

**10c**  
**ASTONISHING**  
**STORIES**  
**10 STORIES 10c**

VOL. 3

SEPTEMBER, 1941

NO. 1

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ALL STORIES NEW—NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 25

Published bi-monthly by Fictionera, Inc., 2250 Grue Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 210 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter January 11, 1940, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1941 by Fictionera, Inc. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. All rights reserved under Pan American copyright convention. Bi-monthly price per copy 10c; 6 issues, \$6.00. Printed in the U.S.A.

# The Plague From Tomorrow

The malaria that the man who called himself Olson had brought to the Indian swamps was bad enough, but he had brought an even worse disease—a drug-like longing for the vibrations of his presence!



By Frank Belknap Long

**G**RAHAM wanted to shut the door on his job with a good, loud slam.

He wanted to take off his—no, wait. Anything requiring muscular effort was out. What he really wanted was an opportunity to spend the rest of his life in a hayloft, flat on his back.

Everything else was secondary. His

nerves were throbbing, his muscles ached and something was wrong with his speech. Certain words stuck in his gullet and gagged him. He had to take a deep breath before he could say "Indian" or "Malaria" and he felt physically ill when the words came out.

There was nothing worse than ungrate-

fulness, nothing that irked a man more when he was dog-tired and in need of a little sympathy. The Indians knew that he was getting the swamp drained for them, and doing everything in his power to clean up the district. They knew that he was working for a big, miracle-performing Chief who sat beneath the dome of the Capitol Building in Washington, and drew strength from the rivers, mountains and valleys of forty-eight states.

But knowing all that they still wanted to get out of bed and drive back to the Indian reservation in their 1923-Model T's. Something was being handed out back there which seemed to intoxicate them, so that they had to be brought back to the barracks under duress. It wasn't alcohol. Graham had checked on that. His job was to examine all the charts and dash around on stilts.

The malaria was just as depressing. It was the bad estivoautumnal variety, which Indians living in the United States were supposed to be immune to. It was the malaria of severe districts and lush tropical jungles and when it got into its stride there was no stopping it. The Indian Bureau had sent Graham out to erect temporary barracks and drain a swamp which was in all respects miasmal.

Graham was a youngish, firm-jawed man with a clipped red mustache and eyes that gave off sparks when he became excited. He wasn't excited now, however—just dog-tired and miserable.

HE WAS dipping his hands in a one in two thousand solution when a burly orderly appeared in the doorway of his off-duty quarters. "Doc, a well guy just walked in and asked for treatment. What'll I tell him?"

Graham frowned. Withdrawing his hands from the antiseptic wash, he reached for a towel and dried them with great deliberation.

"An Indian, Malone?"

The orderly shook his head. "No, Doc. He's a big, blond guy with side-whiskers. His eyes made me feel so damned queer I couldn't think of anything to tell him."

"Side whiskers?"

"That's right, Doc. Like in pictures of old Vice-Presidents of the United States. But he's wearing Indian clothes, and—"

"He doesn't *look* ill, you say?"

"Doc, I never saw a healthier looking guy."

Graham's frown increased in volume. "You ought not to form snap judgements, Malone," he said. "I've seen men with pernicious malaria who looked as well as you do."

Malone turned pale. "You mean I could be—"

"Forget it, Malone. There are little indications but it takes a trained eye to spot them."

"Gee, Doc, you had me scared for a minute."

"I told you to forget it."

"Just as you say, Doc. But what'll I tell Goldilocks? He's sorta big and hard to handle."

"I'll go down and have a look at him," Graham said.

His features were twitching when he accompanied Malone downstairs but when he stepped into the recovery ward and saw what was happening there he pulled himself together with a jerk.

The recovery ward was in an uproar. The Indians were jabbering like maniacs and running back and forth between the cots. Two of them were flat on their backs on the floor, pinned down by Amazonian nurses. One of the frailer nurses was standing between her patient and the door, and threatening him with a broomstick.

"Get back into bed," she warned. "You ought to be ashamed."

He was an old Indian, doddering, racked by fever, but he kept trying to dodge past her, and get out.

Five of Graham's cases escaped from the ward before he could get the others quieted down. Not entirely quieted, for they continued to jabber between the sheets, but it was reassuring to know that they had regained control of their reflexes and could be cowed by hypodermics. They knew what hypodermics could do, so the actual injection of morphine into them wasn't necessary.

Graham was breathing harshly when he stepped into the admission department to receive another jolt. Waiting in the admission department was the strangest looking human being he had ever seen. He had a chest like a brick wall, and was so abnormally long-waisted that he seemed much shorter than his six feet five. Light yellow hair crowned his pale brow.

NOT a muscle of his face moved as Graham looked him up and down. There was something vaguely patronizing

in his manner which infuriated the medical man.

"Well?" he snapped. "What did you wish to see me about?"

The giant grunted. "Name Olson," he said. "Me sick. Me very sick man."

"This is not a clinic, you know."

"Not a clinic. Me know. You cure here. Malaria bad."

"You haven't got malaria," Graham rapped. "I can tell that just by looking at you. No rings under your eyes, no sallowness."

"Me very sick man. Me need cure fast."

"Let me see your fingernails?"

Olson nodded and extended his powerful hands.

Graham stared, gasped. "Hrumph," he said.

"Malaria bad," the giant reiterated, and folded his arms on his chest.

Graham went into instant action. He

leaned over the admission desk and pressed a buzzer. He ruffled papers, a slow flush creeping up over his face. There was no mistaking the significance of those gray-blue splotches at the base of the giant's fingernails. Or the small, hard pulse he had felt beating in the giant's wrist.

Malone came in and stood waiting for orders, his gaze riveted on the giant's face. Olson returned his stare haughtily, standing straighter than a sick man had any right to stand.

When Graham turned he barked orders. "Malone, this man has malaria. It is fortunate that he came to us. Tell Dr. Craig I shall want a blood examination and a therapeutic test. Oh, yes—tell him to send the diagnostic chart to me. We'll put him in Ward 3. Tell Craig this is an unusual case—no herpes, lividity, or urticaria. A walking case, probably estivoautumnal type."

"I can't remember all that, Doc. Could you write it out?"

"Just tell him it's a walking case and the patient mustn't be kept on his feet. Then a blood test, a therapeutic test, and the chart. Have you got that?"

"I—I think so, Doc."

"Good. Take him out."

**F**IVE minutes later Graham was pacing his off-duty quarters, his brows furrowed. So the little mosquitoes who squatted down with their bodies slanting upward were feasting on white men now. There was no reason why they shouldn't. In epidemic malaria they usually feasted indiscriminately. But so far white men had been spared. It was no end puzzling.

He was still pacing when a voice said behind him: "Could you spare me a minute, John. I've got something here that is turning my hair white."

Graham wheeled. Standing in the doorway was the youngest member of the medical staff. Paul Malkin was holding

a five hundred and fifty dollar microscope which had gone through John Hopkins with him, and was something special in the way of precision.

Graham said: "That's all right. Come in and sit down."

"I'll stand if you don't mind. When you've looked at this you'll need that chair for yourself."

He crossed to the window and set the microscope down on Graham's personal filing cabinet.

"It's blood from one of the gorged mosquitoes," he said.

Graham nodded. He had been intending to go into a huddle with Malkin on that very problem. The mosquitoes had been caught on the reservation, and were presumably gorged with Indian blood containing Haemosporidia.

"Did you ever see a precipitate like that, John?"

Graham stooped and glued his eye to the microscope. There was an expectant look on his face. Slowly as he stared his expression changed.

"Good God," he exclaimed.

"Did you, John?"

"No, I—"

"It doesn't type."

"Obviously not," Graham muttered. "But it seems to be human blood."

"A donor with blood like that would starve to death. He'd have to hawk his wares on the dark side of the moon."

"It's a little like three," Graham said. "If I wanted to be fanciful I'd call it *evolved* blood."

"I see what you mean. There is a complexity of structure which—yes, human blood might evolve into something like that. In 20,000 years."

"I've got Olson's chart here, sir," said a voice in the doorway.

"All right, Malone," Graham said, without turning. "Stick it in the letter rack."

Malone obeyed, hesitated an instant,

and reluctantly ceased to decorate the doorway.

Graham straightened, a puzzled frown on his face. He crossed the room in three long strides. He picked up Olson's chart and ran his eyes over it.

Malkin heard him suck in his breath sharply.

"What is it, John?"

Graham wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "It's hot in here," he said, unsteadily.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, it is hot. But you get so you don't notice it."

"We ought to notice things more. It was standing out like a sore thumb all over him."

"What are you talking about?"

"His *differentness*. I thought he was just a big, dumb Swede. I didn't know I was looking at a lad Barnum would have traded in the Cardiff Giant for."

"I still don't get it."

"The blood in that mosquito apparently came of a big, blond giant named Olson who walked in here an hour ago, and asked for—"

"What he asked for he got, Doc. Craig gave him a ten grain injection and put him to bed. But he ain't in bed now."

MALONE had reappeared in the doorway. His uniform was crumpled, and his face was streaked with sweat. "He must have gone clean off his nut, Doc. We couldn't hold him. I never seen a guy fight the way he did. He locked his thumbs together and *chopped*."

Maybe I'm getting soft or something, Doc, but with a heeled guy you at least know what to expect."

Graham opened his mouth, but no words came out.

"Doc, he beelined for the supply room, and pried the lid off a packing case before I could—Doc, I don't like to say it, but for a minute I was out like a light. When I came to he had grabbed himself

an armful of syringes and quinine eggs, and was heading for—"

"Where is he now?"

"With the Indians, Doc."

"You mean he's back in the ward."

"There are no Injuns in the ward now, Doc. We couldn't hold them either."

Even a badly jolted man can perform mechanical acts. It took Graham scarcely ten minutes to get from the barracks to where he kept his car, which was really nothing more than an instinctive act—a travelling by route. It took him five more minutes to fill the tank with gasoline—a reflex.

Getting into the car, starting the engine and building up speed until he was in the roaring seventies was just his subconscious telling him to hurry, hurry, and his body responding like a drill sergeant's dream of how a body ought to act.

His brow was knitted when he came out of it and found himself approaching the reservation over a macadamized state highway, with moonlit stretches of low-lying countryside sweeping past on both sides of him.

Although his fleeing patients had a head start of at least thirty minutes he was confident that he could overtake them. In the first place, they were Indians and to Indians *speed* was the name of an extremely malign devil who wrecked cars by night. In the second place—

He tried to shout, to warn the man, but before he could do so the crazy fool's body rose level with his face, and went shooting off into darkness.

He stopped the car with a skidding, grinding jolt, stepping on the brakes so abruptly that he was thrown from his seat. How he escaped injury he never knew. When he pulled himself level with the windshield the first thing he saw was a soggy ditch, and a big, blond giant with a badly cut face sitting on the opposite side of the glass staring in at him.

The car was tilted at a forty-five de-

gree angle, and was partly in the ditch. The man was really further up toward the road than he was.

He *wasn't* Olson. All the tension of sleepless days and nights erupted inside Graham's head. He clambered out of the car and advanced toward the giant on wobbly knees, his temples pounding insistently.

The big man made no attempt to rise. He just sat in the ditch shaking his head and staring up at Graham. His jaw was twitching.

"Name?" he muttered. "Olson. Bill Olson. I'm free now, y'hear? Free, *free*. It's all over and done with."

Graham stooped, and shook him. "Easy, man," he soothed. "Go steady."

"No more pain. He promised. He never wanted to—"

Olson seemed to forget what he had started to say. His jaw tightened and he shuddered convulsively.

"Never wanted—" Graham urged gently.

"To torture me. It was the Indians first, then me. He had to find out. He was lost and half-crazy, with all his crew down sick. Inside that tower which he says is a ship, though I'll be damned if I can figure out how he could—"

"Easy, Olson. Try to think back and get it straightened out, so that I can help you. Who is *he*. Where did *he* come from?"

"Help me? There's only one way you could do that. *Take me away from here*. I can't trust myself. I still want to go back. Right into the tower, to suffer again, to—"

"Olson, who is *he*? This man—where did he come from?"

"From right here on Earth. But he says we'll never see the harbor he set sail from, because it ain't in existence yet. And it won't be for fifty thousand years. Oh, God, how I want to go back. It's like a drug."

A CURRENT of warm air blew up from the roadside and coiled around Graham's brow, ruffling his hair. Something nibbled at the edges of his brain and went scampering away to hide itself in dry leaves at the margin of a bottomless pool. "Olson, stop raving. What you're telling me doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't—make sense. You're right. You're right about that. I thought the same thing myself. Even when he started—probing. A fellow like myself, a migratory worker, gets used to crazy folk. You ask for a job anywhere and beside you there is sure to be standing a guy who is not quite right."

"You mean he was working with you?"

"Not him. I bumped into him on the road. A big, barrel-rolling guy, with yellow hair. I'm husky myself, but from base to tip this guy was so blistering big he scared me. He couldn't speak much English—just a little Injun talk that wouldn't jell. Even Injuns don't—"

Graham's hand tightened on Olson's shoulder. "Just tell me about the tower."

"I must have fainted or something. One minute he was asking me questions that sounded crazy, and then I was lying on my back in the tower, on a sort of stone bench, and he was bending over me and trying to get into my mind."

"He got in all right. And when he got in I started screaming. He said it was a power he had, and we'd get in fifty thousand years. All his people had it. And because his people had it they could take it. It was give and take with them—and no pain. But our brains couldn't stand the vibrations yet. Inside my head a live coal was spinning around and around, but he didn't know that."

"He couldn't tell from the Injuns. They are stor—storkical. An Injun never lets on when he's in agony. He knew I was suffering, but he didn't know I was in agony."

"When he found out he told me he'd have to go right on probing. His eyes got soft and sorrowful, just like a woman's, and I could see that he was suffering too. He didn't want to hurt me. But he said that if he didn't probe his men would all die.

"There were a lot of things my brain could tell him he couldn't get from the Injuns. The English he had picked up from them wasn't worth ten cents in any man's money, so he couldn't just ask me.

"His men were sick with a disease which he called *garaba*. He said it was caused by the bite of a little, flying bug—a *ginit*. I don't know much about medicine but we got together on it and decided that what his men really had was malaria. Yeah, and *ginit*s were *mosquitoes*.

"Damned funny is right. His brain and my brain working together doped it out. I was in hell, see, and I had to get out. Somebody throws a guy who can't swim into a lake, and he swims anyway.

"He asked me if malaria was the big, number-one disease in my country. I told him it wasn't. He said it was in his. His people died from *garoba* like flies. It was swamps, he said, and his people couldn't kill the *ginit*s because swarms of them filled the sky until the sun was blotted out.

"I said we had a few mosquitoes waiting around to bite any guy who had it, but in the United States it was almost an extinguished disease. He said his men had caught it from *ginit*s in his country and now their teeth were chattering and he was nearly crazy with worry.

"He said something then I couldn't make any sense out of. He said his country was right here, but that he had travelled fifty thousand years. Not miles—years. He was lost, he said. His navigator was down with it, and his assistant navigator, and he was lost and sick.

"How do you cure it in your country, he asked. It hit me all at once. Our mosquitoes had bitten his men and the Injun epidemic which is raging over on the reservation was something he had brought from his country into ours. I told him about the barracks the Government is putting up, and the mighty fine doctors he'd find down the road apace, working their guts out to put a stop to it.

"You should have seen his eyes light up. The Injuns hadn't told him a thing. Not a damned blessed thing. They couldn't shut out the agony, so they had clammed up on him. What I mean, shut off their thoughts. It was something I could have done too, but I didn't want to try.

"Suddenly he was looking deep into my eyes. 'You'll miss the vibrations,' he said. 'It's like a strong drug when you stop taking it. The Indians have been coming back for more. It's pitiful. Wish I could do something. It will wear off when I'm gone, but meanwhile you'd better keep travelling—all to-night and to-morrow. The nearer I am to you the worse the craving will be.'

"Of course he wasn't really speaking to me. I just heard him talking deep inside my head. His eyes must have done something to me, because when I woke up I was lying on my back in the darkness and staring up at the moon. Above me and off to the left the tower glimmered. It was all lighted up now.

"I got up and started running—not away from the tower, but *toward it*. I felt I had to have more. But I guess he was still watching me from inside. Something seemed to lift me up and turn me around, and before I knew it I was stumbling up toward the road. I didn't hear your car coming. The headlights blinded me, and—"

Graham's fingers bit into the big man's shoulders. "Where is that tower now."



"He—he moves it around. But if you mean where was it when I started up here—"

"That's it."

"Down by the swamp. Just around the bend there and straight down."

Graham said: "All right. Now listen carefully, Olson. You can do one of three things. You can wait here in the car for me, you can hit the road on foot, or you can take pot luck with me when I go knocking, like Childe Harold."

"Childe—"

"'Childe Harold to the Dark Tower came' Which will it be, Olson." He locked the car as he spoke, and put the keys in his pocket.

"I—I'll just sit right here until you get back," Olson said.

**F**IVE minutes later Graham was descending a pebbly embankment, a pocket flash in his hand. Scarcely a sound broke the stillness. Above him trees formed traceries through which the moonlight filtered in thin, wavering shafts. Beneath him gleamed the swamp.

There were dark patches where mud banks protruded above its noisome surface and weedy expanses where no water showed at all. But here and there were reassuring glimpses of brightness between the trees, still pools reflecting the light of far, glimmering stars.

The trees thinned as he descended and the gravel was replaced by soggy mud which sucked at his shoes and spattered up over his ankles. Twisted and flattened shrubs and a sapling bole stripped of its bark bore mute witness to the passing of something massive and swift-moving in a marshward direction.

By the time he reached level ground he was breathing harshly, and into his face had come a look such as a man might have who is contemplating breaking into a sealed vault at midnight.

There was a mist swirling up from the

marsh, but so vast and luminous was the structure which reared itself in his path that nothing but a solid wall of blackness could have obscured its outlines.

From its flaring, mushroom-shaped base there ascended two enormous cylinders which merged into shadows overhead. Like the stamens of some plant-giant in a world Gargantuan were those immense, rotund columns of metal. Blue-cold and unearthly, they seemed to advance without movement on the tiny human figure below, halting him in his tracks and chilling him to the core of his being.

Near the base of that cyclopean edifice a flight of low stone steps terminated in a little square embrasure. Standing in the embrasure, his arms folded on his chest, was a familiar figure. But he was not wearing borrowed clothes now.

On his broad, flat chest was a glowing breastplate, and his limbs were encased in chain-metal and a plum-colored metal starfish had wilted on his head.

He was staring steadily down at Graham, but there was no disdain in his gaze now.

"Indians okay," he said. "Me tell Indians go back, Doc cure. Me lie, say name Olson. Name Jahanus, big wampum man."

"But you—"

"Me go now, Doc.

He nodded and raised his eyes to the vast, glowing cylinders above him. The cylinders had begun to revolve. Slowly, steadily, their luminosity deepening as they turned about in the moonlight. Suddenly as Graham watched them they spun faster.

Cold sweat came out on Graham's skin, and his teeth began to chatter. His face had the look of a child who has been frozen to immobility by some adult wonder beyond its ken.

The cylinders were flashing now with all the hues of the spectrum. Flashing, blurring, becoming spinning shafts of rain-

bow stuff which blended with the swirling mist until the figure's glowing breastplate shone like a star through a cloud.

Jerkily his arms went up and his voice came again. "You square-shooter, Doc. You try cure Indians, work hard. No fuss, just medicine guy. Me like no fuss guy. Me sorry no more see."

A sudden wavering seemed to shorten his body and almost at the same instant—he ceased to be there at all. The sky was blotted out by a vast glimmering, and where his metal-clad body had been there yawned only empty air.

With him into the vast Ocean of Time went the tower a crew that Graham had never seen and five hundred and ten grains of quinine. And with him went a little of

Graham's country—a few seared marsh grasses from a swamp which reflected Aldebaran and the Pleiades and knowledge that would benefit Graham's own ancestors perhaps—in fifty thousand or so years.

Slowly the glimmering subsided and Alpha of the Centaur came back into the night sky, to wink moistly twenty-six trillion miles away.

Most of Graham's strength had left him, but he managed to pull up the collar of his coat, and get a cigarette lighted. He felt better when he had taken five or six puffs. Still shivering, he turned from the marsh, ascended the embankment and went trudging back along the road to his car.

**THE END**