

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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The Invisible Terror

An Uncanny Tale of the Jungle

By HUGH THOMASON

OLD MAN Jess Benson, cattleman and mine owner, rode across the high plateau, which divided the rich grazing lands between Rock Valley and Slater Canyon, and let his horse pick its way down the steep slope to Slater Creek. Here, as the sorrel slaked its thirst, the big man in the saddle filled and lighted his pipe, while his eyes roved slowly through the sprinkle of cottonwoods which fringed the creek.

About fifty feet upstream, close to a large bowlder and partly behind a clump of stunted plum bushes, half a dozen magpies were quarreling over something that the rider could not clearly distinguish. He could merely see a dark blotch behind the bushes—the carcass of a cow or steer probably—and he watched the beautiful black-and-white birds speculatively as they uttered their shrill, raucous cries, and fluttered about the thicket.

Since there was a possibility, however, that the dead animal might be carrying his own brand, Benson finally turned his horse in the direction of the birds. Half a minute later, having reached a spot from which he could command a clear view of the thing that lay behind the bushes, his tanned cheeks went ashen, and he swung himself to the ground with an exclamation of horrified surprise.

Close to the thicket, and five or six feet from the rock, the body of a man was huddled in the horrible posture of one who has met a violent end.

He was lying partly on his side, one leg drawn up, the other outstretched, while both arms were bent under him. His face and neck were terribly torn and mangled, and his flannel shirt had been ripped half off his body, which was bruised and covered with wounds. Several paces away was a trampled felt hat, and the muzzle of a revolver peeped from beneath the body, its butt evidently clutched in the stiffened fingers of one hand. For a dozen feet the ground was torn and trampled, as though a terrible struggle had taken place.

For several minutes Benson stood still and eyed the ghastly thing in horrified fascination. Long experience as a range rider told him that the body and the signs of conflict about it could not be

more than forty-eight hours old—the thing had happened since a heavy rain of two days before—and it slowly dawned on the cattleman that the dead man was Nathan Smith, a neighbor of his, who owned a small farm some five or six miles away.

For some time he studied the body and the surrounding soil very carefully, noting especially that the soft earth was covered with large, doglike tracks; then he went to his horse and untied his slicker from the back of the saddle. With this garment he managed to cover the body so that the magpies could no longer reach it. Then he mounted his horse and rode off toward Elktooth, ten miles away.

Sheriff Parker and Doctor Morse, the coroner, happened to be together in the latter's office when Benson entered and told his story. Both men listened without any particular comment, and at the end the sheriff got to his feet.

"I'll run you out in the car, Horace," he informed the coroner. "We can reach the spot easily enough by following the old road up the creek. From what Benson says, the thing does not look like a crime exactly—it seems more like the work of wolves, though I never heard of any attacking a man in this region; but you can never tell. At any rate, we'd better look into it as soon as we can."

It was about an hour later when the three men got out of the machine and walked the few feet which separated them from the scene of the tragedy. Lifting the slicker, Doctor Morse stooped over the gruesome object beneath it, while Sheriff Parker gazed at the trodden ground with interest. While the coroner made his examination, the little officer paced around the thicket, eying the tracks thoughtfully; more than once he stooped to apply a pocket rule to some especially distinct impression, and twice he whistled softly to himself. By the time the doctor's examination had ended, he was turning a speculative eye toward a dim trail which led off at right angles through the cottonwoods.

Returning from washing his hands at the edge of the stream, Doctor Morse looked at his friend in contemplative

silence, as he lighted a cigar and puffed at it nervously.

"Well?" the sheriff questioned, at length. "What was it? What killed him, Horace?"

"Bless me if I know, Bert. I never saw anything like this before in all my experience. It was an animal of some kind, I should say; a wolf, perhaps, although, as you said, the few wolves we have hereabouts have never been known to attack humans. But the man is frightfully mangled, his jugular vein is quite torn out of him. Had his gun in his hand, too. It's empty. He must have fought the thing hard, whatever it was. I wonder—could it have been the 'plague'?"

Sheriff Parker nodded in an absent way, his eyes still fixed on the faint trail through the trees and weeds.

"I think it was," he said. "This spot is only a little way removed from where the creature has been in the habit of roaming, and poor Smith, I suppose, was caught here after dark. These tracks match those we found near Moore, and they look pretty fresh. How long should you say he has been dead?"

"Killed early last night, I should judge," was the doctor's answer. "He died hard; too, poor chap. Look at that ground."

Jess Benson, with horror written all over his honest features, had been staring at the two men as they talked. Big, burly, outdoor giant that he was, he seemed to be in the grip of a kind of terror—or was it awe?—that made him incapable of speech.

"Heavens, what an end!" he burst out at length. "What are we going to do, sheriff? How'll we ever get the thing that killed him?"

Sheriff Parker made no answer. He merely continued to search the ground around the body for a few minutes longer, as though he wished to make doubly sure that his suspicions were correct; then he helped the others wrap the body in a blanket and stow it in the car. Five minutes later, save for the trampled ground and some dull-brown, ominous stains on the grass, there was no sign of the tragedy apparent.

Two hours later, seated at his own desk with a cigar between his teeth, Sheriff Parker squinted through his glasses at Doctor Morse, who sat opposite.

"I tell you, Horace," the sheriff was saying, "it is such a thing as never has been known before. If I had not been studying the results of this creature's work for the past six weeks, I could not believe that such a thing could be. Still, it *must* be so! Poor Jack Moore, he was the first victim; we were morally certain that the thing got him; then that strange waving of the alfalfa in Pollard's meadow, and now this. I tell you, it's awful, Horace!"

"It is; it's more than that, Bert; it's unnatural." Doctor Morse puffed jerkily at his cigar. "And yet, science tells us that there are sounds the ear cannot detect, why not colors the eye cannot see? Take the only time the beast, or the 'plague,' as we have begun to call it, appeared in daylight. I mean that uncanny agitation in Pollard's hayfield that afternoon, when some heavy creature thrashed about there. It could be heard, and the alfalfa moved, but the thing itself could not be *seen*, though three different people stood watching."

"You are quite right, Horace; and I have already spent a great many sleepless nights milling over that 'neutral color' theory. Recently I have read that at the end of the solar spectrum there are things known as actinic rays. They represent colors—integral colors in the composition of light—which we are unable to discern with the naked eye. The human eye is, after all, an imperfect instrument. Undoubtedly there are colors which we cannot see, and this beast, this scourge of the neighborhood, is of some such color."

"Aside from its color," the coroner mused, "the creature is tangible enough. It leaves a track in the ground larger by far than that of a full-grown timber wolf, and it certainly can fight. Benson says his hounds were soundly thrashed by it last week, you know, and there is Smith. He was a very powerful man, and armed, but, so far as we know, the thing killed him and got away unscathed. The man's body looked as if it had been struck by a train. The chest and sides might have been beaten in with a sledge, his clothes were torn to shreds, and as for his throat—well, the less said about that the better."

Sheriff Parker said nothing for several minutes. Getting to his feet, he began to pace slowly back and forth across the room, fingers interlaced behind his back

and head bowed in the way he sometimes affected when in deep thought.

He was struggling with a problem the like of which he had never before tackled; and as he watched him, the coroner, in his turn, strove to devise some method of wiping out the creature which was terrorizing the entire valley.

ALMOST SIX weeks before, Jack Moore, a stock inspector, whose duties often carried him far out into the thinly settled portions of the country, had been found dead under circumstances similar in every way to those surrounding Smith's end.

At first, the authorities and general public had attributed the death to timber wolves, for the sole reason that they could attribute it to nothing else. The tracks about the body, though exceedingly large, were shaped like a wolf's, and the body itself had been torn and mangled as by some carnivorous animal.

Soon after Moore's death came the killing of a dozen sheep in their pasture, and, on the heels of this, Judson Pollard, a prosperous farmer whose word was beyond dispute, with two of his hired men, had seen something rush through an alfalfa meadow—something that they could not make out, though it was broad daylight, and they could see the tall hay wave and shake, and could even hear the creature as it thrashed about there.

Then Jess Benson's hounds, a pack of fourteen, which had never met its match in numerous encounters with wolves and coyotes, had been soundly whipped, and three of its number killed outright in a fight with some animal which their owner could not see, although he had witnessed the fight from a distance.

Now, as a climax to the whole business, had come Nathan Smith's horrible death; and no man could say who or what would be the next victim. No wonder the entire county could talk of little else, and that the creature, whatever it was, had been named the "plague"!

As he thought over all these things for the hundredth time, Sheriff Parker cudged his brain in an effort to form some plan for trapping and killing the beast. He knew that there must be a way, somehow, to make an end of the terror, even though the most skillful trappers and hunters in the district had failed to discover it. The animal's range was known. It seemed, for the most part, to frequent the country between Slater Creek and White Horse Mountain, probably because this region contained plenty of timber and natural shelter; and it was in this region that

it must be cornered. For many years the little sheriff had studied the crimes of men, and few criminals had ever had just cause to boast of outwitting him; but this was a different task.

"Horace," the sheriff burst out finally, coming to an abrupt halt in front of his friend, "this butchery has gone far enough. We must put an end to it. What do you say to trying this very night? The beast seems to roam mostly at night, and tonight will be moonlight. We'll try to trap it at the Black Pool."

Doctor Morse stared at the speaker in surprise.

"The Black Pool?" he repeated. "Are you crazy, Bert? To be sure, we have discovered, so far as possible at any rate, that the beast seems to frequent the pool more than any other one spot; but how can we trap it? That has already been tried more than once."

"True, Horace; but we shall try in a different way. This thing, whatever it is, though it can't be seen, can be felt and heard; therefore it must have a solid body, so to speak. It leaves a distinct trail, you know, and its victims are proof enough that it is a creature of flesh and blood. My scheme is to *make* it visible—then, if we are lucky, we can shoot it."

The coroner jumped to his feet in his excitement.

"I see what you mean!" he cried. "Why haven't we thought of that before? But how, Bert—how will you do it?"

"That remains to be seen." Sheriff Parker smiled oddly as he looked at his companion. "If you are willing to risk the thing with me, I think I have a plan that will work. We'll leave here in the car about four this afternoon; that will get us to the pool in plenty of time to set our trap before dark. Bring along your repeating shotgun—a heavy charge of buckshot is far more certain after dark than a rifle ball, and we can't afford to miss."

Doctor Morse nodded understandingly.

"I shall not fail you, Bert," he said.

EARLY DUSK found the two men in the sheriff's car slowly picking their way over the stony trail which led to the Black Pool. In the bottom of the tonneau was a ten-gallon keg, three or four short boards, and something wrapped in burlap, while the back seat held a pair of repeating shot guns and a box of cartridges. A hundred yards from the pool, at the foot of a little hill, Sheriff Parker killed his engine and stepped out onto the ground.

"We'd better leave the car here," he remarked. "It is best not to make any

more disturbance in the immediate vicinity of the pool than we can help, and we can easily carry what we need from here. But let's look around a bit first."

Together, carrying their loaded guns in the manner of men who wish to be prepared against any sudden emergency, they made their way through a fringe of trees to the edge of the black, still water, which gave the pool its name. Even by daylight the place was far from cheerful. The pool, about seventy feet in diameter, was entirely surrounded by trees which grew to within a few feet of its oily surface.

There was no sign of life about the place, not even a frog croaked, and the muddy banks bore mute testimony that none of the many cattle which roamed that region had been there to drink for many days. In one place only was the mud broken by fresh tracks; and when his eyes fell on this spot, the sheriff smiled grimly.

"You see them, Horace," he said, pointing. "The thing has been here recently—its trail is as plain as day; this must be its drinking place. Now for our little trap."

Returning to the car, the two men first carried the keg to the foot of a large tree which stood only a few yards from where the "plague" had approached the pool; then they got the boards and the other articles, which, on being unwrapped, proved to be a brass hand pump, with a long spray nozzle, and about a dozen feet of hose.

Doctor Morse regarded this contrivance with considerable perplexity. He could not see of what use it could be in the task that lay ahead of them; but when he expressed his puzzlement, his companion laughed softly.

"It's really very simple," he explained, "although it is merely an experiment of my own, and may not work as I hope it will. The keg is full of whitewash, and this pump will throw a steady stream for over thirty feet. If we can get the brute within range, my idea is to spray him with whitewash until we can see enough of him to shoot at. White always shows up fairly well in the dark. Catch the idea?"

Doctor Morse gazed at his friend in surprised admiration for an instant; then he impulsively caught his hand in a hard grip.

"You're a wonder, Bert!" he exclaimed. "I don't see how you ever thought of it, but the scheme looks good to me. I am honestly beginning to think we have a chance. But what are those boards for?"

"For a platform on the tree yonder," replied the sheriff, nodding toward a

cotton wood. "For obvious reasons I thought it would be safer to do our watching from above ground, and with these boards we can construct a support that will enable us to stay in the tree with some degree of safety. Of course, the thing may be able to climb, for all we know, but we must chance that. The tree is within easy range of the water, and those tall ferns and weeds, if we watch them closely, should give us warning of the beast's approach. Now let's get busy, for it will be dark before we know it."

At the end of half an hour, just as it was actually growing dark within the shadows of the trees, the two men had built a substantial platform in a fork of the cottonwood, some ten feet from the ground, and established themselves upon it. Sheriff Parker's gun lay beside him, while he grasped the nozzle of the high-pressure pump in his hands; but the coroner's weapon was ready for instant use.

Swiftly the day turned into night, and for an hour it was as dark as pitch at the edge of the pool; then the moon, surrounded by myriads of stars, slowly climbed up over the hill-tops beyond the water. With eyes riveted upon the ferns, from the movements of which they expected to be warned of the beast's approach, the two men waited tensely.

For a long time nothing happened. From the blank darkness around them came merely the familiar noises of night in the wilderness—the long, wailing howl of a distant coyote; the chirping drone of the tireless insects in the trees; strange cries of night birds, so different from those of the birds of the day; the "plop" of muskrats diving in the still water, and all the mysterious chorus of small sounds that one never notices until after night has fallen.

Seated on their narrow platform, the watchers were soon very uncomfortable, for the mosquitoes were numerous and hungry, and the men dared not smoke for fear the smell of tobacco would give warning to the thing they sought. Doctor Morse, eyes fixed on the top of a ridge which could be seen through a break in the trees, and beyond which the stars and the moon seemed to be grouped, was half dozing, when suddenly he straightened up with a little start.

A curious thing had taken place! The stars, rising above the crest of the ridge, had successively disappeared from right to left!

Each was blotted out for but an instant, and not more than two or three at the same time, but along half the length of the ridge, all that were within a few degrees of the crest were

eclipsed. Something had passed along between them and the coroner's line of vision; but he could not see it, and the stars were not close enough together to define its shape. After a second of tense watching, Doctor Morse reached out and gripped the sheriff by the arm.

"Did you see it?" he whispered. "It's coming, I think."

"Yes; but be quiet, for your life!" Sheriff Parker leaned forward and shifted his grip on the hose nozzle.

For several minutes all was silent, then came a faint patter of stealthy feet, and something like the sniffing of a hound sounded below them, while the ferns waved violently, although there was no breeze. Almost immediately came the sounds of lapping in the water—sounds exactly like those made by a thirsty dog when drinking.

Taking careful aim with the nozzle, Sheriff Parker suddenly pumped out a steady stream of whitewash which began to splash and spatter on the edge of the pool and surface of the water. And, as the milky liquid began to fall, the two watchers saw a strange and wonderful thing. In a spot, which ten seconds before had been merely opaque darkness, an outline grew up and took shape out of the ground; a strange, monstrous, misshapen thing, squat and hairy, not unlike a huge wolf in general appearance, but broader and more powerful than any wolf either man had ever seen.

For an instant after the whitewash began to fall upon it, the thing turned a big-jawed, hairy face in the direction of the tree; then, with a horrible snarl of fury, which both men plainly heard, it charged toward them.

"Shoot! Shoot, Horace!" Sheriff Parker yelled, dropping the useless nozzle and grabbing his gun.

The two heavy guns, charged with double loads of buckshot, roared out almost together. There was a coughing snarl from the thing on the ground, which save for a white patch or two, was almost invisible again, and the sound of convulsive struggling; then the sheriff fired a second time. Almost immediately there was a heavy splash in the water; then absolute silence.

Doctor Morse wiped the cold sweat from his forehead with a shaking hand.

"Did we get it?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yes, I'm almost sure of it." Sheriff Parker, though tremendously excited, began to lower himself to the ground. "No animal of the wolf type could stand up against three charges of buckshot at less than a dozen yards," he declared. "I believe it is dead, Horace."

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THE INVISIBLE TERROR

(Continued from page 102)

When they warily approached the edge of the pool, however, the two men could find no sign of the thing they had shot at, beyond a number of footprints in the soft ground, and, in one spot, very close to the water, a large splotch of crimson, which made the little sheriff chuckle exultantly.

“He was hard hit, and he’s sunk in the pool,” he declared positively, “sunk in water that no man has ever yet found the bottom of—a fitting end for such a beast, although I won’t deny that I should have enjoyed a close look at the body. But it’s too late now, and, at any rate, the brute is dead. Let’s be getting home, Horace.”
