

# Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

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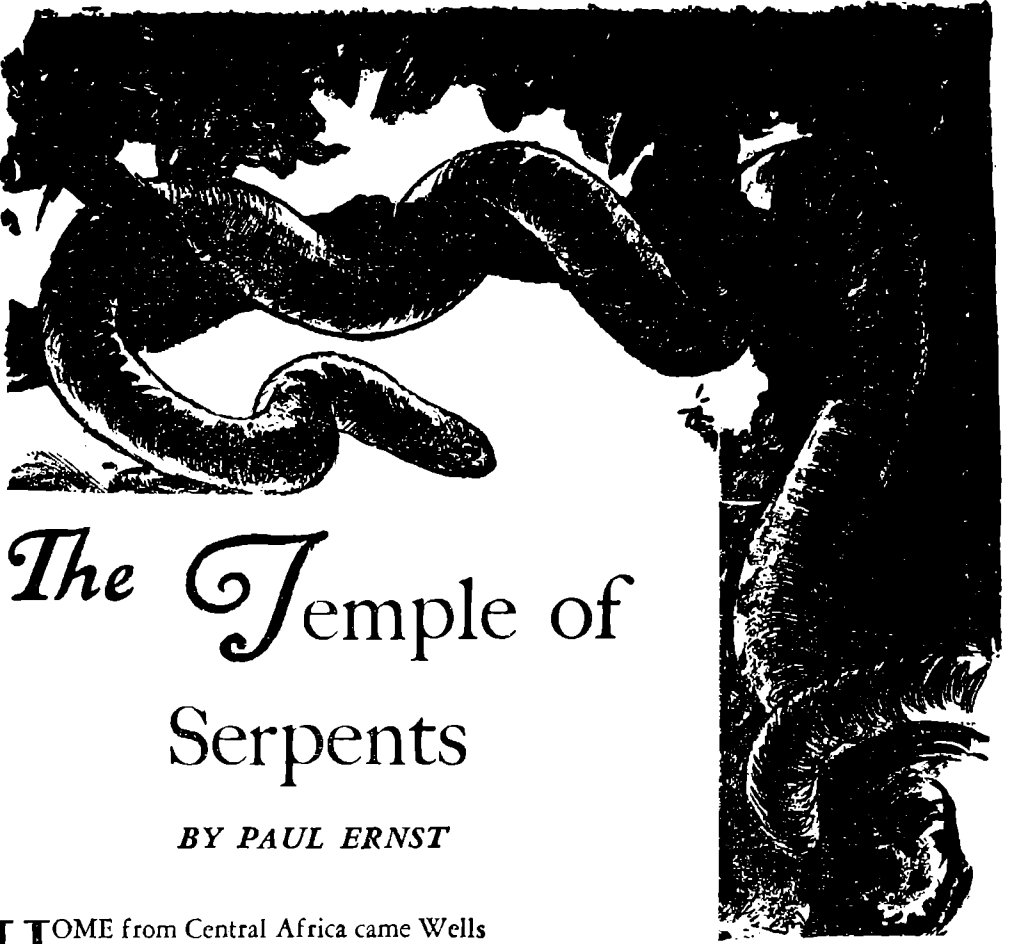
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



# The Temple of Serpents

BY PAUL ERNST

HOME from Central Africa came Wells Beyerlein, the artist, with an imposing stack of canvases to his credit at a New York gallery. As usual, he went directly to Herbert Wayne's apartment. Wayne was his best friend, and it was in his comfortable bachelor suite that Wells put up during the infrequent periods he spent in New York.

"A wonderful trip, Wayne," said Wells as they sipped lazily at a tall drink apiece in front of Wayne's fireplace. "Not only from a productive viewpoint but also from a personal one. You've no idea how weird that country is down there."

"Down where?" asked Wayne. "Congo. It's wild and woolly, my son. The children play with skulls as our kids play with blocks. The fire is kept warm under the cooking-pot, and they eat little white men without salt or pepper!"

"How did you escape being eaten?" inquired Wayne with a smile.

"Oh, I managed," said Wells with a



*Of course no one would actually believe in a wishing stone!*

grimace. "My greatest source of worry was not myself but my paints."

"How come, Rembrandt?"

"It is the custom for the men to daub their faces and bodies with all the bright-colored pigments they can find. And you can imagine how my tubes of vari-colored, guaranteed paints attracted them! Especially the reds and yellows and greens. I finally had to spread a rumor that my paints were terribly bad medicine, and that any black boy who touched them to his body would curl up and turn into a snake! They believed me implicitly—it seems that their witch doctor had a bad habit of turning his enemies into snakes, so they knew it could be done."

For a moment the two men were silent, dreaming into the fire. There was a tremendous contrast between them. Wayne was slender and almost delicate, with the sensitive features and deep dark eyes of a dreamer; while Wells was essentially a man of action, with broad, stocky body and round, practical looking head.

Wayne broke the spell with a short laugh.

"The childishness of the human mind when it is left to itself!" he exclaimed. "Can you imagine an adult human being actually believing that another mortal is able to turn him into a serpent if he so desires?"

The artist gazed at his friend with somber eyes before replying.

"I can't laugh with you, Wayne. I've lost a lot of convictions since I began to travel around the darker corners of the earth. Some of our most precious laws of physics and common sense are knocked silly by the childish, savage mind that you deplore."

Wayne stared. "You don't mean to say that you believe in such things yourself?"

"I believe in nothing much. But at the same time I hesitate to disbelieve even the wildest statements."

"Did you ever see anyone being transformed into a snake?"

"No. Also I never saw a witch doctor change himself into a tiger or a lion—but it is supposed to have been done by the most powerful of them. I tell you, the things that some of those black-skinned, ferocious children of the jungle are capable of, would surprise you."

Wayne attempted to change the subject.

"What would you like to do tomorrow? You've been in the wilds for so long that we'll have to sophisticate you all over again."

"Now you're trying to humor me," laughed the artist. "But I'm not crazy, Wayne. And"—with a smile that was a mixture of earnestness and jest—"I've brought back proof of the snake story. I'll show you."

HE ROSE abruptly and went into the bedroom that was always his when he was in town. There he opened a huge suitcase, one of those carryalls that expand at either side like an accordion. It was a mute testimony to its owner's travels, this battered case. It was stained and discolored, with auxiliary straps sewed crudely on to reinforce it where it had weakened at various times, and it looked as though it could tell a long and interesting tale.

From the capacious folds of the big case, Wells brought out an object that seemed to be heavy and was about half as large as his clenched fist. As he took it up and handed it to his friend to look at, it glittered a dull green in the firelight.

Wayne gave an exclamation and nearly dropped it.

"What a gruesome thing! I thought it was alive at first."

He examined it carefully. It was a snake's head in stone, perfectly done. Blunt and flat and ominous looking, with hard, glittering scales and dull, beady eyes, it seemed more like an actual petrified head than a work of human hands. The dull green sheen was intrinsic in the stone—a stone that Wayne had never seen before.

"What a curious thing, Wells? And it's quite perfect. Surely no jungle savage carved this out of the rock!"

"Not supposed to be carved at all," said Wells, still with his inscrutable smile. "It is supposed to be a real snake's head turned into stone. The old witch doctor who gave it to me assured me that it was one of his enemies whom he had playfully turned into a snake and then petrified! He had a dozen in his filthy hut. His greatest treasures. Actually I think they came from an old temple, the remains of some unknown civilization

that was buried in the heart of the jungle. There were rumors of the existence of such a place, and I noticed several of the other blacks with fragments of ancient carvings and old metal statuettes."

"How on earth did you ever get this from the witch doctor?"

Wells grinned. "I painted a very snappy portrait of the old boy and got in his very best graces. I depicted him as a sort of giant, with his head above the tallest palms and the rest of the men playing about his toes like pigmies. Showed him what a wonderful man he was. It tickled him pink, and his parting gift was this snake-head. He seemed to be absolutely unimpressed by the wonder of its realistic detail—the main thing he harped on was a miraculous potency it is supposed to have."

Wayne raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"It is an aid to grant wishes," explained Wells lightly.

"Oho, a wishing-stone, eh?"

"Yes. One may hold this snakehead firmly in his left hand and make any wish he pleases. The wish will then proceed to come true with swiftness and despatch. Only—the number of wishes is limited to two."

"What have you wished for?"

"I haven't wished for anything. As you see, the head is green in color. The old villain assured me that it would stay green as long as its powers were unused. After it had been exhausted by being used for its two wishes, it will turn brown."

"I'll swear you half believe this tale, Wells. How is it that you haven't put it to the test and made your two wishes?"

The artist shrugged. "As you see, the head is a diabolical-looking thing. I've an idea that any wishes granted by it would end in grief."

Wayne sat up very straight in his chair with mock awe in his face. He held the snake-head soberly in his left hand, extending the thing well over his head.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I will now proceed to make a wish. I assure you there is nothing up my sleeve, there is no trick of any kind to deceive you. You are about to witness a spectacle of black magic that will startle the world of science."

"Don't play the fool, Wayne!" said Wells. "Give me that thing."

HE SNATCHED at it but Wayne held it out of his reach.

"Nonsense, Wells. You're actually half afraid of this dead piece of stone. It's my solemn duty as your friend and mentor to drive the imp of credulity from your ivory skull. So here goes for the wish!" Again he held it up in his left hand with mock reverence.

"Mumbo jumbo, hocus pocus, and any other magical incantations that may be necessary. I am about to make a wish, and may the devils that hide in the dark places see to it that my wish comes true. Otherwise I might turn them into snakes!"

He held the snake-head higher.

"I wish," he said firmly, "I wish that I might see the craftsman who is really responsible for this bit of rock sculpture!"

An instant he sat there, rigid, half serious in spite of his levity. Then, slowly, he lowered his hand, the stone snake-head still firmly clutched in his fingers.

"Well, you see nothing drastic happened," he said, meeting Wells' intent stare with a cool grin. "Your marvelous snake-head is a fake."

"Do you feel all right?" the artist inquired anxiously, ignoring the sarcasm. "You look pale."

"Certainly I feel all right, but I'm a little chilly. Stir up that fire, will you?"

Wells' anxiety grew more marked at this. For if anything the room was too hot. "Wayne, you aren't well at all. I can see it in your face. You don't look normal."

Wayne started to reply, to laugh at his friend's fear. But he found himself unaccountably unable to speak. His tongue seemed paralyzed, and when he attempted to rise from his chair, his body was numb and lifeless.

The snake-head in his hand suddenly grew cold with a living coldness. Its clammy chill spread all over him, till he shook and trembled like a leaf on a dying tree. And then fear descended on his numbing brain. Again he tried to cry out, to call to his friend whose face was slowly fading from his sight.

A thousand pinwheels of fire burned in his eyes. Around and around they flared in ever greater circles until a vast sheet of solid flame closed him in. The flame was

extinguished, and with it his consciousness and life. . . .

**S**LOWLY he realized that he was among the strangest surroundings he had ever seen. He had a sense of being smothered in hot, dank gloom; he felt as though great, soggily warm blankets were over him, closing out all air and revivifying coolness.

Opening his eyes he found himself looking straight up at a ceiling of branches and leaves far over his head. This ceiling of greenery had an intensely tropical look; and running up to it and under it in every possible direction vines and more branches thrust aggressively, so thick as to choke the already stifled air. Dappled, excessive sunlight played on the topmost leaves, but down where he lay there was no sun. Bright as it was it did not penetrate through the almost solid wall of tropic growth that closed like green water over his head. Around him a continuous enclosure of underbrush shot crookedly up like tremendous, hopelessly tangled spider-webs. A dog could hardly have wormed a way through the twining mass.

Something seemed tugging at his hand; and looking curiously at his left arm he saw that it was stretched out, taut and rigid as though some force was trying to pull him to his feet. Observing the thing in his hand he gave a gasp of fear and tried to drop it but could not. It was a snake's head, cold with a living, repellent coldness.

Then he remembered—the scene in his apartment by the light of the fire—Wells Beyerlein handing him the snake-head.

"I suppose I'm dead!" he reflected, and he pitied himself, thinking of the interests he had given up in life for the sake of forbidden curiosity. "And I suppose this is the jungles—the African Congo!"

He felt again the insistent tugging at the hand that held the bit of stone. It was as though he held the end of a rope that was being slowly and inevitably wound up by a great drum, pulling him toward it. In helpless response he rose and started to walk in the direction from which the unknown power was tugging at him. And ever his outstretched arm with the snake-head in its clenched fist was as taut with strain as an iron bar.

He noticed that the wiry, tangled skein of undergrowth curled up into a leafy tunnel to let him pass. In and out among the tremendous tree trunks he wound a tortuous and unwilling path, always going toward the leaf-dimmed brightness of the jungle sunset. And ever the polished fragment of stone seemed to writhe and urge him on toward an unknown spot.

A sinuous black body, a crash of underbrush, the whirring of a slashing blade—and Wayne saw a jungle savage coming toward him. In one corded hand was held a knife that whipped from side to side, severing ropelike vines and branches, hewing out a path for the sweat-gleaming black body. As thoroughly at home as any four-legged beast was the two-legged one that hacked his way through the jungle. Great welts from long-healed scars, self-inflicted, beautified the ebony skin according to the savage mode. Splashes of yellow and red and white paint lent a ferocious bestial mask to the coarse black face with its thick lips and protruding lower jaw. The lobes of the big ears and the flare of the squat nostrils were stretched by incredibly large holes plugged with big wooden disks.

**A**N INSTANT the black man halted, staring straight at Wayne with mindless intensity. The stupid eyes opened wider till a ring of yellowish, blood injected white showed clear around the opaque pupils. Then with jerky swiftness the savage turned in his tracks and began slashing a path away into the inscrutable shelter of the sinister monsters of trees.

And now as Wayne felt himself pulled inexorably along a new sound came to his ears. It was a hoarse, guttural bellow, accomplished by loud hollow beats as though some heavy hand were banging down on a big drum. The sound came from the path directly in front of him.

A darker shadow outlined itself in the jungle murk and Wayne saw the beast that had been making the noise. Tremendous, manlike shoulders heavily padded with matted hair, huge hands beating crashingly down on a barrel of a chest, short legs crooked under ponderous body—a gorilla. As the animal roared its hate and defiance a yellowish slaver flecked its fanged jaws

and the little red eyes were terrible to see.

Wayne put forth all his strength to combat the infernal something that was dragging him directly toward the peril that screamed and roared and beat its great chest. He leaned his body back in a slant of forty-five degrees and dug his heels into the mold and rotted wood that carpeted the jungle; but, neither faster nor slower, the intangible force hauled him on—straight toward the monster!

He was so close to the gorilla that he could see every detail of dirt-matted black hair, every calloused wrinkle of fingerlike toes. He stared fascinated at the long, broken talons that would soon rip at his flesh, at the great arms that would soon be tearing him apart in the senseless rage that seemed to fill the creature to bursting. And always he tried to hang back against the force that was pulling him on.

Then an odd thing happened.

The blood-shot little eyes looked squarely at him. A screaming growl was checked midway between the snarling lips. The gorilla's rank hair rose like the fur on a startled cat's back. With a spasmodic twitching of pads of muscles the huge, manlike thing turned and swung off among the evil tree branches.

Before Wayne could speculate on the sudden terror of this jungle king, a new marvel forced itself on his attention.

**D**IRECTLY in front of him, apparently the goal toward which he was being forced was what seemed to be the front of a gigantic, ruined temple. Two tremendous columns shot up into the murk, guarding the front of a ponderous, mausoleumlike structure that looked to be at least four stories high and that extended back into the jungle for an indeterminate distance. Between the columns was the pitch darkness of a forty-foot-square entrance into the unlighted cube of stone.

He saw that the building was buried to half its height by the accumulated debris of ages, and that there was an incline leading down to the great door which had been uncovered in more recent days. Then he was too close to the entrance to do more than mark the front of the building itself.

He observed that the two key columns

that flanked the entrance were squared at the base of half their height and then rounded to their gracefully flaring tops. The huge blocks of stone that formed the front of the temple were deeply carved with the straight-lined figures and mystic pictures that came originally from Egypt. The big columns, too, were banded with innumerable carven symbols and figures in every conceivable pose. Squatted at the foot of each of the two big columns was a great stone image of an eaglelike bird. Harsh and intolerant were the glaring eyes, and harsh and cruel were the hooked beaks that jutted out as though about to rend and tear. On the flat, ominous head of each bird was set a tall stone crown, like a miter indicating royalty.

The weight of the thick roof was suspended over the void of the mighty entrance on a monolithic beam of stone that was fully ten feet square. This was also covered elaborately with the straight-lined figures and the picture writing. And directly in the center, jutting out over the gloomy entrance of the door, was gigantic stone snake's head as big as a large man's body and with colored stones for eyes that glinted with dull menace.

So much he had time to notice. Then, with his unwilling arm still outstretched in front of him and taut with the power that hauled his body along, he found himself passing under the huge snake's head and into the towering entrance way.

Turns to right and left, winding passages in the pitch blackness—and the strain was suddenly relieved. His arm dropped to his side, but he found his fingers still clenched around the repellent, cold snake-head.

No slightest ray of light came to his eyes. The darkness was so thick that he could feel it pressing around him like swirling water. But gradually he was aware of a sound. It was like myriads of soft whispers, a rustling of ghostly silk, a pressure of dry scales on smooth rock flooring.

From every direction came the rustling whispers, the dragging of sinuous bodies. Something passed sluggishly over his foot, coiled lazily around his leg.

In panic he turned and ran through the darkness, his feet now and then touching writhing, squirming things. He banged

against a wall, felt along it, and stumbled over a stair. Up and up he crawled around a twisting way, feeling the slippery, age-worn stone of the ponderous steps under his feet, until the hand that still clutched the snake-head, came in contact with what seemed to be a trapdoor. It was not of stone but of wood, and it felt rough and freshhewn, the work of some breathing human being in the midst of terrifying and impersonal rock.

A moment he crouched there panting, hearing in imagination the whisper of scaly bodies dragging themselves over smooth flooring. Then he exerted all his strength and pushed at the trap-door over his head. It seemed to give a little. Another heave and it swung suddenly upward. He scrambled through and slammed it down over the stairway.

The great hall in which he now found himself was lighted from end to end by a faint, pervasive blue glow coming from some unknown source. In the blue light he saw that it was evidently an inner shrine room, some ancient holy of holies; around the walls were more of the elaborate carvings and picture writing.

At one end of the hall was an immense statue, an idol representing a monster, half human and half bird, that squatted on its haunches and glared out over the room. It was set a little way from the end wall so as to hint at an entrance behind it.

And now he saw something else! On the floor of the hall, twisted and curled like willow twigs in the heat of a fire, were scores and scores of snakes. But these snakes did not move. They lay there as motionless, as rigid as though frozen. Obviously they were lifeless.

He advanced cautiously to the nearest and touched it with his foot. There was no motion from the serpent and no give to it. He soon ascertained why—it was stone! The snakes in this chamber in some manner had been petrified.

A movement caught the corner of his eye, and turning to the idol at the end of the room he saw a large snake gliding with frenzied haste away from the awesome image. It was writhing over the floor at incredible speed. Straight toward Wayne it came, but before he could feel apprehension

there was a change in all its movements. More and more slowly it crawled, a sort of languor appearing in every move—more and more sluggish till almost at Wayne's feet it assumed the rigidity of the others. He touched his foot to it and it was like feeling a stick of wood. He raised it, then dropped it—and it broke squarely in two! It also was stone!

And now there was a new diversion. Muffled sounds as of a struggle came from the entrance behind the idol. There was a hasty shuffle of bare feet. A black boy hurtled around the statue and came bounding over the floor. It was one of the painted, bestial-seeming jungle men such as Wayne had seen on his enforced journey to the temple.

Suddenly the muscled black boy was rooted to the floor, paralyzed. Wayne saw the arms and legs twitch with what was evidently a tremendous fight to overcome the spell that seemed to hold them in its grasp. The spasmodic jerkings stopped, and the man was motionless.

Then Wayne saw a transformation that was short and relentless and utterly appalling. The black boy seemed to grow slimmer and rounder. The arms merged into the trunk so that they disappeared altogether. The legs melted into one columnar mass which also dwindled rapidly in size. Soon the entire body was a slim black cylinder of flesh with a flat head on it that had lost all traces of humanity. Before the details of the unearthly metamorphosis could be described it was complete. For an instant the snake, that had ten seconds before been a human being, balanced its length in air. Then it toppled swiftly over and with its fall was shattered into pieces like brittle glass.

THE air seemed suddenly charged with evil as tangible as electric current. Wayne found his eyes dragged from the wonder that had occurred and riveted on the grim idol. Slow, dragging steps could be heard.

He was about to be granted his wish! He was about to see with his own eyes the sculptor of the snake-head that was clamped in his unwilling left hand!

For an instant the slow steps ceased.

Then, out from behind the satanic-looking stone idol stepped a figure that seemed to have been evolved from a nightmare.

The body, wrinkled with age, was bent and twisted and infirm. The shriveled black flesh was covered with stinking strips of untanned hide that flapped grotesquely with the creature's shuffling walk. The skinny arms were those of a weird skeleton, but it was the face of the Thing that was most unbecomable. From brow to chin, from ear to ear, it was covered with coarse, yellowish gray hair! Like a mask it was, that unwholesome-looking thicket of fur that covered nose and chin and forehead; and from the caves of the eye-sockets, little red eyes peered forth.

The creature stood for an instant just in front of the great stone image, looking at Wayne with an intensity that robbed him of every shred of his will-power. Hypnotic as the glance was, he could not have moved if death itself had been the penalty. He felt turned to stone himself at the impact of that evilly intelligent, fiercely intent gaze.

Dragging his gnarled feet, the hairfaced black man advanced slowly toward Wayne. He seemed in no hurry about it, picking his way leisurely among the stiffened reptiles on the floor as though they were pollution he did not care to touch. And ever those red little eyes ate into Wayne's heart.

In them Wayne read a purpose that set him to trembling like a taut, vibrated cord. What he had seen happen to the unfortunate jungle black man was shortly to happen to himself! In a few seconds he too would crash to the floor, a human form no longer, breaking impotently into a dozen pieces!

The little eyes held his gaze with fascinated helplessness. They bored into his brain, feeling as tangible as red-hot needles. White and trembling, Wayne stared back. He saw the pupils of the creature's eyes so expanded that he seemed to be looking into two black holes, down into unguessable depths.

Wayne's head began to sway rhythmically back and forth on his slack shoulders. The little red eyes he was staring at increased in size until they became great flaming circles. The huge circles became multitudes of rings, concentric, of many vivid colors.

The hall melted away and became roofed with stars, every star a flaring pinwheel of sputtering fire.

He felt his arms merging into his trunk as the bewitched black man's had done. He felt his legs fusing into one piece of quivering flesh. With a roaring inside his head like the noise of a thousand cataracts, he felt his skull changing its shape.

The glaring little eyes blinked as though the strain of their weird stare was too much even for superhuman strength. And with the sudden filming of the hypnotic eyes, though it lasted for but a fraction of a second, Wayne had an instant's reprieve.

**H**E FELT the bit of stone in his hand that had brought upon him the fate so soon to be his. There was something about it that he ought to remember. Something that might save him. What was there about the stone? Oh yes . . . It was a wishingstone. It would grant the power of two wishes before it turned from green to brown and became exhausted. Two wishes. The stone was still green. Only one wish had been used. . . .

And Wayne screamed aloud. He writhed and struggled to move his arms and legs. His left arm slowly raised over his head, though it was like tearing strong linen to get it loose from his body.

"I wish to get out of this awful place forever!"

For an eternity of suspense he waited. Nothing happened. The red eyes peering from behind the ghastly mask of hair held him once more in their hypnotic power. He turned and twisted to escape the spell that was surely stealing over him again. His arms! If he could only wrench them loose from his sides he might spring on the demon that was transforming him into a scaly, crawling thing!

He fought and lashed out with his arms. "Steady, steady," said a voice.

Slowly the great, blue-lighted hall, the grinning stone idol that was half human, half bird, the hair-covered mask of a face with its glaring red eyes—all faded from his sight. But his arms were still helplessly bound to his sides. He flapped them feebly.

"Easy, Wayne. You're all right now." said the voice.



Opening his eyes he saw Wells Beyerlein bending anxiously over him and holding his thrashing arms. There was another man with him, a spectacled, professional-looking man who was at the moment engaged in shutting a small black bag. Wayne felt the sting in his shoulder of a recent hypodermic injection.

Flooded by a vast, overwhelming content and a sense that somehow everything was all right, he closed his eyes and relaxed. He heard the door open and close, and felt that the spectacled man had gone out with his little black bag and left him alone with his friend.

"I've had such a ghastly nightmare, Wells," he whispered weakly.

"Yes, yes," soothed Wells. "And now let me have this infernal thing." Coaxing fingers opened the clenched left hand and removed the stone snake-head.

"Such an awful nightmare!" repeated Wayne drowsily.

"But you're all right now. Everything is all right now. It was only a mirage. Go to sleep and rest your nerves."

With a puzzled frown Wells tried to ex-

plain the phenomenon to Wayne, after his friend had rested and come to himself again.

"The snake-head was probably saturated, drenched with some one of the devil's brews that those witch doctors can make with their jungle herbs. Then it dried, leaving only a residue in the pores of the stone. And the heat of the fire, and the warmth of your hand as you clenched it served to release a vapor that drugged your nerves and produced the hallucination you went through."

"You're sure that's the explanation?" asked Wayne.

"No, I'm not sure. But it's the only things I can think of."

Wayne turned the stone snake-head over and over in his hand.

"Your theory doesn't explain the change of color," he remarked. "When you gave it to me it was green. Now it's brown!"

"No," admitted Wells uneasily, "my theory doesn't explain the change of color."

And together they stared with somber eyes at the enigmatic bit of stone that had once been a shimmering green and that was now dull, used-up brown.

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