

Strange STORIES

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THE GEIST OF THE JUNGLE

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

Author of "The Fourth Dynasty," "The Second Moon," etc.



An Amateur Archeologist Sees Weird Mayan Rites and then Makes a Startling Discovery in the Heart of Yucatan!

BETWEEN the pyramid and the ball court at Chichen Itza was an opening through the jungle leading to the *cenote*, a great, open well, bounded by a seventy-foot overhanging wall of rock. From the top of this wall, hundreds of years ago, Mayan maidens had hurled themselves into the dark, green water of the *cenote* as sacrifices when a serious drought threatened famine to the people of Itza.

Over this ancient road now walked a young man, an American college graduate seeing the world before he went back to the States to chain himself to a lifelong job.

The victim was placed on the stone slab

Once the road to the *cenote* had been paved and bounded by small temples, ranging at the side in the manner of hot-dog stands, for gods had been a highway dissipation of Mayan culture. Now, excepting for those temples which had been restored, the route barely saved itself from the overrunning jungle.

The American, Sam Christopher, was smiling, drawing the heavy, moist, jungle air deep into his lungs and caring about nothing in particular. He was tanned by exposure in the tropics. His hair was straight and black and he wore a native sombrero so that at a distance he might have been taken as a descendant of the men who had built ancient Chichen Itza and who had served her glories.

On his back was a knapsack and fastened to his belt was a water bottle. Thousands of tourists visit Chichen Itza and thousands of them pack knapsacks and slip away, feeling that secrets are still to be exposed in the old ruins and that they shall find the key to the vanished culture. So there was nothing odd about Christopher's solitary jaunt.

As Sam Christopher walked the jungle road, a ray of sunlight, filtering through the trees fell on the ground near the edge of the jungle to his right. The young man's pace slackened. He halted and stooped to examine the ground. A ridge of earth ran back into the dense vegetation.

HE KICKED the earth curiously with his boot heel. He pushed away decaying vegetation and exposed a dirty, square-cut stone.

He had been eager to discover something, but now that he had uncovered a rock shaped by tools, a queer and perplexed expression crossed his face. For a moment the veneer of civilization was wiped away. Sam Christopher, amateur archeologist, the product of an American university, became a superstitious savage, hesitating in awe before something he could not understand.

There was nothing he could see, except an ancient paving brick. But he was not sure his eyes were seeing this brick. He touched the object.

He could feel it, yet his senses doubted the touch. The smell of damp, earth-covered stone was there, yet it wasn't, and to his ears, more mystifying than all other manifestations, was the muffled thrumming noise, not loud but plain, like the beat of drums and the hoarse honk of conch-shell trumpets.

For a single instant the world seemed to freeze in its tracks. Then a snap of a twig behind him broke the illusion. The puzzled frown faded from Sam Christopher's face and the rustling of the modern jungle seemed to drown out the things he heard.

"Find something, young man?" came a voice from behind.

Sam turned with a startled jump. He saw a huge, gruff-looking American, wearing a dirty sun helmet and looking like a prop in a movie jungle picture. The stranger's eyes were squinting at the stone Sam Christopher had uncovered.

"Yes," Christopher replied, his voice breaking queerly. "This brick—there is something funny about it! Notice anything?"

The man's eyes dropped to the brick, rested there a moment, and then traveled along the ridge of ground that ran into the jungle. The stranger glanced again at Sam.

"Lord, you're a white man, aren't you?" he said. "I thought you were a Mex in that hat—you're brown as one. Better be careful about too much sun—"

He broke off and glanced back at the stone.

"It doesn't seem real, does it?" asked Sam.

The big man shook his head. "It's the shape," he said finally. "The Mayans were wizards at optical illusion. You know, I presume, how the Greeks bulged their columns at the middle to create the optical illusion of straightness? Well, these redskins had a lot of ideas like that. The steps up the pyramid are wider at the top, so that they look the same width all the way up to a man at the bottom. There's something like that the matter with that stone. It's been carved so that it looks like it isn't real."

Sam Christopher nodded as if the explanation satisfied him. But it didn't. There was the feel of the thing, the smell, and that thumping of drums.

"You're an archeologist, aren't you?" he asked the big stranger.

"I'm something of the sort," replied the other with a laugh. "I'm Murdock Duncan, Ph.D. I've done a little research on the Holactun initial series and I've made some discoveries regarding the invasion of Yucatan along the west coast in 764 A.D. I haven't done much, but enough to make a slight reputation. And now I'm back again to delve some more."

Sam took the extended hand and introduced himself.

"It's strange about this ridge, where you found the stone," Duncan went on. "Every authority on Mayan culture, besides thousands of tourists, have walked here and none have noticed it. Looks to me, Christopher, as though you've made a discovery!"

SAM could have puffed out his chest, but he didn't, for he heard the roar of drums again—louder now, like thunder.

"Hear that?" Sam's voice was like a whisper.

Duncan grinned and looked overhead. He raised his hand and pointed to the sky. There, floating over the jungle, was a tri-motored plane.

"The mail plane for Belize, British Honduras," he explained with a chuckle.

Sam laughed, too, a bit sheepishly. There was something in the environment that gave a man a sense of awe. His vision had been distorted by the shape of the brick and his ears, not expecting the hum of an airplane motor above the primitive jungle, had done the rest. The odor and the queer feel of the stone could be laid to nerves.

"Just the same," went on Duncan, "I think we could do a little profitable investigating. Wait here until I get the tools—"

Without waiting for Sam to reply, Duncan darted briskly down the road. Alone, once more, Sam felt uneasy. Each rustle of the trees, every sound

of the forest seemed laden with menace.

"Nerves!" muttered Sam, as he lit a cigarette. Nevertheless, he was glad when Duncan reappeared, carrying a machete.

"I always keep one of these things handy in case I want to peek behind the scenery," explained the archeologist. "Got a gun?"

Sam pulled a small-caliber automatic from his pocket. "I've a couple of extra clips, too," he informed Duncan.

"Pop gun!" snorted Duncan depreciatingly. "But it'll do for snakes. I doubt if we'll see anything larger."

Duncan raised the machete and started to work on the jungle. The broad blade flashed and cut into the brush.

"Come on," he called, stepping through the opening.

Sam followed uncertainly. After a few minutes he took his turn with the machete, cutting, slashing, tearing his way into the jungle. Always at their feet was that mound of earth, running straight as an arrow through the trees.

As Sam worked he realized that his whole body was tense and alert. He seemed to be listening for something. Then, as Duncan worked, each slash of the long, flat knife startled Sam. Somehow it did not sound as it should. The jungle seemed to deaden the noise, holding it so that it could not escape. It was intensely hot and deathly quiet.

A monkey screamed in the forest, and Sam almost jumped out of his boots.

They waded through brush for hours, it seemed. It was cut, step, hack; cut, step, hack. Sam's back ached as he sweated and toiled in the steamy growths. They were almost being devoured by insects, but Duncan would not slow down. He was a bloodhound on the scent of something big.

"Where does it lead to?" asked Sam, looking at the ridge. Ahead of them a tree had sprouted in the center of the ridge, turning up a score of those queer stones that fooled the eyes.

"It's an old road," replied Duncan. "It may go for miles."

Sam gritted his teeth and plunged on. It was his discovery and he was going to stick with it. If Sam didn't, he knew that Duncan was ready to follow the road until he came to the ocean if necessary. Sam wasn't going to let Duncan hog the credit.

Trees now grew frequently in the middle of the ridge, turning up the paving like a plow share. It looked as if the jungle were determined to erase all trace of man.

Suddenly Duncan uttered a shout. Ahead of them, entwined by vines, was a dirty, grayish stone. A monument in the middle of the jungle.

"A stela!" exclaimed the archeologist.

A FEW whacks with the knife brought them close. It was covered with checkered glyphs. Only about four feet of the stone now stood above the surface. There was no telling how much of it lay buried beneath the decaying vegetation at their feet. Vines had pulled it at a forward angle, but the stone had been planted firmly and it showed no signs of toppling.

While Duncan jotted down the inscription in his notebook, Sam unfolded a canvas shelter that had formed a part of his pack. The forest was growing dark rapidly and the creepy sounds of night swirled through the trees. Duncan was working rapidly, showing familiarity with the symbols on the stone.

"It's a new series," said Duncan, squatting down beside the fire Sam had built. "I'll have to do a lot of deciphering later, but I know it's very old. The date is before any other stela on record—before the Christian era."

"You mean it's older than the stela at Uaxactun? That one's the oldest—"

"At least five hundred years older, and that would put it before the Tuxtla statuette," declared Duncan. "Don't ask me to explain Mayan time-keeping. It's a complicated quadruple check system, but it's accurate—so accurate that the Mayans could distinguish without duplication any given day in three hundred and seventy thousand years! Our own calendar

will require several revisions before that time has slipped by."

Far off to the right a cougar howled. Monkeys chattered and the jungle came to life in the deepening night. Sam shuddered.

"Creepy, isn't it?" he muttered.

His eyes were staring past the stela. Light from the fire flickered in the trees. At times he saw the eyes of small animals gleaming like opals in the darkness. And an air of strangeness settled over everything—including the big figure of Murdock Duncan.

Sam wished he would see something. He was not afraid of a tangible enemy. But there was something—a menace he could not see that had dogged his tracks since morning, since the moment he had swung his heel against the end of the ridge.

Suddenly his eyes caught sight of a movement in the darkness. There was no definite form. Rather, it was a shadow where a shadow should not have been. It floated in the darkness at the edge of the farthest light from the fire.

"Look!" His hand clenched Duncan's arm, and he rubbed his eyes.

"It's just a shadow!"

"It is—but look again! It floats through the trees. It's circling the fire!"

Sam was watching the stela, rooted in the ground, enmeshed by jungle vines. The stela was rising upward.

There was a crack, like a rifle shot. Then another. Two giant trees, one on each side of the stela, swayed and began falling away from each other.

The stela continued to rise. Sam grabbed Duncan's arm and dragged him away. Then with a crash the stela fell face downward across the spot where the two men had been sitting.

For a moment neither man spoke. The cougar howled in the forest, a note of disappointment seemed in his voice. Birds of the night fluttered in the trees, and animals scampered away at the sound of the crash.

DUNCAN trained his flashlight on the stela.

"Strange that two trees should fall at the same time," he muttered. "The

weight of the falling trees pulled the stela up from the ground. Those vines acted like ropes."

"It wasn't a coincidence," said Sam unsteadily. "There's something in this jungle that doesn't want us here!"

"The jungle itself always resents intrusion," murmured the older archeologist.

"Don't you think there's something weird here, Duncan? Can't you *feel* the things I feel? Lord, man, are you made of stone?"

Duncan glanced at the young American.

"Don't be a fool, Sam," he replied. "There're no ghosts in this jungle or anywhere else! The Mayan gods are dead. If we didn't know it we could look at that monument to the dead gods at San Felipe. Mortals don't honor their gods often by erecting tombstones over them when they're dead, but these Mayans are a funny race—"

"But it's so strange!" declared Sam. "It is as if some strange force is fighting us back—keeping us from things we shouldn't know!"

"Nature itself is a weird, eerie, titanic thing," replied Duncan in a sonorous voice. "There are things in the jungle you don't find anywhere else."

"Let's go back!" whispered Sam. "We can come here tomorrow, when it's day!"

As he spoke there was a sound in the jungle. It came as a hollow boom. It was followed by another and another thumping, echoing reverberation, as if a giant tom-tom were assembling all nature to a meeting.

Duncan did not answer, and Sam Christopher knew that it was too late now to turn back. The drum was calling, and its voice said war!

Duncan strode to a tree. He jerked his machete from the limb where he had embedded it while studying the stela. Sam pulled his automatic from his pocket and examined the clip.

Then Duncan whistled low as he switched his flashlight on the hole in the jungle once blocked by the stela.

Beyond was a clear space, a path which might have been made by animals or by man. It was clear and

straight, and it followed the ridge of the old Mayan road. Duncan led the way.

Instinctively Sam followed. The thumping sounded at regular intervals. Then, in the distance they saw the eerie gleam of a light.

Their progress was wary, and the path lay uphill. Far ahead the light became a triangle, and then it separated into three lights, which could be discerned as flickering bonfires at the top of a mound of earth. Now Sam could see moving, ghostlike figures.

"Mayans?" he asked incredulously.

"Probably Indians, celebrating Mayan rites," replied Duncan. "Not long ago a colleague of mine found priests in Guatemala keeping the old Maya calendar with red seeds. The Mayans and their gods may be dead, but their culture—as old as our own—didn't pass with the arrival of a few Spaniards."

They reached the edge of a clearing. There was no sign of an ax or a machete, yet here the invincible jungle had been held back. On all sides were gleaming buildings and shadowy forms of half-naked Indians.

BUT the people were silent! The three bonfires formed a triangle about a stone altar, behind which stood a score of Indians, silent, motionless and looking like statues in the half-light. Then the giant drum sounded, almost beneath the feet of the two white men.

"The drumming!" gasped Sam Christopher.

"I can explain that, at least," said Duncan. "Yucatan is a vast, limestone plain through which water percolates rapidly. That's why there are so few running streams here. Breaches in the limestone occur at several places forming the wells or *cenotes*, including the two large ones at Chichen Itza. That's what the name means: 'Mouth of the Wells of the Itzas.' The booming comes from the wells—and changes in atmospheric pressure might cause it."

"But it seems to call a person!"

"Pure imagination!" Duncan said gruffly. "Have you noticed how every-

thing you have thought so strange admits a natural explanation—the shape of the paving stones, the drums booming, the fall of the stela—

"I'm not sure of anything," replied Sam. "You can call it natural phenomena, nerves, or what you please—but there is something on that pyramid that is either human or unhuman!"

As Sam spoke a new figure appeared on the summit of the mound. He was tall in comparison with the others and he wore a blood-red robe. Eight of the Indians detached themselves from the throng and suddenly seized another of their number.

Their movements were silent and ghostlike. The only sound was the hollow booming of the *cenote*.

The victim was picked up bodily by the others. Two Indians held each of his struggling limbs and the man was carried toward the altar.

Sam's face was white and strained. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He sensed what was coming.

The red-robed priest raised his arm toward the stars; his movements were stealthy, gliding. A long, stone knife seemed to materialize in his hand. He shook his head and the hood of the red cape fell back, revealing long, snow white hair growing from a fleshless skull.

"Oh, my God!" groaned Sam. "You think we imagine this?"

Duncan did not reply. He moistened his lips. The strain was showing on him.

Another Indian carried a jar of burning copal to the priest, who placed it beside the altar. A second later the victim was laid on the slab of stone. The knife raised once more to the stars and flashed downward.

The only sound was the groan that came from Sam's lips.

The priest thrust the knife into the flesh, turning aside the flesh with a twist. His long, fleshless arm reached into the opening and gave a quick jerk. Then the priest pulled forth a still pulsating heart and held it aloft.

Sam saw the lips of the Indians move, but he heard only the drumming reverberation of the *cenote*.

"It isn't real!" whispered Sam aloud. "It can't be real!"

Duncan made no answer. Sam could not tear his fascinated gaze from the scene to look at his companion.

The heart was dropped into the jar of burning copal, and the priest hurled the dead man's body down the steps of the pyramid. The deep tone gurgled and drummed, and in the jungle a cougar wailed.

THEN the priest turned slowly and pointed his bloody dagger at the spot from which the two white men watched. The eight Indians filed down the pyramid steps toward the place. And still there was no sound.

"Use your machete, Duncan! They are coming!" cried the young American. "They are real!"

In a moment Sam was cool. He rose to his feet. Here was something to fight; something he could see. He faced Duncan. In spite of the older man's bulk, in spite of his huge form, Duncan seemed helpless as a babe. He seemed thinner and the lines of his face were drawn.

"Explain these renegade red devils!" he cried, "but do it with your machete."

"You don't understand!" cried Duncan. "Not yet."

His voice was drowned by the crash of Sam's automatic. The flame spat from the gun in the direction of the approaching Indians. It spoke again and again, but the advancing figures did not hesitate.

Sam emptied the clip and replaced it with another. Still the figures advanced.

"They're not human!" said Sam. "Explain them away, Duncan!"

Duncan screamed as the drum of the Itza well mocked them both.

Sam's useless gun slipped from his fingers. He had fired at point-blank range at the eight crouching figures, and the human forms had not even hesitated. Stooping, Sam picked up the other's machete. He was no longer afraid. He might be a poor shot, but he could slash and stab.

The jungle, for an instant, grew quiet as death. The *cenote* tolled once. Then it was quiet again. Faintly

from the air came a new sound. It grew louder. It came as a beating rumble, like the roll of many tomtoms. It was eerie, unearthly and out of place in the jungle. It was the sound of churning machinery of civilization!

The phantomlike advance of the figures slackened. The eight Indians halted and seemed to quiver. The roar became louder and louder, rumbling like an approaching storm. The eight Indians were staring upward. Overhead floating above the tops of the trees were red and green lights. "The night plane from Belize!" cried Duncan.

Sam shouted. He picked up his gun, discarding the machete. He fired into the air. But the plane floated serenely on across the clearing. Its lights disappeared and the noise of its motors grew faint in the distance.

"Gone!" whispered Sam.

He looked about him. The fires on the pyramid had grown dim. Now they went out, and far away in the east appeared the first flush of dawn. The figures of the Mayans and the red-robed, fleshless priest vanished like smoke.

DUNCAN sank back on the ground with a groan.

"I suppose," said Sam, "it was a hallucination?"

Duncan rocked back and forth. He was a changed man.

"It wasn't a ghost gathering, Sam! Remember that!" he said.

"What d'you mean?" demanded the youth. "We saw something that did not exist. We were scared to death! We saw fires that never burned!" Sam paused. "And a murderous sacrifice that never—"

"Ah, but you're wrong! Those things did occur. Not just now, but—" He stopped while the *cenote* gurgled and boomed. "You hear that?"

Again came the deep-throated, hollow noise. It taunted the fears of the young American.

"I hope I can get far enough away so that I'll never hear it again!" Sam cried.

Duncan smiled.

"It's been doing that for cen-

uries, Sam. Once it accompanied many sacrifices, just as we thought we saw here tonight! There is really nothing very tangible to a noise except when we hear it."

"I suppose it hypnotized us, made us believe we were seeing things we didn't see?"

Duncan shook his head. He dusted the dead leaves from his clothing and led the way toward the pyramid. Already it was daylight. Now the structure appeared only as a mound of vegetation-covered dirt. The steps, down which the victim of the sacrifice had tumbled, had disappeared. Other little mounds had replaced the small, white temples that had gleamed in the light of the fire around the pyramid.

Sam, who had stood bravely before the advance of the eight ghostlike warriors of Itza, trembled in the morning light. Duncan, who had exhibited funk a short time before, now was cool.

"It might have been a sort of suggestion," said Duncan, "but not the usual form of hypnotism you see in vaudeville or in psychology classrooms. It was the spirit—the geist of the jungle. Remember, Sam, you're walking where no living white man has ever walked before—where no Mayan has walked for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. During that time the last memory of the jungle was one of bloody human sacrifice. The jungle is a living thing, Sam. It is murderous to everything, even itself. For centuries the jungle fought the Mayans. This was a battleground!"

They labored up the disintegrated steps of the pyramid. There on top they saw three places for the sacrificial fires, but the rains had washed away the charred ashes centuries ago. The altar stood white as snow on top. It was the only clean thing about the place.

"The only Mayan wars of consequence were those against the relentless jungle," went on Murdock Duncan. "The cruel human sacrifices the ancient Mayans made were, supposedly, to gain advantage in this war—to appease the gods so that rain would fall when needed, or that crops would

not be rooted out by weeds of the jungle. I do not refer to the century and one-half of civil war which ended about fourteen sixty, bringing the country to the verge of ruin, a devastation which was completed with the coming of the Spanish conquistadors.

"Our path along the old Mayan road through the jungle permitted us to see marks of the struggle against the jungle. Subconsciously our eyes of the mind took in the fragments of scenes of conflict. As for the scene we just witnessed atop this pyramid, it may have been a psychic or telepathic echo from the distant past that impinged on our—"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Sam Christopher incredulously.

"Impossible!" repeated Duncan, raising his heavy eyebrows and staring at his companion peculiarly. "When you grow older, my young friend, a great many things which are inexplicable and which you so impatiently label today as impossible, you will be quite ready to accept as natural phenomena which you simply do not comprehend."

"You mean you didn't believe your own logical explanations about the paving stones, the falling stela, and the booming of the *cenote*?" demanded Christopher.

Duncan shrugged. "They were logical. Accept them if you like. But why not accept the psychic theory for the ancient Mayan sacrificial rites we witnessed here?"

CHRISTOPHER was startled.

"You say that? You, a hard-headed archeologist, a hard-boiled scientist?" The young American stared at his companion. "Didn't you see they were modern descendants of the ancient Mayas, carrying on their bloody rites?"

"Were they?" asked Duncan softly. "You could not kill them with your modern weapon. Yet they did not hurt us. They faded away with the coming of dawn—at the sound of the airplane. And where is the evidence of their recent presence here? Show me."

"You are afraid of—of ghosts?" queried the young college man. "And you a student of Mayan civilization?

By the way, when did you last explore here in Yucatan?"

"Exactly ten years ago," replied Duncan evenly. "In nineteen thirty—the year I was awarded the archeological medal by the Academy of Arts and Sciences."

Sam Christopher was impressed in spite of himself. He turned away, his eyes exploring the top of the mound. He took several steps and dropped on his knees to examine the crumbling remains of the ancient altar. Then he uttered an exclamation.

There on the flat top of the stone was a splotch of something rusty brown.

"Something or somebody did die here," he cried in surprise. "It wasn't last night, and it wasn't a hundred or a thousand years ago, either."

There was no response from Duncan, and Christopher looked around. He started violently. Murdock Duncan had completely vanished.

Sam Christopher seized with an unaccountable trembling, arose and stepped forward. He stumbled over something in the weeds at the end of the altar. He looked down.

It was a pile of bones—a human skeleton clad in the moldering rags of white man's khaki breeches and boots. Imbedded in the breast about where the heart had once been was a machete. Not a rusted or weatherbeaten knife, but the machete Duncan had supplied to hack the way through the jungle yesterday afternoon!

Sam Christopher wanted to run, but a deadly fascination held him rooted to the spot. The dull glitter of a watch chain at the belt of the decaying breeches compelled his attention. Slowly, his hands shaking as though with palsy, he drew from the rotting pocket a gold watch and a watch-charm that was a medallion. He examined the second object.

It was a medal award from the Academy of Arts and Sciences. Turning it over, Sam deciphered the engraving on the back side.

To Murdock Duncan, Ph. D.

June 12, 1930

Sam Christopher took the shakes, despite the bright morning sunlight. (Concluded on page 123)

THE GEIST OF THE JUNGLE

(Concluded from page 103)

It was several minutes before he could control himself. A great many things became clear if not understandable. "Impossible," he had said, and what had Duncan replied?

"A great many things which you impatiently label as impossible today you will be quite ready to accept as natural phenomena which you simply do not comprehend."

As the young American stood there he understood that the ghost of Murdock Duncan had led him to the explorer's death site, the spot where he had presumably fallen a victim to the sacrificial rites of the savage descendants of the ancient Mayas.

The *cenote* boomed again.