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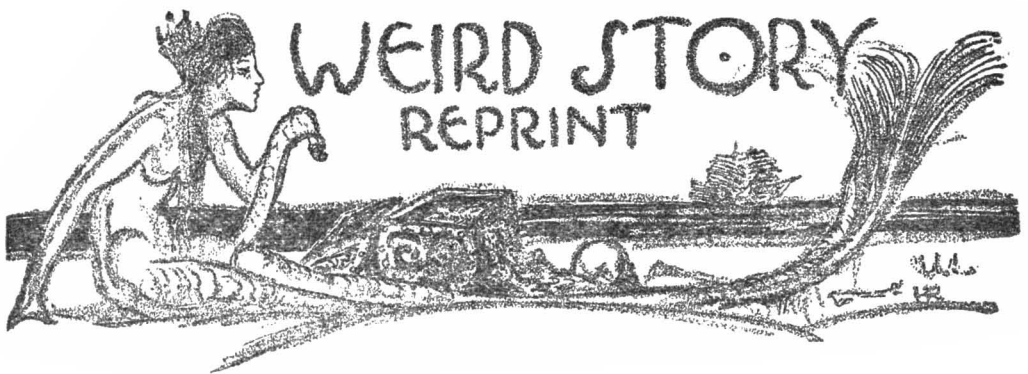
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The Sunken Land*

By GEORGE W. BAYLY

IT WAS eleven o'clock in the morning when Tom O'Grady and I rode into a remote little Cree village some hundreds of miles northwest of Edmonton, Alberta.

We were both members of the Royal Canadian Northwest Mounted

Police (commonly called Mounties) and wore the scarlet jacket of that famous force. We had been detailed for special duty to find and bring back the slayers of a certain half-breed at Athabasca Landing. When last noticed the murderers had been headed in this direction, but since

*From WEIRD TALES, May, 1924.

then two months had elapsed, and we had not obtained the faintest trace of their whereabouts.

It was, therefore, without much hope that we rode through the scattered lodges in search of the chief of the roving band. As we approached the center of the village our attention was attracted by a small crowd of Indians standing and squatting in a large semicircle around a solitary white man seated on a soap box at the entrance to the chief's lodge. The man was sturdy and thick-set, and gave one the impression of possessing great physical strength. His present attitude was one of calm and complete detachment, but as we approached he turned his head in our direction and called out:

"Hullo, Gerald! hullo, Tom! You're the very men I want to see."

It was the Dominion Government doctor on one of his periodical visits to the wandering tribes in that section of the Northwest Territories.

"What's up? I asked, dismounting.

"I've found a dead white man in here," he answered, "and at the same time I've unearthed a mystery. Sit down and I'll show you."

As soon as we were seated he took a small match-box from his pocket and handed it to me. Inside it there were ten small stones. I examined them carefully.

"They're diamonds," I said.

"Now look at this," and he took a rough, torn piece of brown paper out of his pocketbook. On the paper, evidently part of a rough diary, were the following disjointed notes:

entered the sunken land
S. lost. No tra
ip

Blue Clay Island
Lat. 60° 30' Long. 127° 10'
150 miles

B. very sick. Must ge
ack

One glance at this scrap of paper

was enough to show me that we were on the trail of the murderers. S. could mean but one thing: Sam Elliot, one of the men we were after; and B. must be Bad Bill Blake.

"Now let's see the dead man. If it's the one I think it is we'll know where to find the others. Eh, Tom?"

We followed the doctor into the teepee. One look was enough. Pat Corbeau, the ringleader of the gang, had committed his last crime. It was now up to us to gather in his accomplices, dead or alive.

"When do we start?" asked the doctor as we came out into the sunlight once more.

"We?" I said. "Are you coming with us, then?"

"Why not?" he answered, shortly.

"Don't get sore, Doc. We'll be tickled to death to have you but it's going to be one hell of a boring trip."

"That's where you're wrong," said the doctor. "I've heard rumors of this sunken land, though I've never met a soul that's been there; but that there's something uncanny and altogether horrible about the place I fully believe. Take that scrap of diary, for instance. Read it by what's left unsaid, and you'll see what I mean."

"Nice cheery document," I remarked as I glanced at it again. "We'll bury Pat this afternoon and start off on the trail tomorrow forenoon. How does that hit you, Doc?"

"Fine," said that laconic individual without turning, as he strode off toward his own tent on the outskirts of the encampment. "Now we eat." We followed him a few paces behind.

IT WAS two weeks later. The day was far advanced, and the sun, low on the distant horizon, was sinking into a bed of heavy black clouds. Away to the south a range of mountains stood sharply silhouetted against the sky.

- We were preparing camp, quietly, steadily, methodically; for the spirit

of the trail had taken hold of us and conversation was reduced to a minimum. The horses had been taken back by the Indians some four days previously, and we were now entirely upon our own resources. We stood on the threshold of the unknown. Up to that point our journey had been a commonplace of northern travel. Work, danger, monotony, they had all come in the day's run. We had crossed many rivers, we had traversed a mountain range, until one day we had descended to a vast plain which stretched northwest as far as the eye could reach. This plain was typical northern country, grass land alternating with stretches of stunted black spruce and white birch, and stretches there were, too, where sand and glacial boulders predominated, but this was all past. In front of us, straight into the sunset, lay a low range of undulating hills.

After supper we smoked in silence for a time; finally the doctor pointed to the hills.

"If I'm not mistaken, the Sunken Land begins beyond that low range. What latitude and longitude did you make it at noon today, Gerald?"

I took out my notebook.

"My observation gave us an approximate latitude of 61 degrees 50' and a longitude of 126 degrees 40'. The sun was rather obscured so I can't be quite certain of my figures."

"That's near enough," said the doctor. "We enter the Sunken Land tomorrow, and don't forget our agreement. Not one of us must ever, even for an instant, be separated from the other two. There's something queer about that country, and it's through getting separated that that other party came to grief; at least that's the way I have it figured. So let's keep together."

The next morning we began the climb of the low range, following a little valley we slowly ascended until we came to where it flattened out; we had reached the top. In front and

below stretched a panorama of broken country, low hills alternating everywhere with plains, but the astonishing thing was that the whole country sloped downward. As far as the eye could reach the hills continued.

"The whole land seems to have sunk," said Tom. "That hill on the horizon line must be thousands of feet below us."

I took out my field glasses and focused them on the horizon line.

"I can't see any sign of the lake," I said as I handed them to the doctor.

"I don't suppose you can," he remarked. "If that diary is correct it's one hundred and fifty miles from here."

All day we traveled carefully, warily, expecting every moment to have to defend our lives against some hidden peril, but nothing out of the ordinary occurred. During the past weeks we had often discussed the fate of the men who had preceded us into this land, but the subject was baffling, as we had no clue as to the manner of their death.

Now that we had actually seen the country spread out before us, a feeling of vague alarm had taken hold of us—none of us could explain why. The country looked so very peaceful, but I could not help thinking of a story I had read, where ants the size of rats and of unparalleled ferocity inhabited a tract of barren rolling country somewhere on the borders of Afghanistan, and devoured all that came in their path. No animals could escape, as they could run with incredible swiftness; consequently the country was entirely denuded of game. I told this tale to my companions, and though they appeared to treat it as a joke, I noticed that their watchfulness increased.

Sometimes we climbed the rounded hills, at others we descended their farther slopes, but always the descent was longer than the ascent. Toward the end of the second day we noticed a distinct change in the temperature.

The country was getting warmer, vegetation, too, began to increase, scattered pine, tamarack and birch trees became more numerous and game became abundant (thus exploding the ant theory). Rabbits in particular seemed to overrun the whole country, while deer were quite plentiful. But the face of the country was undergoing a steady change, woods were appearing, taking the place of scattered trees, alder and ash also became abundant and finally I noticed a stunted elm.

"I say, by Jove, this is interesting," said Tom. "See the squirrels and small birds. Why, the country is simply crawling with game."

Being interested in forestry I found this change in forest conditions fascinating in the extreme. The country was, in fact, a paradise; nothing untoward had yet happened, and all sense of approaching disaster seemed to have vanished. The very air seemed clearer. In fact, we acted as if the danger were behind, rather than in front of us; unless the diary lied.

THAT night we camped by a small stream, and rising early the next morning, had been on the march for a couple of hours when Tom suddenly stopped.

"Do you fellows notice anything?"

"I can't say I hear anything," said I.

"Nor I," said the doctor.

"That's it," Tom replied. "There's nothing to hear; the game's gone. I haven't seen a rabbit or heard a bird for the last hour." We looked at each other.

"That's true," I said. "I wonder what's the trouble."

We looked carefully on every side; the country seemed the same.

"Nothing's changed from yesterday," said Tom finally.

"The trees are larger," I remarked.

"And there seem to be more creepers," added the doctor.

"There's something queer about

this," sputtered Tom. "Keep your rifles ready."

At noon we stopped in a little grassy clearing.

"Look, there's a rabbit!" I cried. "See the way it's running; something's chasing it."

We sprang to our feet, seizing our rifles. The creature tore past us without even noticing our presence, squealing as if in the most mortal terror, and disappeared in the opposite direction. Then all was still again. Not a sound broke the stillness.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "I feel as if something were watching us."

"Yes, I feel that same way," said Tom, "but it's only natural. Fear is catching, even a rabbit's. It was probably only a weasel."

We agreed heartily, too heartily perhaps.

"Let's be moving," I suggested.

Before us the forest appeared much thicker, and the trees much larger, and I pointed out some oak and beech, as well as a few very large elms. The temperature was almost oppressively hot.

That night when we camped we chose an open space and lit a large fire, taking turns to keep watch, but nothing tangible occurred. The night was oppressively still, yet all through the night there were vague sounds of rustling and faint whisperings, now louder, now fainter; that was all. There was an uncanny strangeness about it which made us distinctly uneasy.

The next morning we talked it over, and the doctor's opinion was that if at any time we were out at night, it would be a good plan to carry torches. This suggestion met with approval, so we spent an hour before starting out in making a few for each of us, and fastening them to our pack sacks.

All next day the temperature kept rising, and as we progressed, the vegetation became more and more tropical. We were now progressing in

single file along a trail, made in all probability by the ill-fated party which had preceded us, as the forest growth had not yet had time to obliterate the recent traces of man's handiwork.

As night approached we began to look around for an open clearing, for the prospect of spending the night in the thick undergrowth among these giant trees in the presence of an unknown peril was far from reassuring. To make matters worse, the ground was becoming swampy; little stagnant pools and rotting vegetation appeared on every side, making the going more and more difficult.

Suddenly Tom, who was leading, stopped and remarked:

"It's no use going on. This may get worse and worse instead of better, and we can't camp here, so I think we'd better go back to the last clearing we passed. How far do you think it is, Doc?"

"Two miles, I should think."

"All right then, about turn and we'll have to hurry. The sun's just setting."

THE darkness came on quickly, the great trees shutting out the afterglow, and we were soon straggling along in a very uneven manner, the doctor now leading, and Tom bringing up the rear. The uneasy feeling of the previous night began to take hold of us and at the same time our resolution about torches flashed into my mind. Without a moment's pause I stopped and calling to the others, pulled out a torch and lit it. The others did the same.

"That's better," said Tom. "Now we can at least see where we're going."

But the flare and flicker of the smoky torches only seemed to accentuate the darkness of the forest about us, and as I glanced from side to side I felt sure that again an evil presence, a gruesome, nameless terror, was keeping pace with us on either hand. I

spoke about it to the others. They, too, felt the same fear. The night was dreadfully still, but again we noticed a faint whispering sound; but now it seemed all around us.

Suddenly the whispering seemed to grow louder and more menacing. I saw the doctor start to run; already he appeared a long way ahead. All at once his torch disappeared from view, for the trail had taken a bend. At that moment, I, too, started to run—wildly. I had felt something soft and clammy grasp my throat, while I thought I felt innumerable little feelers gripping my face and body. With a scream I fought them off with my torch, and realized a moment later that my nerve was going and that the little feelers had only been a creeper and the branches of some trees. A moment later I was running close behind the doctor. Suddenly I turned round.

"My God!" I cried. "Where's Tom?"

We started down the trail, the hair literally rising on our heads. There was nothing but black darkness behind us and from the darkness came a hum as of angry bees. Suddenly—there was a distant shout.

"Ger-ald—Ger-ald! Come back—my torch has gone out," and then—then came a prolonged scream of agony and terror—"help—Gerald—hel——" followed by a choking cry of mortal terror—then silence.

Throwing off our packs we raced along the trail at top speed. When we reached the spot where he had been we found his rifle and his pack, evidently thrown off in the desperation of a fight for life. And—that was all. Tom had completely vanished. We searched the ground with our torches and called and called and fired our rifles—but all to no purpose. No sound broke the stillness of the night. Even the whispering had ceased.

We returned to the trail, and fetching our packs we brought them back

to the place where Tom had disappeared. Then we gave way to utter despair.

How long we sat I don't know, but it must have been some considerable time, for the first thing that roused us was the dying splutter of my torch, which had been stuck into the ground at our feet. This effectually brought us back to a sense of our position and to the danger of thus sitting still. I lit another torch and turned to the doctor.

"What are we to do now?" I asked.

"I'm sure I don't know," he answered. "Camp here, I suppose, and light a large fire. We'll have to wait for daylight before we can do anything."

As soon as we had a good fire going we put out our torches, and making ourselves as comfortable as the swampy condition of the ground would allow, we lit our pipes and settled down to wait for morning.

An hour passed; then softly, ever so softly, a faint, almost imperceptible murmur began to come from the tree tops.

"Sounds like a breeze," I said, tilting my head a trifle to listen.

"Yes, it does," assented the doctor, "but unfortunately we know it's no such thing. Throw some more wood on the fire."

"What do you think it is?" I asked as in strained attention we listened to the increasing murmur.

"God knows," answered the doctor, with a shrug.

"Do you think a rifle is any good against it?" I went on.

"No, I do not," he replied shortly.

"Why?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know," he said.

"I've been thinking over the events of the last few hours," I went on, "and there are one or two things that strike me as especially curious."

"For instance," suggested the doctor.

"Well—for one thing," I said,

"We're in a far northern latitude, yet because this country is many thousands of feet below the upper plain, the temperature has increased to such an extent that all the conditions of life down here are tropical."

"Yes, yes," interrupted the doctor, impatiently, "I know all that. We've discussed it many times."

"But this is my point," I said. "These are *not* the tropics. This is an entirely abnormal condition; therefore, life, as we know it, may have undergone a complete change, or at least a modification."

The doctor nodded. "Go on."

"In that case the animal and vegetable life may have characteristics entirely unknown to us, and quite foreign to those with which we are accustomed to deal."

The doctor was lost in thought.

"I see what you mean, but don't generalize. Come down to something definite."

"That I can't do," I answered, "but I have a suspicion that this thing which is menacing us is more or less impalpable, but is armed with innumerable feelers, which I actually felt round my throat and on my face and all over my body a while ago."

The doctor abruptly sat up.

"By God, that's true!" he cried. "I remember feeling them, too, but I thought I was imagining things, and decided they were only creepers and branches of trees, after all."

"That's not all," I went on. "The thing can only see at night; light apparently blinds it."

"In that case," said the doctor, "our best hope lies in our knives and hatchets and in having plenty of light. Throw on some more wood, Gerald."

The next morning we were up at the first hint of daylight, and after a hurried breakfast, determined to prosecute a thorough search for our missing companion, in the faint hope that we might at least gain some clue as to the manner of his death. Plunging into the undergrowth we soon struck

a small stream, and advancing in single file along the bank, found that it narrowed down to a mere brook, and finally lost itself in a great green morass of sponge-like mosses, into which we sank up to our knees. The place was horribly haunted by clouds of enormous and most venomous mosquitoes. This swamp seemed to extend without end in front and on both sides of us.

"It's no use," said the doctor. "We'll have to give it up and go back and make our way to the lake as quickly as possible."

All day we traveled along the narrow trail, making a slow but steady speed. For a forest land it was the most wonderful that the imagination of man could conceive. The thick vegetation met overhead, interlacing into a natural pergola, and at last through this tunnel of verdure, in a golden twilight, we caught sight of the lake, beautiful in itself, but marvelous from the strange tints thrown by the light from above filtering through the foliage.

CLEAR as crystal, motionless as a sheet of glass, green as the edge of an iceberg, it stretched before us. In the center was a small conical island, entirely denuded of trees, while at our feet, where the trail ended, lay a small raft imbedded in the mud.

"There's our boat," I said.

"Well, we still have about an hour of daylight," said the doctor. "That treeless island looks the most beautiful place in the world to me at this moment."

Whether it was the sound of our voices or something else, I don't know, but at that instant the whispering began in the tree tops and from moment to moment the sound increased. Looking up we saw leaves and twigs in violent motion high in the crowns of the trees. Too astounding to move, we watched the strange phenomenon. Suddenly without any warning the

whole tree seemed to spring into life. The giant branches curved down and swept the ground, and every twig and leaf seemed to be stretching out toward us. And at that moment, as if aroused by the clamor of the tree, every plant and shrub began to stir with life, violently agitating their long tentacle-like stems, the edges of which, rasping upon each other, produced a whispering or hissing noise.

“Good God!” screamed the doctor. “The trees! the trees! I’m caught!”

“Use your hatchet,” I cried as I sprang to his rescue and severed a long sinuous tendril that had twined itself round his waist. At the same instant I felt a steel-like vise closing round my ankle and fell heavily. Turning, I saw an enormous plant which had been near the path, waving its tentacles like a huge octopus. It had a short thick trunk, from the top of which radiated giant tentacles, narrow and flexible, but of extraordinary tenaciousness. The edges were armed with barbs or dagger-like teeth. It was one of these sinewy feelers which, inclined at an angle from the trunk, had laid itself flat upon the ground, and at the touch of my boot had risen and like a gigantic serpent had entwined itself about me, and was drawing me toward the center of the stump, where my body would soon have been crushed until every drop of blood had been squeezed out of it and absorbed by the ferocious plant.

A cold sweat broke out on my forehead as I noticed other feelers flailing the air in search of me, and in the frenzy of despair, I slashed at the tendril round my leg and with two quick blows severed it. Immediately it rolled itself up into the parent stem.

“Run! Run!” I yelled to the doctor. “Into the lake!”

Tripping and falling and rising again, and slashing to right and left as I ran, cut and bleeding from the giant barbs, I rushed into the lake. Turning, I saw the doctor madly cut-

ting at a creeper that had him by one arm. In another instant he was free from it, and with a frenzied bound was in the lake beside me, his clothes all torn and his face streaming with blood.

We were up to our waists in water, but safe for the moment from that frightful nightmare. We watched with gruesome fascination the madly tossing forest, the long feelers still groping and searching for us.

"Isn't it ghastly?" I said.

We were nearly sick with the horror of what we had escaped, but when I had sufficiently recovered my mind and some wind, and some of my nerve had come back, I began to look around for some means of escape from the predicament in which we found ourselves. My first thought was of the raft; it looked small and seemed firmly imbedded in the mud. However, with only a small amount of effort we were able to launch it and climb aboard. It was nearly flush with water but with care we were able to cross safely, propelling ourselves by means of a crude sort of sweep which was fastened to one end.

THAT night, after a good meal from our fast-diminishing stores, we slept the sleep of utter exhaustion, untroubled as yet by any fears for the future. Next morning we found our cuts and scratches very sore, but with plenty of iodine and a roll of bandage we were soon fixed up and ready for the exploration of Blue Clay Island. Climbing the conical hill we found, as I expected, that the center of the island consisted of the crater of a small, extinct volcano, the floor of which was covered with blue clay mixed with small boulders.

"There's your diamond clay," I said.

The doctor nodded.

We descended into the cup-shaped valley and soon found the spot where the murderers had started to excavate. We spent the rest of the day then

looking for gems and turning over the solid clay, but we were only rewarded with one minute stone. Whether our want of success was due to lack of experience or to the fact that we did not dig deep enough, I can't say, but the fact remains that that stone was the only one we ever got from the mine.

From this time on our every effort was bent toward trying to find a way of escape, but we were stopped at every turn. We circled the lake in an endeavor to find a landing-place, but everywhere the trees seemed to sense our approach, and we dared not land. Two or three days passed in this way, while we grew more and more desperate. Finally, on the evening of the fourth day, as we were sitting by our fire smoking, our energy almost exhausted, the doctor spoke, deep dejection in his tone.

"It's no use, Gerald. I give up. We'll either have to try to make our way through the forest where we came in or die of starvation. We have only a few more days' grub left."

"Before we do anything as rash as that," I remarked, "let's tell each other all we know about this place, put all our cards on the table, and we may be able to work something out when we have our data all together. I'll begin. To start with, look at the forest now. Not a leaf stirring, is there?"

The doctor looked intently at the shore line with my field glasses.

"No, everything is as calm and peaceful as possible."

"Now watch the trees."

I took a fair-sized stone and threw it into the lake about a quarter of the way across. There was a big splash.

"Any sign?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, look at the water line where it meets the shore by the big pine and keep looking and tell me when the ripples get there."

"All right," he said a moment later. "They're lapping the bank."

"Now look at the tops," I directed.

The doctor uttered an ejaculation. "That's a remarkable thing. They're all in motion. Whatever made you think of that, Gerald?"

"You see," I went on, "how hopeless it is to try to reach the shore without letting the trees know of our approach."

"That's true," said the doctor, "but we can land on that little sand beach just to the right of the path."

"Yes, that's point number two. And number three is, the nearer the lake the fiercer the trees."

"I don't see any more points," said the doctor slowly.

For a long time we sat moodily staring into the fire. Then, slowly at first, but finally with a flash of inspiration, the idea came, and I smiled. The doctor, who had been watching me dejectedly, suddenly exclaimed:

"You've got a plan, Gerald. Spit it out."

I pointed to the fire. "We'll burn the forest," I said.

Ever since our first entry into the Sunken Land, the weather had been dry; consequently the timber on the island, which, as the diary showed, had all been cut down by our predecessors, was in first-class condition to start a fire. The only question was, would that forest burn?

"We'll have to build a bonfire on the beach and have everything all set for the first big wind from the northwest," I said.

"A regular funeral pyre," remarked the doctor.

For the next two days we toiled from daylight to dark, ferrying logs and brushwood across the lake and scientifically building a large square pile which covered the center beach, and at the apex, for the top was conical, was nearly fifteen feet high. The forest at this point consisted of a pure stand of pine, mostly longleaf, with some loblolly admixture, which was a great piece of luck for us, as this pine is highly resinous.

Our preparations were now all

made; the wind only was wanting. We made a number of torches and got everything in readiness, then, while waiting for the weather to change, tried our luck with the blue clay once more, but with no success.

Four days passed. Then one night I was awakened by feeling a strong breeze from the northwest blowing over me. I quickly roused the doctor, and we sat up and listened.

"It's rising," I said.

"Yes, it's rising, but we're going to have rain. We haven't a minute to lose."

Hurrying down to the raft, we paddled across.

When we got back to the island our landing was as bright as day in the light of that enormous fire, which, fanned by the rising wind, was roaring above the tops of the nearest trees.

"Let's go up to the highest point of the island," I suggested, "so that we can follow the course the fire takes with our field glasses."

The conflagration was now well within the pine stand, and was already beginning to spread fanwise; momentarily the wind increased, driving clouds of sparks and dense clouds of smoke high into the air. We watched it, fascinated; our lives hung upon the result.

I handed the glasses to the doctor. "The fire has reached the mixed forest. Will the deciduous trees burn?"

The doctor pointed to the east. "Look, Gerald, the dawn."

"I feel a drop of rain," I said.

Overhead heavy gray rain clouds were tearing across the sky.

"Let's cross," suggested the doctor.

"No use," I replied. "We'll have to wait until tomorrow morning."

Late in the afternoon we crossed to have a look at things. The rain was coming down in torrents, and the wind had dropped to a gusty breeze. We made our way into the charred forest for a couple of hundred yards. Nothing molested us; apparently our way lay open.

The next morning we made an early start, for the weather had cleared and a bright sun was shining. We followed the path of the fire all morning until we reached the edge of the green morass where Tom had disappeared. Here the fire had burned itself out, but its purpose had been accomplished. We were safe.

The object of the expedition from an official point of view had been achieved, but at a terrible cost. Poor Tom had paid with his life, and to us the price seemed far too high. It is true that no trace of the last of the murderers, Blake, had been found, but we had had sufficient proof of the impossibility of escaping from the island in any other way than that which we had taken.

He had tried to pass the forest and had failed.