

# Weird Tales

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# The FLYING DEATH

BY  
B. WALLIS.

"He expected to see some gigantic offensive that would disarm them both."

"**S**AY, what was that, Bill?" exclaimed the taller and thinner of the two men staring at the thick bush that for some way lined each side of the dusty lane.

"Hanged if I know, Joe—thunderbolt, maybe," replied his companion, eyeing blankly the dense scrub.

"Thunderbolt! But there ain't no clouds," objected Joe, turning his gaze to the evening sky. "Least nothing to speak of," he amended his assertion as he solemnly surveyed a few dwindling remnants of what an hour ago had been a mass of gray vapor that all day had veiled the glare and tempered the scorching rays of a July sun.

Though there had been a promise of rain in the low-lying shroud, yet

toward evening it had thinned and rapidly dispersed, so that shortly only a few wisps flushed with the setting sun were left. Most certainly the mighty Thor stored no shaft of his in such flimsy housing. Yet something—they had no idea what—from out the nowhere had suddenly plunged through the bush with a frightful crash. Close beside them, apparently not a dozen paces from the lane, it had entered the fringing wood with terrific force and its short transit from the topmost boughs to the ground was but a rending smash of splintered wood punctuated by the dull impact that wound up its volcanic career.

"Well, if it ain't a thunderbolt, what is it?" queried Bill. "It come

from way up, anyway, whatever it is," he added with conviction.

"How about a flying-machine, then?" observed his friend hopefully.

"This wasn't all that size," counted Bill, still slightly nettled by the summary rejection of his thunderbolt. "But say! it might be a guy—a birdman—dropped out of his machine. Gee! maybe come down miles and miles! Gosh!" and he ceased as the profundity of that presumed descent gripped him.

"Flying-men don't fall out—they're strapped in, ain't they?" said Joe diffidently, his temperamental skepticism more than a little shaken by the nerve-racking phenomenon. "But—Lord! if it is a guy come down, he'll be a sight!" he added in an awestruck mutter.

The two men stared at each other in sudden fear. They realized that the terrible final thud had been sickeningly suggestive of something limp, inert, and compressible; imagination completed the picture and speculation abruptly ceased.

"Say, Bill!" said the tall man hoarsely. "We got to go in there." He nodded toward the fringing bush.

"Yep, I guess so; I ain't stuck on it, though," replied Bill with a catch in his voice. "Come on!" he added with querulous impatience.

Now that the matter had assumed such a significant aspect, their course, distasteful though it might be, was quite clear. And it augurs well for the future of our race that two very ordinary individuals such as these, whose lives from boyhood had been devoted to a pursuit of the slippery dollar rolling between the purchase and disposal of second-hand furniture and personal effects, should so instantly and simply obey the dictates of our common humanity. Naturally their vocation carried them far afield, and to this fact—and a lately deceased farmer—they owed their introduction to the little fishing-village of Lytham, Maine, and the after-

supper stroll that had been interrupted so rudely.

At once the two men entered the scrub, and for a little they cast about like a couple of sedate retrievers in search of their objective. Then they came upon it, resting in a little open space tunneled by the shattering of stems and the stripping of limbs from a stouter and taller growth that chanced here to rear a spearlike crest as though to mark the horror at its base.

"My God, Joe! What's this? Reckon he's dead—don't you?" exclaimed Bill in an awed whisper.

"Yep, it's awful! I ain't going no closer," said Joe hastily, then paused and admitted reluctantly, "though I guess we should make certain."

**A**SSUREDLY death had come in no gracious mood to the poor broken thing they gazed upon. For the man's body was smashed and twisted most horribly and lay in a huddled heap amid the splintered boughs of the tall tree and the crushed shrubbery. Limbs were hinged strangely and repulsively at places where joints are normally absent, and the face was merely a mass of shapeless pulp through which the jagged end of a shattered bough projected. Apart from total disintegration it was hard to conceive of a human frame more completely devastated; it was only too visibly obvious that every bone in the dead man's body was broken and the flesh either gashed, or stripped, or perforated in a score of places.

For a moment the two men stood staring in awed and commiserating silence at the terrible thing, and no further word was uttered concerning a closer investigation. Then the taller man shivered a little and said harshly, "Say, we'd better beat it back and tell the folks in the village."

And at once, stepping softly as though they would conceal their

presence from something feared. they turned and made their way back to the dusty road.

"Say, Bill, this poor guy now," said Joe as they hastened on their mission; "there ain't no doubt but he dropped out of a flying-machine, so high up we never heard it, but it's queer—he's dressed all wrong. It ain't the front of a birdman—or even a passenger—no coat, no mitts or helmet, not even goggles, and him all that way up!"

"That's so," said his companion slowly. "And ain't these flyers strapped in their seats, case of accidents?"

"Sure!" confirmed Joe with the easy assurance that another's ignorance often begets. "Though maybe this guy's straps went back on him, or—by Jiminy!—now I wonder!"

"Wonder what?" queried his companion briefly, the unwonted pace having told on him.

"Well—I dunno. But maybe this guy done it himself—jumped out, went bugs or something!" replied Joe hesitatingly.

"Meanin' suicide? I never heard of a birdman taken that way—they being sure to smash some day," said Bill, voicing the pessimistic popular conception of the fate awaiting such intrepid adventurers.

"But Lord, what a nerve! if he done it—miles and miles of dropping through nothing!" mused Joe, loth to relinquish the horrific pictured descent.

"What would he strip his working-rags for, anyway? There ain't no sense to it," objected his companion with an innate love of debate.

"I dunno—it's a mystery," avowed Joe frankly.

And that was the verdict accorded the occurrence by a coroner's jury and the expert investigators who at once were engaged to elucidate the strange and tragic enigma. For immediately the poor, shattered thing had been identified as one James

Symington, a youth in his early twenties, and son of a wealthy shoe manufacturer—a young man of exemplary habit and pleasing personality; quiet, unassuming, and devoted to his parents, his business, and the hobby of photography: in short, a level-headed, estimable young American, and certainly the last one his friends would consider to be afflicted with the insanity of self-destruction—though a most cursory survey of the known facts banished effectually the incipient rumor that possibly the discoverers had thoughtlessly originated.

It appeared that the boy had never ascended a foot save by the aid of his legs or an elevator, and had a natural antipathy to aeronautics. Moreover, on the morning of the tragedy he had left his home for a few days' vacation, and had taken his car and camera out for a ramble along the picturesque Maine coastline, with no particular objective in view but merely to wander as fancy dictated. And the car was found ten miles from the fatal spot, overturned in a ditch bordering a lonely stretch of by-road that there for a space closely parallels the cliffs which for many miles tower a hundred feet or more above the surf-lashed sands.

By what possible means had the victim been transferred from his car, conveyed ten miles, ascended to an unguessable height and there been launched in that terrible descent? It was all inconceivable, both in the mode of its execution and in its object. One might as well endeavor to formulate a plausible explanation of the sudden materialization of a prehistoric monster in the trim flowerbeds of a city park! And each detail as it was brought to light but further meshed the affair in a net of mystery.

The little clock in the overturned car had stopped at 6 p. m., and this might reasonably be taken to indicate the moment of capsizing, and

James Symington's translation; but what had at that moment happened? If for some incomprehensible motive the youth had been taken captive and transferred to a flying-machine, where had it alighted, and how arisen? Not a sign of such a happening was visible amid the fields of tall grass ripe for mowing, that lay on the landward side, while to the seaward lay a narrow strip of broken, boulder-strewn waste bounded by a sheer hundred-foot drop; the road itself was much too narrow to accommodate the smallest plane man has ever flown in. Yet by what other means had been effected that rapid migration? For less than half an hour later his body had ended its terrible flight—the taller of the two discoverers, with an eye to future questioning, had glanced at his watch as he emerged from the shrubbery.

Two planes had indeed some hours earlier passed over the neighborhood and been noted by several persons, but both had flown high over the water and quickly vanished into the cloud-weighted horizon; and on inquiry they proved to be a couple of military "busses" used by instructors and their pupils. So there lay not a single shred of tangible evidence to connect the tragedy with the only possible means of its consummation, with an assailant of any nature whatsoever.

The wrecked car was itself inexplicable, the road affording no reasonable excuse for an accident, or any evidence of its nature. The youth's camera was discovered about fifty feet distant, immersed in the scummy seepage that lay in festering pools over the ditch bottom. And though the tracks were barely decipherable because of a stiff breeze that had stirred the fine dust and almost smoothed the indentations, yet there was sufficient evidence to hazard the presumption that the car had been stopped and the owner had

alighted and wandered slowly ahead and stood a little while, probably taking pictures of the lonely scenery. Then, more uncertainly, he had returned rapidly, and midway had broken into a run. Ten feet from the car his hat was discovered, in the ditch also; there the steps had ceased, at least no trace of them remained.

From all evidence of the wrecked engine the car had been standing motionless at the moment of its capsizing, and no trace of deep-gashed ruts of swerving wheels was visible. It had simply capsized as though a huge lever had been applied to its side and heaved it over.

There all logical deductions and reasonable surmises ceased; other tracks were obviously more recent and probably left by the wondering farm-hands who early the next morning had passed that way. All that was certain was a car overturned and an owner who had vanished as though snatched aloft by the fabled jinn.

But the medical profession had further and equally astounding testimony to offer. The inquest revealed the startling fact that almost certainly the poor boy had died before that frightful landing, and been done to death in a most abominable manner. The doctors stated that by some strange means every drop of blood had been extracted from the veins and what they examined was but an arid shell as devoid of moisture as a dry sponge. No known wound would account for such complete extravasation; for normally there always remained a residue imprisoned in a network of the lesser conduits by the rapid caving in of the main channels. But this shattered thing was absolutely devoid of the least drop of its life's fluid.

Then more abstrusely the medical evidence spoke of some small areas of skin and tissue still intact about the throat, face and hands; areas

that exhibited a most peculiar condition, being pitted with innumerable minute excrescences which under microscopical examination were found to be of craterlike construction whose vents were in reality but pores greatly distended and ruptured so badly beneath the surface that in their bursting they had lacerated the mesh of tiny veins about them so completely that to the naked eye the tissues appeared merely as a puffed, disorganized mass of macerated pulp. Whether this condition was the result of immense pressures experienced in such a stupendous fall was a matter they lacked the data to affirm or deny, but save for this purely speculative supposition they had no other solution to offer—a pronouncement quite in accord with the cherished traditions of scientific reserve and caution.

As usual, public imagination seized on the sensational, and promptly garbled, misquoted, and maltreated the hesitant speculation, and spoke knowingly of strains and stresses, and vascular tissue, and felt exalted by their perspicacity, and justified in spoiling reams of good paper informing weary editors of absurd and weird conclusions the writers had evolved to account for an impossible, objectless translation to an invisible, untraceable flying-machine.

And there the matter rested; money and brains had collaborated and utterly failed to unearth a single fact upon which to base any rational theory of mode or motive of the killing of James Symington; who being but one man among many millions, each with his bread to earn and his niche to fill in a busy world, it is not surprizing that the millions shortly shelved the tragedy in the dim subconscious vaults where side by side lie every shred of emotion, every fact, everything felt, seen, or heard in a lifetime, be it junk or treasure.

A MONTH later the body of one Harriet Conroy was discovered, face down, on the lonely sands of Ladner Bay, barely three miles distant from the spot where poor Symington's car had capsized.

Again the public thrilled with horror as it learned the strange and gruesome facts connected with the grim tragedy; and with the odd, illogical intuition of the mass mind in moments of high emotion immediately the two fatalities were associated, though save in one particular there lay no resemblance between the manner of the victims' slaying.

Harriet Conroy, only daughter of a retired sea captain, a widower with a modest competence, was school mistress in her home village of Shaldon. Just turned twenty, healthy, cheerful and level-headed, she was liked and respected by all in the little community. The fact of that solitary stroll to Ladner sands was due to no morbid love of lonely self-commune, but merely the result of a persistent headache. For on that tragic day, after tea with her father, she had remarked that probably a brisk walk along the cliffs to the sands would be better than any medicine; and mentioning that on her return she would likely spend a few minutes at a neighbor's, with a smile of affectionate reassurance to her parent she had gone on her way.

That was the last time her father ever watched the trim figure unlatch the little garden gate. At dusk she had not returned, nor an hour later, when, mindful of her words, the lonely old man had smiled and grumbled fondly, "These women! and their minutes—it seems but yesterday she was snug in bed and hours sleeping by this time." Then, thinking a little sadly that a day might come when another home would claim her, he slipped from reverie to slumber; and awoke to find the clock hands were nearly laid together and the house as lonely as ever. Then, with a sudden

black fear clutching at his heart, the lost fire of his seafaring youth returned to him, and hatless he ran into the darkness, and pounded fiercely at the doors of sleeping neighbors.

Shortly two friends and the distracted man set off with lanterns the way she had taken—and found her, face downward, cold and dead, in the soft, dry sand above high water. With dreading touch they sought for evidence of foul murder, but failed to discover wound or mark of evil clutch upon her. Then by the yellow light of a lantern they searched the vicinity for trace of assailant; for it was evident there had been a struggle, or rather a defense against something that had overtaken her.

The crooked, rigid fingers, the out-thrust arms, and the deep depression in which the victim lay spoke eloquently and horribly of the short, desperate struggle she had waged to protect herself against a merciless antagonist who had leaped and hurled her headlong. While the frenzied old man bent over his darling, moaning and calling piteously to the cold, unhearing ears, his two companions tramped the vicinity and examined closely the soft, shifting sand. Though so loose that the imprint of their steps was at once half filled and blurred beyond identification, nevertheless it was plain enough that the poor girl had come from the steep descent in the ravine at the head of the bay and strolled toward the firm, smooth floor left by the receding tide. Half-way to it she had halted, then apparently returned a few paces, and there suddenly turned and run for the line of great boulders that strewed the foot of the sheer cliff, the nearest of the two giant black arms enclosing her.

This absurd turning and haste was so apparent that it was obvious something had intercepted her return and she had madly raced for the only shelter at hand. But not a third of the distance had been covered when a most astounding thing had happened,

for the tracks vanished! Not a trace of her step was visible in the space of at least a dozen feet that lay between the last deep slurred indentation and the dead girl.

But for these two searchers the strange fact would have escaped notice, for at dawn the feet of many shocked friends had quite obliterated every trace of her movements. At the inquest the affair was sworn to by the discoverers, but excited little comment, for other even stranger matters occupied the attention of the astounded and baffled inquiry; yet to the two witnesses that void space, the visible evidence of a thing unknown and inconceivable, was the most appalling memory they retained. And for many a night they pondered over it and spoke darkly of things evil and malignant that of old they had heard their fathers' fathers declare roamed such desolate places; and the cheery lamplight within seemed more comforting than ever they had known it.

But men of learning and those skilled in the murky labyrinths of evil vainly sought to elucidate the matter; even a great surgeon from the city had willingly found time to assist at the autopsy, summoned by a wire from an humble country medico, who nevertheless in college had ranked higher than his famous chum. And in terms unintelligible to the lay mind the two had agreed and wrangled throughout one whole night, until the gray of dawn had sent the visitor hastening back to waiting patients. His last words as he pressed the starter were, "Thanks, Slater; the most amazing case I ever encountered—most interesting. But what the deuce caused it I haven't a notion."

As with an earlier verdict, those few curt words summed the facts the strictest probing had elicited. Well they might, for never a bruise or the least abrasion lay upon the poor body, yet of blood not a drop remained within it; and as in the case of young Symington the staggering complete-



ness of the extravasation was an anomaly to science, the tissues being disrupted in the selfsame violent manner, and every exposed surface of epidermis betraying a like eruptive disfigurement. Though the body was otherwise not mutilated, the examination was unhindered by the shocking maceration that Symington's corpse had suffered. In spite of this the verdict was identical: "Murder! but no evidence of how, or by whom committed."

**A** GAIN the great presses roared in their pangs of conceiving columns that dripped with adjectives and horror; and staidier prints admitted frankly that the tragedy had really happened, and in them learned men penned articles that meandered through the dictionary, and seemed very wise and conclusive, but left the reader wondering what it was all about, yet oddly comforted that such men lived to deal with these ghastly enigmas as coolly and confidently as though the solution were concealed in tomes of algebra or differential calculus.

But the great public, whose emotions feed on simpler diet, just wondered, and thrilled with the horror of that strange, pitiless slaying, and throbbed with pity for an old, broken-hearted man mourning his only child; yet, lacking fuel to keep alight the gracious fire of sympathy, it shortly expired, just as reports of vast calamities in foreign lands flame dazzlingly for a moment in our mental firmament, then flicker and vanish as another star leaps above the horizon and outlives its predecessor.

Probably sooner or later there would have been other victims, and by chance some terror-stricken witness to afford humanity the first inkling of the gravest peril that has ever beset it. But it so happened that Philip Daimler, the talented painter, and his friend Richard Messinger, the well known curator

of the geological section of the Jackson Institute, were the first to solve the mystery of the two terrible slayings, and in detail render an account of the fearful assailant—a relation that left humanity gasping and bewildered as we realized our impotence to combat the menace that now must be reckoned with. In a twinkling it had thrust our species back a hundred thousand years, to days when the survival of our hirsute ancestors trembled in the balance and only by a miracle escaped from the chaos of ravening monsters to become the dominant masters of their destiny. But now as well, or better, might we plan to clear the black depths of the oceans of the monstrous octopi that lurk a hundred fathoms below the surface invincible in their murky kingdom and calmly awaiting the diving leviathans or foundered floating palaces to appease their gargantuan appetites.

It might have been better had we never learnt the truth, never awakened to the fact that after all our thousands of years of striving, ceaseless war with ruthless creatures, pride of victory and attainment, after all we are not the lords of creation, and though in no danger of a world-wide catastrophe, yet neither science, police, nor politics can guarantee protection in the future to the individual. Now the serene cerulean dome has lost its divinity, for we know that merciless malignancy is hidden in its profundity; and the seductive peace of the green country, the charm of solitude, must forever be haunted by the dread of impending tragedy. Only surrounded by our fellows or with walls enclosing us can we know the security that once we lightly deemed our heritage.

The relation of their terrible experience is perhaps more vitally descriptive in the simple words of Messinger rather than the later careful summaries by the learned of the mere facts shorn of their emotional

reactions; just as a first impression often more truly portrays a scene than does a photograph.

"Daimler and I," said Messinger to the press representatives who rushed to the village early the following morning, "came here by car yesterday. As you know, Daimler's art is highly imaginative, though in detail truth itself; and for a canvas he desired to obtain some studies of the massive rock formations in this locality. I had been working rather strenuously of late—a little brochure on the sedimentaries—and feeling a trifle stale, came with him for a few days of rest and a mouthful of ozone.

"Naturally we were not ignorant of the tragic happenings that had occurred so recently in the neighborhood; but the victims being total strangers, and neither Daimler nor I of hypersensitive disposition, we hardly gave the matter a thought.

"Last evening, about two hours before sunset—my friend particularly desired to observe the evening effects—we set out for Ladner Bay; and though the road above would have been much the quicker route, yet the sloping shingle beach was preferable for Daimler's purpose.

"Daimler carried a small sketching-outfit and a light folding easel, while I had my old friend, a short-hafted prospector's pick which invariably accompanies me on these outings. Probably you know the tool—the head is shaped much like a small pick, but one prong has a flat hammer head. I think it weighs about five pounds, but in a practised hand a surprizingly powerful blow can be dealt with it.

"To this simple tool my friend owes his life; for, lacking it, I would have been quite powerless to aid him. As a matter of fact it was, I think, probably the best weapon that could have been devised for the purpose—the finest rifle would have been no more effective than a pea-shooter against that frightful thing.

"My friend had so frequently halt-

ed to admire some wild outline of crag or boulder that by the time we arrived at the bay the sun had dipped behind the western crest of the enclosing cliffs and that side lay in a fast-extending and deepening shade.

"The bay, I may remark, is a singularly picturesque one. It is about half a mile wide across its mouth and almost as much from low tide to the steep trail in the ravine where the great walls come together. In the bay the cliffs are higher than elsewhere and the strata more contorted; as though the spot had been the center of a violence that had thrown up miles of towering rock like a feather. Of course really the process was an infinitely prolonged one, the effect of vast strains and adjustments of the earth's envelope; nevertheless one can not avoid the impression of wrathful titanic forces unleashed and working instantaneously.

"High water seldom comes more than half-way over the smooth sands, and the huge, sheltering arms afford ample protection from the northerly gales that sometimes ravage this coast; therefore fishermen occasionally put in and wait until the blow is past. I believe the fine sands sometimes attract picnic parties, but otherwise it is as lonely a spot as can be found in a hundred miles of this coastline. The nearest house is more than a mile away and of course quite hidden from the beach; the road above is merely a rough country track and used only by a few farmers as a means of access to their widely separated neighbors. I believe one could camp for weeks in that lonely cove and never a soul be the wiser.

"Daimler was delighted with the wild grandeur of the spot—it was through my advice he had come—and for a little he flitted about from one point to another until the spirit moved him to set to work, while I made for the foot of the near-by massive wall and commenced busily with my pick to remove slabs from the face of it;

for in this formation not infrequently were to be found small fossils of mosses, lichens, and diminutive crustaceans.

"Some measure of success attending my labor, I became interested and immersed in the quest, and save for the waning light hardly noticed the passing of time until I found myself climbing the steep ascent that leads to the crest.

"This trail is merely the bottom of a great V-shaped gash that in the course of years has become partly filled with fallen fragments, and likely some day will be completely blocked by them. The way is extremely narrow, and not far from the beach it is for many yards a mere slit where two could hardly walk abreast; though for a sheer wall, maybe twenty feet high, on each side, the ramparts fall back and ascend in a series of giant steps.

"IT WAS here that Daimler's cries first reached me, though he states that he had shouted several times before he heard my response; a fact for which a turn of the passage just below me and his rapid approach may be held accountable. At once I answered with a loud 'Halloo' and commenced quickly to retrace my steps. The only thought I held at the moment was that he had completed his sketch, and not seeing me about had called to inform me that it was time to return. We had previously agreed to return by the road, for in the dark the shingle would be rough walking.

"So intent had I been on my chipping that the gathering dusk had gone almost unnoticed. But now I realized that some time must have elapsed since I had left him; for as I turned the corner and the bay opened before me I saw that the scarlet and crimson of the horizon were fading, and though not a hundred yards distant his figure was blurred and only just recognizable.

"He was coming toward me quickly, in fact faster than I ever remembered seeing him move; for Daimler, though not grossly corpulent, is a big, heavy-built man, averse to rapid motion.

"At that second he called again, though I do not think he had yet seen me. He seemed to be walking in a crouching position, and his bent head was foreshortened to half its normal height above his broad shoulders. Although, as I have stated, his hastening form was somewhat blurred in the gathering dusk, yet his outline in the main was fairly well defined by the lighter-hued sands and sea that lay behind him.

"'What's the matter?' I cried sharply. The tone of his cry had surprized and startled me, it was so undeniably a cry of warning and agitation. But as I called back to him I was staring at something many feet away, a something that lay a hundred feet above him.

"I had perceived it directly I turned the bend in the trail, for it was quite impossible to miss its huge bulk. Yet one may perceive a strange and incomprehensible object without instantly grasping the enormity of its presence; we have lain so long in the rut of the known that our perceptions do not lightly rise out of it. Doubtless in the days of King Arthur they were quicker to accept and instantly tabulate the fantastic things they were taught quite commonly might be encountered; things which we dismiss with a smile as mere chimeras of ignorance and auto-suggestion. Yet now it occurs to me to wonder whether there is not a base of fact somewhere or other at the back of these dragons and ogres, centaurs and satyrs that they so often engaged in combat. For I feel certain that I, too, have seen a thing utterly opposed to sane credence, something abnormal, unknown and very horrible, yet as truly a fact as your presence at this moment.

"What I stared at was strange beyond imagining. Above him hovered—no other word quite conveys the instant impression I received of conscious movement—a something more resembling an appalling thunder-cloud condensed, or compressed, to an undreamt-of solidity, if such a phenomenon was possible, than anything else I can call to mind. In conveying to you a mental picture of this thing I am handicapped by having to describe something that has no counterpart in human experience and benumbs the brain with its staggering incomprehensibility.

"Viewed as a living entity it was enormous; I should judge fully thirty or forty feet in diameter, though its circumference was irregular and its outline so ragged that in many directions it might be much more than this figure. It seemed to rise from its edge to a dome center considerably higher than the stature of the hastening man beneath it; while underneath it appeared slightly hollowed.

"You understand I am giving you the sum of the impressions I retained after the encounter, and not merely my first instinctive observations; for it would be tedious, if not impossible, to separate my earlier impressions from later surety.

"At the moment my only emotion was amazement; though intertwined with my amazement there lay a shrinking, a loathing, of its abominable hue, which, save at the murky edges, was blacker than ink, or coal, or night—the black I should imagine we mean when in the phrase 'Black as Death itself' we endeavor to convey a profundity beyond all art to picture.

"Daimler of course heard me; in that quiet enclosed spot my voice seemed swollen unnaturally.

"'Look out, Messinger! The thing is alive—it's going to attack. I think!' he cried hurriedly and breathlessly.

"'Alive!' I exclaimed; and although instinctively I knew that it was indeed a living thing, yet the spoken word shocked me exceedingly. 'Nonsense! It's queer, but—quick, Daimler, run! It's dropping!' I shouted in a panic of sudden fear that strangely contradicted my curt refutation of his assertion.

"An instant realization of his great peril had come upon me as I saw the outlandish hovering thing that kept pace with his steps—by what means it moved I have no notion—abruptly fall for at least a third of the space between them. It fell just like a stone! No planing, or slanting swoop like a hawk at its quarry, but in a flash it was thirty feet lower, and the souging swish of its passage was very audible.

"As I called, Daimler leapt forward and commenced a frantic dash toward me, and at the same second I rushed to meet him. Exactly how I expected to aid him I can not say, or indeed what manner of offensive I could summon in the slightest way effective against such a monstrous creature. The action was merely a blind impulse, the age-old urge of combination—the human species versus all comers.

"What this thing was dumfounded me, but I was convinced it was utterly malignant; for so close was it now that I glimpsed the sinuous rippling that agitated its ragged edge. The thing was visibly throbbing with vital life; even through the dusky pall I had seen that every inch of its surface was swelling, subsiding, and again heaving tumultuously with the apparently aimless convulsions of a gigantic bunch of knotted worms. Possibly part of this perception arose in a later impression; I can not be certain, for everything passed in a whirl in those tense seconds. But one detail I can state with certainty occurred in its rightful sequence: the sound that was emitted coincidentally with its abrupt

descent. A thin, piping sighing filled the air around me, and though so thin and quavery, yet its volume seemed to saturate the vicinity like the whine of a horde of tiny mosquitoes. I can not recall that thereafter it ceased for a moment.

“**D**AIMLER when he started to run had not more than fifty yards to cross to gain whatever shelter the narrow trail could offer; yet before we met it happened. As I ran, my eyes never left the appalling thing, and I saw it quite clearly lessen in its area. There was no warning or any preliminary adjusting; it simply shrank, or rather contracted, as a length of slightly stretched elastic on release diminishes; and like it, this thing also thickened. Or perhaps in view of its concavity I might better liken the action to the half shutting of a huge umbrella.

“Then its huge mass had fallen and it lay exactly where Daimler had been running. For an instant I halted and stood staring blankly at the monstrous thing, just as one stares at an apparition—palsied with fear, mute and motionless. Then the enormity of the catastrophe that had overtaken Daimler flooded upon me and I hurled myself forward, frantically calling him by name.

“It seemed like circling a hill, for its summit rose many feet above me, and its height, I should judge, would be less than a third of the diameter. And all the time that queer piping sound was ceaselessly welling from it, only now in volume immensely greater and the note much shriller and more like the escaping of innumerable little jets of high-pressure steam.

“Behind that huge palpitating bulk lay Daimler on his back; head, arms and shoulders alone were visible; below this his form was missing, being covered by his assailant.

“He says that something impelled him at that critical second to hurl himself backward; likely it was an im-

pulse, an emergence from the subconscious, the mysterious self that gains its knowledge from unknown channels. At any rate he hurtled backward, and instead of engulfing him the vast hood caught him a slanting blow and still further expedited his effort. Had it not been for this action, beyond any doubt he would have been instantly and most horribly smothered.

“‘I can’t get clear—and it’s moving up!’ he gasped hoarsely as I rushed to him and slipping my hands beneath his armpits sought to snatch him from the loathsome thing. But with all my might, and with Daimler thrusting desperately at the sands, I could not by an inch release him, and beyond the slight natural flexion permitted to the human shoulders I failed to raise him appreciably.

“I stared at the monstrous thing as the cold sweat of terror poured profusely from me; but Daimler, though white and haggard, was, I think, much the cooler and more collected.

“‘I can’t gain an inch! What shall I do?’ I exclaimed hoarsely as I, too, saw that the revolting, glutinous-looking edge was extending farther over him. It seemed to flow with a rippling motion outward—the smooth creeping of a tide of festering slime more solid than liquid.

“Now the light was very dim but, the sky being cloudless, I could distinguish in a blurred, unreal fashion that the substance of the thing was still in a state of ceaseless pulsing fluxion; swelling into ridges and bosses, sinking in grooves and craters everywhere over a surface as coarsely wrinkled as the withered skin on the hands of age.

“‘For God’s sake, Messenger, do something! It will be all over with me in a minute!’ said Daimler tensely but quietly—I can not too highly rate his courage.

“In a frenzy of despair, my eyes swept the vicinity for anything—a piece of driftwood, a boulder even—

to batter this nightmare with. But the sands here were far above high water and bare of a single splinter, and the loose debris fringing the nearest cliff at least fifty feet distant; and at any second that ghastly living tide might sweep over its victim.

"Then my eye alighted on a weapon that somehow I had forgotten—the pick at my feet, where I had dropped it. These simple tools are marvels of efficiency and in a practised hand produce results; I do not doubt but with a single blow I could split the skull of an ox. In a second I had swung it aloft and at the extreme limit of my reach dealt the brute a savage stroke. It was indeed fortunate that I had not hit closer to the edge, for I might easily have seriously wounded if not slain my friend. The eight-inch prong went through the substance as though it were butter, and haft and hand were deeply pressed into a soft resilience.

"It was as flimsy as a sponge, or rather like hitting a cushion that would give but not rend before the mightiest fist, yet a child could drive a pin through it. At once there arose a series of little explosions such as might be made by the bursting of small air-filled paper bags or toy balloons.

"Astonished but elated by this unexpected vulnerability, instantly without raising the weapon I raked it down toward me. Thus attacked, it was more resistant, and I had to exert some force as if opposed by the strands of a half-rotten net. But I rent it to where the prong bit into the sand close beside Daimler. The deep laceration closed behind the steel like molten tar, and a line of grayish scum, greasy and frothy, welled out to mark the ravage.

"'All right, Daimler, I'll have you clear in a moment!' I cried. 'It's as soft as a jelly-fish!' I cried exultingly as I feverishly plied my pick and with blow after blow roughly raked a great V-shaped wedge of it to tatters.

"Nevertheless, though I had spoken so assuredly, I was still in a state of panic. For the bulk of the thing was so appalling that my efforts seemed those of a pigmy assailing a whale with a bodkin: every second I expected to see some vast movement convulse it, some gigantic offensive that would erase us both as simply as my hand would crush a mosquito. Moreover each blow was meeting with a greater resistance, and if my attack was to be confined merely to stabbing the prong into it, then my friend was doomed to a certainty. For if I could not weaken it by scoring the portion that lay above him, I realized that there was no hope of saving him. So rigidly did this nightmare confine him that it seemed as if they were cemented together, or welded by suction like a glutinous limpet to a rock; and of course, in spite of its loose construction, this stupendous brute must have weighed tons.

"FROM start to finish, the whole experience could only have been a matter of moments, but to me the time seemed infinite.

"I ceased to attack the inner mass and confined my blows to the edge about the prisoner. It was much tougher, but I tore it to pieces for a couple of feet inward.

"'Quick, Daimler! Put all your strength to it!' I cried, as, dropping the pick again, I caught him under the shoulders and strove to pull him from under. Whether unaided we would have been successful I can not say, but aid came from a most unexpected quarter.

"I suppose even that unnatural monster possessed the rudiments of feeling and its wounding reached some center of sensation; for suddenly it shook—one might better say 'shuddered'—violently, and there came a shrinking, a sort of retrogression of the wounded portion into itself; and a

wavelike shaking and rippling agitated the entire monster.

“‘It’s loosening! Put every ounce of strength into it!’ I gasped as I heaved desperately at the broad shoulders—and moved them! Swaying him from side to side, inch by inch I drew him clear to the waist; then abruptly resistance ceased and I went sprawling. He was free, and groaning and attempting to rise as I picked myself up and leapt to his side.

“‘Lean on me! We’ve got to reach the trail—it’s the only shelter about here!’ I panted, winded by my efforts and the fall.

“‘Somehow I got him standing, and with my arm about him we started, at a tangent to clear the throbbing horror, and made with all speed we could summon for the trail. Lurching and stumbling—for as I have said, Daimler is a big, heavy man, and now was badly shaken and benumbed by the pressure he had borne—we circled the brute; and though in the blurring dusk I had but a hasty glimpse of its black immensity, yet at once I saw that it had become even larger than a moment back and the throbbing had changed to a swaying motion that went from side to side. At once I guessed the truth.

“‘My God! Daimler, the brute is rising—we must go quicker!’ I hoarsely whispered, somehow fearing that even a whisper would precipitate another attack.

“I heard the staggering man’s breath indrawn with terror, and felt his form stiffen and strain to further effort, but a shambling amble was the utmost we could manage. My spirit fairly crawled within me as every step of that slow passage I felt that escape was impossible; and any second we might be dashed headlong with the blackness of unimaginable night and tons of living pulp smothering us.

“‘But at last, unharmed, we reached the ascent and staggered up until the

walls closed in and we neared the narrow slit where I had been chipping and which now offered our only refuge. Here we halted for a moment.

“‘I think we are fairly safe now, thank heaven!’ said I fervently as I peered back into the blur of the bay. Only a toneless pearly gray remained of the many-hued sunset. But one could distinguish quite well the cliffs, and the sands, and the darker band of sea beyond; and all that colorless expanse was solitary and nothing met the eye but the natural and the explainable.

“‘Why, it’s gone!’ I exclaimed in surprize and relief.

“‘No! Look up there, Messinger,’ said Daimler in a shaking whisper as he clutched at my arm.

“‘I suppose by recent association of space and horror instinctively he had sought the quarter from which that horror had been born. I followed his lifted, pointing arm, and there floated the beast, level with the cliff crest and directly above us; and as I fearfully stared, it dropped a little lower and lay between the upper outflung sides of the gorge.

“‘It’s coming down! Quick! into the shelter ahead!’ I urged in a panic.

“‘Shelter! Where!’ asked Daimler cagerly.

“‘Just above—the passage is so narrow, it couldn’t reach us there,’ I replied, regaining some confidence as I thought of the deep narrow cleft ahead.

“In a moment we had stumbled up the steep slope and stood between the sheer walls that for thirty or forty feet lay so close together that we could only just stand abreast and stare up at the thing that loomed so menacingly against the infinite gray behind it. But now I had less fear, for I felt it was impossible that such a huge mass could ever penetrate into our shelter; and probably the brute was of the same opinion, for it made no further attempt to attack us but

lay motionless for a few minutes as though gloomily pondering over the matter.

"Then in a flash it had gone; I had just an impression of a huge expansion like a roller-blind snatched across the sky, and then it was thousands of feet above us and appeared no larger than a tablecloth, and as harmless. In the flick of an eyelid followed another extension and instant diminution to a mere smudge that for an instant floated in profundity. And after that all trace of it vanished, and for a moment I was left awed by the imagination of prodigious heights and a lone monster fearlessly navigating the silent infinite void beyond.

"'It's gone this time, anyway,' I heard Daimler mutter; and at his voice I returned to solid earth and things understandable.

"'Yes, I hope forever to the hell it came from,' said I, savagely. 'But we'd better move before they cast it out with other stunts to try on us.'

"At once we climbed the steep ascent, and on the crest stood for an instant to ease the distress that now acutely beset Daimler. No longer spurred by imminent danger, he complained of pain and weakness in his limbs, faintness and dizziness, and would have lain on the rocks and coarse grass; but fearing the relaxation might incapacitate him I sternly refused to allow it.

"While we stood resting, my gaze wandered with loathing over the somber solitude that lay below us, and unbidden there came to me a thought of the poor girl who found death awaiting her in this treacherous loneliness—a tragedy which, as I now recalled, had never been solved, even as Daimler's fate if he had been solitary.

"'My God! Of course—that nightmare from space!' I muttered, aghast at the thought of that horror. For I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that

I had solved the mystery of Harriet Conroy's slaying.

"'Come on, Daimler!' I urged hoarsely.

"THE rest of the story, gentlemen, is of no moment. Eventually we reached a farmhouse and secured a conveyance to this inn. Today my friend is confined to his bed, so bruised in limb and racked with nausea that I do not anticipate he will be fit to leave it for several days. The local man—Dr. Slater—assures me that save for shock and this severe bruising my friend is as sound as ever. But he awaits a friend of his, a famous specialist, with much impatience to learn his opinion. It seems that they collaborated in the examination of certain extraordinary phases at the poor girl's inquest recently; and with this new evidence on the matter he is anxious that I should meet him and relate our astounding and terrible experience. Moreover I understand that still another tragedy is linked with this locality. I mean the fate of young Symington—you know I am but little interested in such matters, being, I suppose, of skeptical temperament and completely immersed in my profession, and having no time to waste on the merely sensational; though I have some recollection of the affair, but very fragmentary and certainly nothing on which to found any conclusion of resemblance. Yet Dr. Slater assures me that our encounter with this unique assailant has forged the key to an otherwise inexplicable tragedy. Doubtless the whole matter will receive the closest official attention, even not improbably a world-wide investigation, and some definite conclusions and co-operation of offensive—if possible—be arrived at. For I can not conceive of a greater catastrophe to humanity than the existence in numbers of such monstrous, malignant creatures.



One shrinks appalled at the thought of their size, their powers and their immunity from detection.

"This new science of aviation? Why, one of those brutes could overwhelm a Zeppelin, and in a moment cast it a flaming heap of junk to destruction; and a dozen could clear the skies of every flying-machine the world could gather together, and make of aviation just another term for certain suicide. For how can one combat a creature that with the speed of a falling stone comes out of nothingness invisible until the darkness of death is smothering you?

"What this creature is I have no notion, whether a single survival of our planet's early abortions, or a type evolved in comparatively recent times, along a line and in an environment we, from inability to explore, have never thought of; these are enigmas that only research and further evidence can elucidate. All I know to a certainty is that my sense of peace and security has vanished for ever; the nature I have been wedded to, the lonely loveliness I have loved, now all is profitless—it is abhorrent! For what I have seen will dog my memory to my last day."

SUCH, deleting a few repetitions, was the narrative of Richard Messinger, and in the main is the extent of our knowledge today of the creature that popular misconception has christened "The Flying Death." For as yet no fresh witness has arisen to affirm or deny the particulars he has given.

Speculations, learned treatises, and discursive theories exist by the dozen, proving that the monster is mentioned allegorically in the Bible, or was known to the Chinese before Confucius, or has no existence—are there not persons who affirm that the world is flat and ignore the certain evidence to the contrary?

But the world has no doubt that

this thing exists—a nightmare that can prey on humanity with the ease and impunity of a cat catching mice. For, immersed in alcohol in a glass jar in the great Metropolitan Museum, there lies one item of incontrovertible evidence of the creature's unique and terrorizing ability to destroy as it will and when it lists. And marveling crowds daily read the inscription beneath it.

Thus preserved for perpetuity lies a fragment, a mere strip—though originally somewhat larger, the vandals of science having wrought on it—the size of one's middle finger, that Messinger's pick had torn from the monster. In this liquid it looks exactly like a greasy, saturated sponge, of the coarse, dark-hued variety used in garages and for window cleaning. It was salvaged by a farmhand, who early on the spot the following morning had disturbed a horde of gulls which were screaming and squabbling on the sands above high water. Just in the nick of time he arrived to secure this morsel, the last of a banquet the feasters had been enjoying; consumed with the glory of his discovery he had straightway sought the authorities and turned it over, and finding his name misspelt in the papers had felt amply rewarded.

Lengthy and exhaustive examination of this fragment has resulted in some startling conclusions about the interior economy of its former owner, and its marvelous adaptation to altitudes so vast that the most daring aviator has never more than touched their fringe. We know for a certainty that its substance is as light and strong as a feather, elastic, and permeated by innumerable tiny cells, miniature bladders void of contents, connecting one with another by a network of small channels.

Primarily it was conceived that as with some species of fish these empty containers might be used for the storage of air to render the brute

buoyant, but this would in no way account for its superb powers of levitation in a like medium. Then under chemical analysis distinct traces of the gas hydrogen were found to be present. At once the secret was revealed. For this gas is the lightest of all the vapors and was used in all our great airships until helium, though heavier, was found to be safer, being non-inflammable. Undoubtedly this monster possesses the ability to separate the gas from the humid vapor always more or less present in our atmosphere. The process is probably of chemico-electric nature and instantaneous in action; which, though very astounding, is no more so than the extraction of oxygen from water with every inflating of the lungs of a fish.

Such an inflation of a tenuous elastic fabric would result in just such an instantaneous levitation as Messinger described; and when the hydrogen was expelled and the structure contracted, a falling stone would hardly drop quicker. The miracle lies really in the amazing control and nicety of manipulation of its medium of locomotion; but then all living creatures, save man, control their movements with a like perfection of accuracy.

By a little shrewd reasoning it has been deduced that its natural habitat is probably within the tropics where the humidity is greater than our latitudes; and for some unknown motive we have been visited by a lone strayer from its fellows: possibly the moment of the odd chance in a mil-

lion that has peopled continents has dawned for their species.

It certainly is strange that all wild tribes dwelling near the equator are ridden by the fear of monstrous, shapeless, evil things that assail the night wanderer who at dawn is found lifeless and withered with the terror of that encounter. We have deemed these stories superstition; but the fear is a living force and must be based on something, to dominate millions as it does.

No explanation of the extraordinary mutilation of each of its victims has yet been advanced. All we can conceive is an organism endowed with a means of imbibing sustenance, much as a vastly magnified reproduction of the apparatus of the common mosquito—a lower surface with an infinite number of hairlike filaments, each the counterpart of that insect's proboscis and similarly provided with an irritant poison that draws the blood of a victim to the inserted borers.

But this is mere theory and may be right, or may be wrong, and well it will be for us if the truth is never known, and this the brute's last appearance; though several inexplicable disappearances have recently occurred among our flying men—craft and men have vanished from our world as though they had found another and been unable to return. And yet the daring adventurers fly still higher seeking the thing that dwells in the unknown beyond; and these missing craft may have encountered it.

