not the one I touched. It was another beyond it. Then again the sounds were repeated. A crack of light now gleamed by the jamb.

Practically in one motion I put the flat of my foot against the slowly opening

door, thrust hard and plunged forward with the butt of my rifle. Something soft that groaned stopped it.

Joe Big and I were inside the house. At our feet lay a middle-aged Chinese whose hands were clasped to his stomach while he writhed in agony. There was no one else in the big room.

"Quick," I cried to Joe Big. "Tie him up and gag him. I'll bar the doors. This place is a fortress."

My glance around the room had shown me great changes. Not only was there a double door of heavy teak and steel through which we had passed, but the windows, too, were similarly shuttered. Red rubber showed around the edges, and evidently the fastenings were air-tight.

I locked and barred both doors and then turned to Joe Big. The Indian was staring at a still figure on the floor. A knife in his hand dripped blood.

"Better they all die," he muttered in answer to my exclamation, and stooped to wipe the blade on the dead man's shirt.

Joe Big was right. I suppressed my squeamishness. The nest of world-poisoners must be wiped out.

The Indian had taken off his shoes and was disappearing soundlessly down a passage. I followed him as quietly as I could and saw him stooping in front of a door. Sounds of frying came from the other side. It was the kitchen door.

I saw the Indian's hand on the knob. Slowly the door opened, and then a squeal like that of an enraged pig sounded in the passage.

The red man flung the door wide open and jumped into the room. I heard a high gibber of Cantonese, and a meat cleaver hissed by my head and struck the door opposite. Somebody yelled in the room and the door burst open. A Chinese

holding a gas pistol in one hand and a knife in the other bounded out at me.

My rifle barked from waist level and I saw him collapse like a punctured balloon, even while he was in midair. Blood splattered the eye-glasses of my mask as he struck me. But it was Chinese blood. The man was already dead.

"Joe Big," I yelled, and the Indian was at my side. Again he was wiping his knife, this time on a cook's white apron.

We had won the house. But the shot must have alarmed Tsu Liang and his party. We must make sure that they could not get in.

Joe Big's gas helmet was torn on one side. Blood was staining the ripped edges.

"Cook hit me," he said stolidly in answer to my question. "Cut my ear off." He did not even trouble to take off the gas mask.

We heard a door being pounded and shaken. Was it Tsu Liang already returned? No, I heard a voice. It was Polly's voice.

"Help! Help!" it cried.

"Coming!" I shouted, and raced down the passage. I found the door locked, and hurled myself against it. Woodwork splintered and snapped. And then I had Polly Houlton in my arms.

Viciously she kicked at my shins and beat my shoulders.

At first I did not understand it, and then I laughed. It was the gas helmet. I tore off the useless thing, and Polly staggered. She almost fainted, and I had to support her.

"Is it really you, Greg?" she whispered. "Tsu Liang said you had been killed."

"Too tough to kill," I boasted happily, and then cried out, "But aren't you glad to see me?"

For Polly Houlton was crying. "Y-yes,

Greg," she sobbed. "I'm crying for happiness."

Women are strange creatures. Other men have said that before.

Professor Houlton was standing by a window whose metal shutters were ajar.

"I'm glad to see you, boy," he said wanly. "But I heard some men go past my window just now. Look to the back door."

I loosed my hold on Polly.

"Show me the way," I said, and she dashed before me, continuing down the passage and turning an angle.

A double door under an electric light was slowly opening. Evidently the bolts could be manipulated from the outside. I swept the girl behind the corner and knelt down in the passage with my rifle to my shoulder.

A sheen of gun metal appeared in the crack. It was a rifle barrel gradually being thrust in. Next came an oilcloth-covered arm and then a head wearing a gas mask.

Calmly I fired and saw a black spot appear where the intruder's forehead would be. The man slumped down like a sack of flour between the double door and the frame. Somebody started to pull him back by the legs, only to be stopped by a harsh order in Cantonese.

There was silence for a full minute, and I had an intuition of what might happen.

"Run," I whispered to Polly. "Fetch my gas mask."

Tsu Liang's voice rose vibrant with anger. "I say there," he called. "Who is shooting at us?"

I made no reply and heard him swearing to himself.

"Professor Houlton," he said savagely, "if it's you that's behind the door, I tell you now that I shall kill you, and give that brat of yours to my men, if you don't

let me in at once. I will use dynamite to blow in the doors and let the spores in. There are enough of them coming through this part-open door now."

Still I made no reply, and Polly Houlton returned with the gas mask which I slipped on.

"Look in the living-room, dear," I whispered. "You'll find two more masks that I brought for you and your father, and try to find another one somewhere in the house for Joe Big. His is spoiled. Where is he, anyway?"

"He's watching by the front door," said Polly, and once more ran away.

I SPRAWLED on the floor of the corridor. My rifle sights were on a black speck that had appeared low over the body of the dead Chinese. The speck turned into the barrel of a pistol and a hand became visible behind it.

Fire streamed from the pistol and gelatine gas bullets blotched the wall waist-high behind me with poison gas. Deliberately I squeezed the trigger, and the hand twitched away as I heard a yell of pain from Tsu Liang. I grinned my satisfaction as I charged noiselessly at the door, snatched in the body on the threshold and slammed the steel portal to.

There was a bar which could be lowered, and I breathed my thankfulness when I had wrenched it down.

Tsu Liang was a madman. I could hear him raving outside. He was shouting orders in English to his men to get dynamite.

The gas mask I wore was not designed to filter out the poison vapor of Tsu Liang's pistol. Yet none of the fragile bullets had hit me, and I was twenty feet from the walls where the liquid had splashed. For a few moments while I leaned against the door I felt weak and

dizzy, but I soon found myself alert once more.

Professor Houlton and Polly, both wearing masks, joined me. Joe Big was still watching the front door, they told me.

With my ear pressed against the steel barrier before me I could faintly distinguish furtive movements on the other side. They worried me. Yet I could not open the door and shoot without making so much noise that I would warn the Chinese. I would only expose myself to their fire.

Outside there rose a frenzied call.

"Pro-o-fessor Houlton!"

The tall man beside me spoke.

"Yes."

"Professor," Tsu Liang's voice chattered. "My wrist is smashed and bleeding. You must have some mercy in you. Surely you can't keep me outside here, exposed to the spores, in my condition."

Houlton laughed shortly.

"What mercy have you shown to the thousands that are dead?" he demanded.

"But to a brother scientist," Tsu Liang pleaded.

"Scoundrel," roared Professor Houlton, "you are no scientist. You have picked my brains to bring ruin upon my country. Besides," he added, "it is a mathematical certainty that some of the Cordyceps spores have already found lodgment in your wound."

Silence followed, and then three shots. They sounded like a signal to me and I cried, "Back—back behind the corner of the passage."

We ran back, and no sooner had we done so than we were knocked off our feet by a terrific blast of air. Fragments of the steel door buried themselves in the wall near us. It had been blown in. And not only the back door, for another explosion followed an instant later. I could

hear Joe Big shouting a strange ululating chant as his rifle fired shot after shot.

There was another noise too, a noise as of rushing wind—a rising drone that grew to the familiar roar of airplane engines—many engines.

I jumped around the corner, my rifle flaming lead at two startled Chinese who craned their masked heads skyward instead of attacking through the shattered masonry that had held the door.

One of them clutched his chest and fell. The other screamed and ran away. I followed to the smoking pit by the broken stone and caught him with another shot; for the night had become brighter than day. Half a dozen blinding flares drifted slowly to earth on tiny parachutes.

"What—what is it?" faltered Professor Houlton.

"Help," I said briefly and ran out into the light.

Tsu Liang was not to be seen on my side of the house. Nor was any other live Chinese. I walked around to the other side. Nobody was in sight there either. Cautiously I approached the patio and peered in. It was empty.

"Joe Big," I called. "Joe Big!"

Polly Houlton came out of the black shadows, picking her way daintily through the rubble that strewed the tiles.

"He is not in the front room," she said. "There is some blood where he was lying, but Joe is gone. There is a dead Chinese by the door, too."

"Is it Doctor Tsu Liang?" I cried.

"No, just one of his men."

12

ONE ship was still circling over the brightly illuminated island. The others had gone over, and I could see their landing-lights switched on as they settled on the water.

"Tell me, Greg," asked Polly, "what are all these airships?"

I laughed happily and put my arm around her shoulder. Gas masks are a nuisance, I then decided.

"They're naval boats from Colon where the base is to guard the Panama Canal," I said. "I wired to Dicky Sharp, a war-time friend of mine at the naval air establishment, and told him what was going on here. I said that I was coming down to rescue you and wipe the place clean. He came and brought some friends with him—it's only six hours' flight away—and thank God that he did come."

One of the seaplanes was taxiing forward in the more or less open water by the landing-stage. It advanced slowly until its floats touched sand. I saw a man climb out of the cockpit and splash into knee-deep water.

With my hands raised in the air, I ran to meet him.

"Dicky Sharp," I cried, "is that you?" For like myself he was wearing a gas mask that concealed his face.

"Greg Morris!" he exclaimed and advanced with outstretched hand.

A rifle cracked from some bushes on the left and I felt a blow on my foot. The leather heel of the left shoe had been neatly torn off. A yell of fear and a deep shout of triumph followed the shot, and the bushes waved agitatedly. Out of them burst Tsu Liang. He wheeled and threw his rifle at Joe Big, who followed him laboriously through the tangle, and then the Chinese raced toward us, his free hand gripping his shattered wrist.

"Help," he cried. "I surrender, prisoner of war——"

But Joe Big was faster than he. In gigantic bounds the Indian overhauled the Chinese. Brown fingers stretched out,

caught the yellow man's gas mask and tore it off his head.

Dicky Sharp had brought out a pistol and was training it on Joe Big.

"Don't do it," I snapped. "Shoot the other one if you must. He is the man who spread the caterpillar death."

The Chinese dodged toward us through the long grass and around a dead tree on which a huge brown puffball hung. I heard him scream again and trip over something. His elbow struck the puffball and it exploded into brown dust which veiled to us what was happening.

Joe Big, too, stopped at the edge of the cloud and peered intently into it. From its center there came a horrible choking sound and then another ghastly scream. There were sounds as of a struggle; of vicious jaws snapping again and again. And then there was silence. Something long and low and slimy scuttered out of the cloud toward the water. It hissed like a land torpedo through the tall grass and splashed when it reached water. Then it was gone.

"My God!" gasped Dicky Sharp. "It's the grandfather of all alligators. It's twenty feet long!"

Slowly the brown fog lifted. The aviator in the 'plane that roared above us dropped more flares and we saw that the place where we had last seen Tsu Liang was bare. There was the puffball still smoking its brown spores. But nowhere was there a trace of the Chinese scientist.

Joe Big was standing, his head in its new gas mask, sunk upon his chest. Suddenly he swept up an arm and tore the protecting envelope from his head.

"Joe!" I gasped. "Are you crazy? Put that on again quick."

"I die," said the Indian. "Spirit of my people kill yellow devil. I die now."

Slowly he began to intone the ululating chant I had heard before, and then a

horribly gurgling cough gagged him. Blood gushed from Joe Big's mouth and nose, and though I caught him before he fell, I sensed that he was dead. A bullet-hole in his chest showed why.

SILENTLY I folded his arms and wiped the blood off his mouth. I could not speak—not even to Dicky Sharp or to Polly Houlton, who stood beside him now. Presently we were joined by the professor, and Dicky started to flash a message with his electric torch to one of the seaplanes.

Collapsible boats brought more flyers to the shore of the ghastly island, and Dicky Sharp clicked to attention as a stocky man came up, whose leather coat and gas mask concealed all signs of rank.

"Commander Bob Bradley," he introduced him. "He is in charge of the squadron."

"And so this is where the terrible pest was manufactured," said the stocky officer heavily. "You know that it threatens to lay waste the whole of the North American continent? No saying even then where it will stop. It may cover the world."

Professor Houlton snorted in his gas mask.

"Nonsense," he said belligerently. "Smash those mirrors on that framework there so that the lunar rays are no longer concentrated on the original culture beds and I'll guarantee that with the exception of the few odd ones there will not be a single accelerated puffball or Cordyceps in the land within a month."

"What!" The exclamation burst from several lips.

"Certainly," said the professor warmly. "I tried to do it myself immediately after I was captured, but that Chinese fiend caught me at it and had me whipped until I could not stand. Me—Professor

Howard Houlton. And ever since, my daughter and I have been under guard while she nursed me back to health."

"But how is that, Professor?" I cried. "What effect do these rays have now?"

"I don't know how familiar you are with my subject," said the professor kindly. "But I know by experiment that the rays and the chemicals with which the breeding-beds are impregnated give an accelerated development to the fungi bred there for about ten generations in the case of puffballs. I have not experimented with the Cordyceps, but since they have not been cultured long I should say that there would be only five or six generations of acceleration and virulence strong enough to give them power to attack mammals.

"Now you may say that an accelerated puffball grows, ripens and sends out its spores in the maximum space of forty-eight hours. The spores may float for seconds or for hours according to atmospheric conditions. Let us put the maximum at twenty-four hours. In that time they may travel a foot or many miles, depending on the wind. The maximum would be about fifty miles.

"Thus you see the longest generation would be three days and the maximum rate of travel fifty miles.

"In thirty days the furthest puffball spores will be five hundred miles from this point in the Everglades, and then they lose their acceleration and become the spores of ordinary puffballs."

"But Tsu Liang planned to lay waste the whole of the United States with these spores," I ventured to suggest.

"Quite so," agreed the professor. "He could have done so if he'd been a man of courage. He could have collected newly accelerated spores from the original culture beds, spores of the puffballs and also of the Cordyceps from the bodies of the poor Indians whom he has lying there.

"He could have released them in New York, in Detroit, in Chicago, along the Pacific Coast, and he could have wiped out the United States; for they would have had an active radius of four hundred and fifty miles from each point of release.

"But he was a craven. I heard him gloat and boast about his cleverness in imprisoning the poor Indians who had come here to help him when they saw the place was on fire more than a month ago. He thought that he was clever because he inoculated them with the spores of the Cordyceps—the caterpillar death fungus.

"But he burned his own bridges behind him, for when he wanted to leave the Everglades to spread his poison, he discovered that he could not find his way out, and he had killed the only men who could guide him. He was imprisoned himself and he was afraid to leave because he feared that he would be lost in the swamp."

Commander Bradley gave a brisk order, and a group of men advanced upon Professor Houlton's lunar ray projector.

As for me—Polly and I went away from there, into the old house where we were out of sight of our rescuers.

And here again I cursed all gas masks and the necessity for wearing them.

