

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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*It Was a Frightful, Incredible Thing,
Found in the Amazon Valley*

THE GRAY DEATH

By LOUAL B. SUGARMAN

UNWAVERINGLY, my guest sustained my perplexed and angry stare. Silently, he withstood the battering words I launched at him.

He appeared quite unmoved by my reproaches, save for a dull red flush that crept up and flooded his face, as now and then I grew particularly bitter and biting in my tirade.

At length I ceased. It was like hitting into a mass of feathers—there was no resistance to my blows. He had made no attempt to justify himself. After a momentous silence, he spoke his first word since we had entered the room.

"I'm sorry, my friend; more sorry than you can imagine, but—I couldn't help it. I simply could not touch her hand. The shock—so suddenly to come upon her—to see her as she was—I tell you, I forgot myself. Please convey to your wife my most abject apologies, will you? I am sorry, for I know I should have liked her very much. But—now I must go."

"You can't go out in this storm," I answered. "It's out of the question. I'm sorry, too; sorry that you acted as you did—and more than sorry that I spoke to you as I did, just now. But I was angry. Can you blame me? I'd been waiting for this moment ever since I heard from you that you had come back from the Amazon—the moment when you, my best friend, and my wife were to meet. And then—why, damn it, man, I can't understand it! To pull back, to shrink away as you did; even to refuse to take her hand or acknowledge the introduction! It was unbelievably rude. It hurt her, and it hurt me."

"I know it, and that is why I am so very sorry about it all. I can't excuse myself, but I can tell you a story that may explain."

I saw, however, that for some reason he was reluctant to talk.

"You need not," I said. "Let's drop the whole matter, and in the morning you can make your amends to Laura."

Anthony shook his head.

"It's not pleasant to talk about, but that was not my reason for hesitating.

I was afraid you would not believe me if I did tell you. Sometimes truth strains one's credulity too much. But I will tell you. It may do me good to talk about it, and, anyhow, it will explain why I acted as I did.

"Your wife came in just after we entered. She had not yet removed her veil or gloves. They were gray. So was her dress. Her shoes—everything was gray. And she stood there, her hand outstretched—all in that color—a body covered with gray. I can't help shuddering. *I can't stand gray!* It's the color of death; Can your nerves stand the dark?"

I rose and switched off the lights. The room was plunged into darkness, save for the flicker of the flames in the fireplace and the intermittent flashes of lightning. The rain beat through the leafless branches outside with a monotonous, slithering *swish* and rattled like ghostly fingers against the windows.

"The light makes it hard to talk—of unbelievable things. One needs the darkness to hear of hell."

He paused. The *swir-r-r* of the rain crept into the stillness of the room. My companion sighed. The firelight shone on his face, which floated in the darkness—a disembodied face, grown suddenly haggard.

"A good night for this story, with the wind crying like a lost soul in the night. How I hate that sound! Ah, well!"

There was a moment of silence.

"It was not like this, though, that night when we started up the Amazon. No. Then it was warm and soft, and the stars seemed so near. The air was filled with scent of a thousand tropical blossoms. They grew rank on the shore.

"There were four of us—two natives, myself and Von Housmann. It is of him I am going to tell you. He was a German—and a good man. A great naturalist, and a true friend. He sucked the poison from my leg once, when a snake had bitten me. I thanked him and said I'd repay him some day. I did—sooner than I had thought—with a bullet! I could not bear to see him suffer."

The man sat there, gazing into the flames—and I listened to the dripping rain fingering the bare boughs and *lap-lap-tapping* on the roof above.

My friend looked up.

"I was seeing his face in the flames. God help him! . . . We had traveled for days—weeks—how long does not matter. We had camped and moved on; we had stopped to gather specimens—always deeper into that evil undergrowth. And as we moved on, Von Housmann and I grew close; one either grows to love or hate in such circumstances, and Sigmund was not the sort of man one would hate. I tell you, I loved that man!

"One day we struck into a new place. We had long before left the tracks of other expeditions. We *trekked* along, unmindful of the exotic beauty of our surroundings, when I saw our native, who was up ahead, stop short and sniff the air.

"We stopped, too, and then I noticed what the keener, more primitive sense of our guide had detected first."

"IT WAS an odor. A strange odor, indefinable and sickening. It was filled with foreboding—evil. It smelt—*gray!* I can not describe it any other way. It smelt dead. It made me think of decay—decay, and mould and—ugly things. I shuddered. I looked at Von Housmann, and I saw that he, too, had noticed it.

"What is that smell?" I asked.

"He shook his head.

"Ach, dot iss new. I haf not smelled it before. But—I do not like it. It iss not goot. Smells is goot or bat—and dot is not goot. I say, I do not like dot smell."

"Neither did I. We went ahead, cautiously now. A curious sense pervaded the air. It puzzled me. Then it struck me: *silence*. Silence, as though the music of the spheres had suddenly been snuffed out. It was the utter cessation of the interminable chirping and chattering of the birds and monkeys and other small animals.

"We had become so accustomed to that multitudinous babel that is absence

was disturbing. It was—eerie. Yes, that's the word. It made that first impression of lifelessness more intense. Not death, you understand. Even death has in it a thought of life, an element of being. But this was just—lifelessness.

"The gray odor had become so strong it was wellnigh unbearable. Then we saw our guides running back to us. They rebelled. They refused to go beyond the line of trees ahead. They said it was *tabu*.

"That ended it. No promise, no threat, nothing would move them. Do you know what a savage's *tabu* is? It is stronger than death. And this place was *tabu*. So we left them there with our stuff, and Sigmund and I went on alone. We reached the farthest line of trees and stopped on the edge of a clearing.

"I can't describe that sight to you. But I can see it—good God, how I can still see it! Sometimes I wake up in the night with that nightmarish picture in my eyes, and my nostrils filled with that ghoulish stench.

"It was a field of gray; almost, I might have said, a field of *living* gray. And yet, it did not give the impression of life. It moved, although there was not a breath of wind; not a leaf on the trees quivered, but that mass of gray wiggled and crawled and undulated as though it were a huge gray shroud that was thrown over some monstrous jelly-like Thing.

"And that Thing was writhing and twisting. The gray mass extended as far as I could see ahead; to the right the sandy shore of the river stopped it; and to the left and in front of us it terminated at a distance of a few yards away from the trees where a belt of sand intervened.

"I don't know how long we stood there, my friend Von Housmann and I. It fascinated us. At last he spoke.

"*Heilige Mütter. Was kommt da?* Vat in der name off all dot iss holy do you call dot? Nefer haf I seen such before. Eferyvere I haf traffeled, but nefer haf I seen a sight lige dot. I tell you, it makes my flesh crawl!"

"'It makes me sick to look at it,' I answered. 'It looks like—like living corruption.'

"The old German shook his head. He was baffled. We knew we were looking upon something that no living mortal had ever gazed upon before. And our flesh crawled, as we watched that Thing writhing beneath its blanket of gray.

"We walked slowly and cautiously across the strip of sand to the edge of the gray patch. As I bent over, the pungency of the odor bit into the membrane

of my nostrils like an acid, and my eyes smarted.

"And then I saw something that drove all other thoughts from my mind. The mass was a mosslike growth of tiny gray fungi. They were shaped like miniature mushrooms, but out of the top of each grew a countless number of antennae that twisted and writhed around ceaselessly in the air.

"They seemed to be feeling and groping around for something, and it was this incessant movement that gave to the patch that quivering undulation which I had noticed before. I stared until my eyes ached.

"'What do you make of it,' I asked my friend.

"'Ach, I do not know. It iss incomprehensible. I haf nefer seen such a—t'ing in my whole, long life. It iss, I should say, some sort off a fungoid growt'. Ya, it iss clearly dot. But der species—um, dot iss *not* so clear. Und dose liddle feelers; on a fungus dot iss new. It iss unheard off. See, der *veddamnte* t'ings iss lige lifting fingers; dey svay und tvist lige dey vas feeling for somet'ings, not? I am egseedingly curious. Und, I am baffled—und, my frient, I do not lige dot.'

"Impatiently, he reached out a stick he was carrying a newycut, stout cudgel of dried wood. He stirred around with it in the growth at his feet. And then a cry broke from his lips.

"'Ach, du lieber Gott—*gnädig Gott im Himmel! Sieh' da!*'

"I looked where he was pointing. His hand trembled violently. And little wonder! The stick, for about twelve inches up, was a mass of gray!

"And as I watched, I saw, steadily growing before my eyes, that awful gray creep up and surround the wood. I'm not exaggerating; I tell you, in less time than it takes to tell, it had almost reached Von Housmann's hand. He threw it from him with an exclamation of horror.

"It fell in the gray growth and instantly vanished. It seemed to melt away."

"SIGMUND looked at me. He was pale. At last he sighed.

"'So-o-o! Ve learn. On vood it grows. I might haf guessed. Dot iss der reason dot no trees are here. It destroys dem. But sa. *schnell*; *ach*, lige fire it growed. My frendt, I lige dot stuff lesser *als* before. It is not healt'y. But vat vill it not eat?'

"I handed him my rifle. He took it, and with the muzzle poked the growth. Man, my hair fairly stood on end! Do you know anything about fungi? No?

Well, I have never known or heard of any vegetable growth that would attack blue steel. But that stuff, I tell you, that rifle barrel sprouted a crop of that gray mass as readily and as quickly as had the wood!

"I grabbed the gun and lifted it out of the patch. Already several inches of steel had been eaten—literally *caten*—off. I held it up and watched that damnable gray crawl along the barrel. It just seemed to melt the metal. It melted like sealing wax, and great gray flakes dropped off to the ground.

"Nearer and near it came; to the rear sight, the trigger-guard, the hammer. It was uncanny—like a dream. I stood there, paralyzed. I could not believe what my eyes told me was true. I looked at Sigmund. His mouth was open and his face was white as death. I laughed at his face. That seemed to tear away the mist. He yelled and pointed, and I looked down.

"Not two inches from my hand was that mass. I could see those feelers reaching out toward my hand and I was sick. Instinctively, I threw the gun from me; aimlessly, blindly. It fell on the sand belt outside the gray mass.

"Hardly had it struck the sand before the growth had reached the butt, and then there was nothing to be seen but a tiny patch of that gray, poisonous Thing. And as we looked, it began to melt. Gradually, steadily, it was disappearing.

"'Quick, quick,' shouted Von Housmann, and we ran over to the spot. By bending over, we could see what was happening.

"The feelers, or antennae, which we had noticed before, had vanished, but instead, at the bases of each individual plant, were similar tendrils. But more of them—thousands and thousands of them all feeling and groping frantically about. And as they swayed and twisted and brushed the sand, one by one they shriveled up and seemed to withdraw into the parent body.

"And gradually this nucleus itself shrank and withered, until it was no more than a tiny gray speck on the sand. Soon that was all that was left; a lot of tiny whitish particles, much lighter in color than the original plant, scattered around on the sand.

"I looked at Von Housmann, and he looked at me. After a long interval, he spoke. He spoke slowly, almost as though it were a painful effort.

"'Ant'ony, ve haf seen a—miracle. From vat, or how, or ven, dot hell-growt' sprang, I do not know. I do not know how many, many years it has stood here; may be it has been for centuries.

But I do know this: if dot sand was not here—vell, I shudder to t'ink off vat would be today.'

"I stared.

"'You do not understand? *Ach*, so! You haf vat happened to dot stick? Und to dot gun of steel? So! Look, now.'

"He took off his hat and went over to the border of the patch. He touched—just barely touched the brim of the hat to the gray matter and held it up. Already a growth was moving up the linen. He nodded, then threw it away, onto the sand. Speechless, we watched it fade away under the merciless attack of that horrible stuff, and then, in turn, the gray fungoid growth wither and disappear.

"'Now do you understand? Do you see vat I meant? Vood, steel, linen—eferyt'ing vat it touches it *eats*. It grows fast—like flame in dry sticks. All-consuming. Aber—*siest du*—dot sand—ven it touched dot, it died. It starved. Und see! Look close—more closer still at dot sand. Do you see anything odd about it?'

"I shook my head. It looked very fine and light, but I could not see anything unusual.

"'No? Iss it not glass, dot sand? Look at it und at der sand vere dot T'ing has not been, and see if it is not so different.'

"I picked up some sand from under my foot. And then I saw what *he* had seen at once. The sand in my hand was coarser, dirtier—in short, like any fine-grained sand you may have seen. But the sand where the Grey had fallen was clear, glasslike. It was almost transparent, and I saw that what was there was a mass of silicon particles. I nodded.

"'Yes,' I said, 'I see now. That stuff has eaten out every particle of mineral, of dirt and dust, but not the silicon!'

"'Egsactly! Und dot iss vat has safed us from—Gott only knows vot! I do not know what dot stuff vill eat, but I *do* know it vill not eat silicon. Vy? I do not know. Dot iss yet a mystery. So—it starts,—*ach*, dot too, I do not know—but it starts somewhere. Und it eats und grows, und grows and eats, and eferyt'ing vot it touches it consumes—egecept sand. Sand stops it.

"'It eats out der stuff in der sand, but not der silica, und starves and dies. It is a miracle. If der sand vas not here—*ach*, Gott!—it would keep on going until—vell—I do not know! I haf refer seen dot before. I am intrigued, und I am going to take dot stuff—oh, only a liddle bit—und I shall not rest until I haf learned something about it. Und,

because I haf seen it does not lige sand, I vill make for it a cage—a liddle box of glass, und study it lige it vas a bug. Not?'

"We returned to where our natives still stood with our packs. We quickly fitted together some microscopic slides into a rough box and bound it about with string. With it, we returned to the edge of the gray patch. Von Housmann knelt down and carefully scooped up a bit of the fungus with a glass spatula he had brought along. He dumped this into his box and waited. In five minutes it had disappeared. He looked up blankly.

"'You forgot, Sigmund,' I said, smiling at his woeful expression. 'It starves on silicon. It won't live in glass.'

"'Ach. *Dumkopf!* Of course! I haf forgot dot. But, ve vill fool dot hell-plant. He goes yet on hunger-strike-no? Ve try now dot forcible feeding.'

"He took out his knife and cut from a near-by tree several small splinters.

"'Ve vill feed him, so. Dot vood, it vill be for him a greadt feast, und he shall eat und eat, und we vill study him und see vot we vill see.'

"Laughing, he bent over and shook out the tiny gray residue which was in the box. He dropped in a sliver of wood and was bending over to refill his box when I felt a sting on my foot. I looked down, and my heart stood still.

"On my shoe, just in between the laces, was a spot of gray. I could not move. I was cold. I can not describe how I felt, but I seemed turned to stone. My flesh quivered and shrank and I was sick—very sick. Sigmund looked up, startled, and then he looked at my feet.

"The next thing I knew I was on my back, my foot in his hand. One slash of his knife across the thongs which laced my boot, and he jerked it off.

"The biting grew worse. I heard him gasp, and then I felt a sharp pain. My head swam and I must have fainted. I regained consciousness—I don't know how soon after—and I found myself back under the trees. I looked at my foot, which was throbbing and burning like fire. It was swathed in a bandage that Von Housmann had taken from his emergency kit and was wrapping around the instep. It was deeply stained with blood. I moved, and he looked up. He smiled when he saw I was conscious.

"'Dot was a close shave—yes? It had just eaten into der shoe as I pulled it off und one spot—lige a bencil dot—on your skin vas gray. So I cut it out and all around it, und so you haf a hole in your foot, but—you haf your foot. Now so! You lie here, und I get der niggers and ve take you to bed.'

"A tent was soon erected and I was carried into it. For two days I lay there, delirious half the time. Sigmund never left my side. He even slept there. He was insistent that it was his fault. He said one of the apparently dead fungi had dropped on my shoe and had revived there. That is, the plant, instead of dying, had shriveled up, but the life-nucleus was still strong. I shudder even now when I think of what might have been.

"At the end of the third day I was able to hobble about a little with the aid of a cane. That afternoon Sigmund came to me and asked if I would care to go with him to fill his little glass box. I refused, and he laughed. It was the last time I ever heard him laugh. I begged him to leave that stuff alone.

"Still laughing, he made some light reply and left me. I lay in my cot. I was filled with forebodings. The heat was intense, and I must have dropped off to sleep. I dreamed horrible, troublesome, weird dreams. I awoke, bathed in a cold sweat. I felt sure something was wrong, that some one was calling for me. I got to my feet and left my tent. No one was in sight. I tried to laugh at my premonition. I bitterly regretted that I had allowed my friend to override my persuasions.

"Hurrying as much as was possible, I started toward the clearing. My wound throbbled and ached. It tortured me. I seemed weighed down. Once I stumbled in my eagerness. It was horrible. Like a nightmare.

"I must have covered half the distance when I heard a scream. What a shriek it was! I wake up nights even now hearing it. It was unrecognizable. Like some unearthly animal. Just that one scream. My stick hindered me. I threw it away and ran.

"My blood was cold in my veins, but I felt not one twinge of pain in my foot. At last I came to the edge of the clearing. And there—God, it makes me sick even now to think of it."

THE SPEAKER paused; his face was chalky, and he shuddered and buried his face in his hands. I think he was crying.

Outside, the wind still howled, dully, monotonously, eerily. Sometimes it would shriek and scream. Then my friend's voice again—level, dead, cold.

"I looked out; I saw Sigmund standing on the sand. I can see him as plainly as though he were here now. His face was ashen. He was looking down. At his feet were the fragments of the glass box he had made.

"He was holding out his hands, looking at them. They were gray. And they writhed and twisted, but his arms were still. He was not even trembling. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and my throat was dry—but at last I called to him.

"Sigmund—Sigmund!" I cried. "For God's sake—"

"He looked up, and, I tell you, I never want to see such a face again! I can never forget it. The face of a soul in torture. He looked at me and held out his arms. His hands were gone—flaked off in large, gray, writhing drops to the sand at his feet!

"He tried to smile, but couldn't.

"Another gray-Thing—dropped off. I was dizzy with sickness. It was un-

believable. And then he spoke. His voice was well-nigh unrecognizable. It croaked and broke:

"Done for, my friend. I feel it eating to my heart. Be merciful and help me. *Shoot*—quick, through the forehead!"

"His words beat through the stupor clouding my brain, I started toward him—hands out-stretched. I could not speak.

"*Um Gottes Willen, bleib da! Stop! Stop!*"

"The words brought me up to a stop.

"Sigmund! My friend! What—?"

"Do not come near me! Would you also be so tormented? Vat dot Gray touches it consumes. Do not argue, I

say, but *shoot! Heilige Mutter! Vy do you not shoot?*"

"His voice rose into a shriek of agony. What was left of one arm had sloughed off—the other was almost gone. A little mound of gray grew larger at his feet. His flesh was consumed; skin, blood and bone, absorbed by that vile gray Thing, and he shrieked in agony and prayer. Both arms were gone, and the stuff at his feet had already begun to eat through his boots.

"I shot him—between his eyes. I saw him fall, and I fainted. When I came to, there was only a mound of tiny gray fungi, greedily reaching their hellish tentacles for sustenance and slowly shriveling up into tiny light gray specks of dust on a glossy patch of sand."