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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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The Maze And The Monster

by Edward D. Hoch

While Edward D. Hoch has written some fantasy and science fiction, the bulk of his work has been in the field of the detective and crime story — but with a difference. The strange, the eerie, the grotesque, the forgotten legend and obscure, horrifying fact have nearly always played a considerable part in his accounts of crime, detection, and justice; while the occasional, required genuflections to formula were rarely more than perfunctory. Hoch likes to open a story with a familiar, even commonplace situation in life or fiction, and then proceed with his own very individual twist . . .

THE TANGLED CHAIN of half-forgotten events which had carried William Nellis from a comfortable existence on London's West End to the wild waters off the Atlantic Coast of North Africa were such that even he would have been hard pressed to explain his presence that bleak December day in the middle of a sandy beach so far from home. The ship he'd come

on had floundered in a storm the day before, and now he alone of all the crew seemed to have safely reached the shelter of this island. The ship itself was no longer on the horizon. Perhaps it had been carried to the bottom; more likely, the crew had regained control after the storm passed and sailed on without him.

In any event, he was not to be

alone on the beach for long. Two men wearing a sort of greenish uniform unfamiliar to him appeared from the underbrush, leveling rifles of a type he'd imagined were obsolete fifty years ago. They spoke in Spanish, a language he hardly knew, but their commands were obvious. He was a prisoner, captured on the beach of an island he hardly knew existed, by men who spoke a different language. And within an hour he found himself cast into the darkness of a cell in the far interior of the island, without food or water or any clothing but the tattered remains of his seagoing garments.

He remained in the dungeon — for it was nothing more than that — for more than a day, until his thirst was such that he'd taken to licking water from the walls where it trickled down in the darkness from some dampness unseen above. Then, without warning, the guards came for him again. This time he was taken down a long passageway that seemed to connect the prison with a sort of palace, a vast glistening sparkle of a place that reminded him of those old pictures of Versailles in the days of Saint-Simon. The guards led him into a high-ceilinged chamber at the end of which sat an elderly man who gave every evidence of being strong and active despite his years. His face was deeply tanned, almost

brown, and the whiteness of his wrinkled hair gave to the whole head an air of motion, of matter arrested but momentarily. The man might have been a conqueror or a prime minister. He was most certainly a ruler.

"Good evening," he said quietly, speaking in English with just a trace of Spanish accent. "Welcome to the Island of Snails."

"My ship lost me," Nellis started to explain. "The storm . . ."

"No need for explanations." The other held up his hand. "We are always anxious to have visitors here."

"This is your island?"

"Quite correct. I am Captain Cortez, direct descendant of the Spanish conqueror. My island, my people. I own everything you can see."

"I'd be very pleased if you could arrange transportation for me back to the mainland," Nellis said, with a growing tension in the pit of his stomach. There was something about this place and this man which struck fear into him, a fear he had not even felt during his day in the dungeon.

"Well," the white-haired man answered slowly, "that would be a bit difficult at this time. I think you'd better plan to remain with us here."

Nellis took a step forward and immediately the guards

were upon him. "What in hell is this? Am I a prisoner?"

The Spaniard's eyes sparkled like the jeweled chandelier overhead. "Yes, you are a prisoner! You are a prisoner because you dared to set foot on my island!" Then, to the guards, "Take him away! Talk is of no use with scum like this. Prepare the maze for him!"

Nellis struggled in the grip of the guards. "You're a madman. I'm not staying here any longer." But then there was a thudding blow to his temple, and he was falling, into a blackness of unknowing, into a dream of madness that was not a dream . . .

AND WHEN HE awakened, with a splatter of icy water across his face, he found himself in a place far below the ground, where the air was chilled by a dampness that clutched at his bones. The guards were there, and the man named Cortez, and ahead of them was only a long passageway, lit by torches such as one might find in the tunnels of the pyramids or the catacombs of Rome.

"Have they removed the last one?" Cortez asked.

"They are in there now, getting him."

"Very good." He turned to look down at Nellis. "This is a maze," he explained carefully, "built for me at great expense out of the earth and solid rock

in spots. It has about two miles of passageways. You will enter through here, and the door will be sealed behind you. Thereafter, you will come upon one of two possible exits to the maze. At one exit you will find a paradise of pleasure beyond your wildest dreams. At the other, a . . . what shall I say? . . . a monster."

As if on cue, two uniformed guards emerged from the passageway, carrying between them a stretcher heavy with the weight of what had once been a man. The body, stripped of clothing, was torn and ripped as if by a tiger or other great beast. There was hardly a square inch of skin area unmarked by the violence of the assault. The man had died, horribly, back there in the maze.

"You're insane," Nellis told the Spaniard.

"Perhaps. Actually, the idea for this was suggested by a countryman of yours named Stockton — is that the name? Yes, Stockton. He wrote a story called *The Lady or the Tiger?* which has fascinated me ever since my youth."

"Stockton was an American," Nellis corrected, though at the moment it seemed to make very little difference. "And you're still crazy."

"Enough talk. I wish you good luck and a safe return — a safe journey to paradise or a quick death in the monster's

claws. I advise you to keep moving. It is cold in the maze, and I know you are hungry. We would not want you to die of starvation."

"Don't I even get a weapon to defend myself?"

"Your weapons are your hands, though they will be quite useless if you should come upon our monster. Now, into the maze with you!"

The guards tore away what remained of his shredded clothing and cast him a few feet into the passageway. Almost immediately, a door of thin steel slid quietly in to place, blocking out the sight of the smiling Captain Cortez. But though the passage was dim, there seemed to be a flicker of light from somewhere up ahead. Nellis hurried toward it, knowing full well that neither monster nor paradise could lurk that close to the beginning. What he found was a torch burning in the wall, and he pried it free of its metal bracket. It was some weapon at least, against the monster, and it also gave him light.

He went on, quite openly at first, holding the torch high and carefully avoiding the occasional pebbles that might threaten the bareness of his feet. After walking some fifty feet farther on he came to a branching of the maze and his first decision. He decided on the right-hand passageway, and

carefully made an X on the floor of the passageway with the butt of his torch, so he would know if he passed this way again while going in circles. Then he moved on, slower this time, holding the torch high above his head.

The walls here were of smooth stone, but the ground underneath seemed mostly of dirt. He imagined Cortez laboring on the maze for so many months or years, pouring a fortune into the construction of the thing, and anticipating the coming torments of the men who might be his prisoners. Nellis remembered the horribly torn body they'd carried out of the maze, and wondered if there really was a safe way out. Wouldn't it be more in keeping with the madness of Cortez to have every passageway lead to the monster?

A low roaring sound suddenly filled the tunnel, and he froze every muscle. An animal — the monster? Or perhaps only the rushing of water somewhere? After a moment he continued walking, but more slowly still. Maybe he should simply sit down against the wall, wait for starvation to overtake him. But what if the monster came prowling, found him in a weakened condition with no chance to defend himself? No, it was better to go on, while some slight hope remained.

He came to another branch-

ing of the maze, this time with three narrower passages leading off the main one. Again he chose the one on the far right and made his X on the ground. He'd remembered reading somewhere that one method of solving a maze — at least on paper — was always to follow one wall of it. Though it might not be the shortest path, sooner or later you would find the exit. Of course such magazine-made mazes did not include a monster that might lurk around any turning.

He seemed so far away from London then, so far away that memory itself was difficult for him. This might have been another world, another lifetime, an existence cut off from all reality except the reality of the pebbles beneath his feet and the chill dampness of the passage.

Suddenly, without warning, a gust of cold air filled the tunnel, blowing out the flame of his torch like a puff of some giant mouth. He cursed silently and then went on. The deadened torch could still serve as a club, at least, though he would have to travel much slower now, feeling his way along the cool stone wall of the maze. He decided he would stick with the right-hand wall, and hope for the best.

Aware, too aware, of the sweat forming even on his icy flesh, he wandered the maze for

what seemed like hours. Once he hit out at something that might have been a rat, scurrying across his left foot. And again once he heard the howling cry of the beast, or the wind, reverberating through the maze, almost seeming to seek him out. The seconds, minutes, hours went by; the hunger grew within him like a physical presence; and still he kept moving along the right wall, aware now and then of other dark tunnels branching off, aware too of occasional hints of movement close at hand. Rats, perhaps again, or something stalking him like a tiger in the doubt-filled dark. If only he knew the nature of the monster, then at least the fear that welled within him might be lessened.

Then, ahead, he thought he saw a flicker of light. Was it possible? Had he reached one of the maze's two exits, or would he find only another torch flaming on the wall. He went forward more slowly than ever, careful lest his bare toes might hit some pebble and send out a click of warning. Slowly, slowly . . .

He rounded the last corner and found himself in a high-ceilinged room lit by a score of torches. There were vivid red couches here, and ferns and drapes that made the whole thing seem like a great room overlooking the sea. And, standing in the very center of the

chamber, a woman of such beauty that she left him breathless. A woman tall and sleek and raven-haired, wearing a garment of gold that fell loosely from one lovely shoulder. She held out her arms to him, and he dropped his stump of expired torch and ran forward, the hunger of his stomach forgotten now.

"Thank God," he mumbled, flinging himself into her arms. "I never thought I'd find the way out. I never thought . . ."

"You're with me now," she said, and her voice was as smooth as honey.

"I've fooled him," he gasped out. "I've defeated Cortez and his maze. I've found his paradise . . ."

He stopped because her fingers had pressed against a nerve and he could neither move nor speak, nor close his eyes. Her face was only inches from him as answered, "Oh, no! You don't seem to understand. You found the monster."

He had only time to see the madness deep within her eyes before her blood-red fingernails ripped across his eyeballs. Then there was nothing. Nothing but endless pain . . .

In the very first issue of **Weird Tales**, appeared a story about a protoplasmic monster, by the late Anthony Rud. The title was "Ooze". Edward D. Hoch had not read this story, and the manuscript he sent us, entitled "Ooze", while dealing with a monster, was nothing like Mr. Rud's grisly creation. This is subtly different from any other "monster" tale you have ever read; and while we do not think that we will use Hoch's title, we intend to offer this story to you in our next issue.

Meanwhile, Mr. Hoch's articles appear regularly in our companion magazine, **Exploring The Unknown**: the current issue carries an account of predictions of the end of the world, "Something In The Stars".
