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THE THING IN THE PYRAMID

by John Dwight



—BU>WATCH

IT IS now ten months since my old friend Stephen Grayton, the eminent archeologist, sailed for Belize. It is ten months since I have heard from him. An expedition, composed of scientists and friends of Grayton, has been organized and sails from Boston June 26th, on the Scotia. The purpose is to rescue Grayton, if he is still alive, and to destroy the Thing in the Pyramid. It is in the interests of science and archeology that I am publishing this. I have the manuscript as proof. Anyone interested in this expedition and desiring to aid either financially or in person, please communicate with me at 19 Tremont Street, Boston, before June 15th.

[Signed] Michael Wentworth,
Prof. Engineering M. I. T.,
Boston, Mass.

THE story follows, word for word as told to me by Stephen Grayton the night before he sailed:

Of course you know that ever since my days at Harvard I have been interested in archeology, particularly in that of Central America. Fifteen years ago, five years after we left college, I inherited a sufficient amount of money to allow me to devote my en-

tire time to research and expeditions. At first it was the Aztec and Toltec ruins which fascinated me; but gradually I turned to the Mayan civilization, which is even more mysterious and more unknown. Two years ago I spent several months on the Yucatan peninsula, most profitable and interesting months. I began to devote more and more of my time in the attempt to decipher the undecipherable Mayan hieroglyphics. After some study I decided that these inscriptions at Chi-Chien were written in a bastard dialect, a corrupted and degenerated form. The pure Mayan inscriptions must be elsewhere. I had not succeeded in really deciphering, understand, and so I could not be sure; but that feeling persisted. The architecture, what remained of it, also conveyed this impression; it seemed a weak copy of some far loftier conception. This fever, to read these inscriptions, took firm hold on me; I have not lost it. But I had no idea where I could find what I sought.

When I first went into Yucatan I had picked up and attached as my personal servant an Indian boy with just enough mixture of blood to make him more intelligent than the average. I taught him English and gradually

won his confidence, though that took some time.

One night I was working in my tent. I was almost in despair, because I could make so little headway in what I had come to regard as my life work. I was hampered still farther because so much of the city and inscriptions were overgrown and defaced; and my expedition was too small to undertake any serious excavations. I was alone, you understand, with the natives I had hired. I prefer to work alone. Monty, the Indian boy, came in. His native name was unpronounceable, so I had renamed him Montezuma, which speedily shortened to Monty. An idle thought came to me; Monty was an Indian, perhaps a diluted descendant of these very Mayas; he might know something about another Mayan city, some ancient tradition almost lost sight of, the superstitious reverence gone in the rush of years. I leaned back in my camp chair.

"Monty," I began, "this is quite a city we're studying, isn't it?"

His stolid brown face barely moved. "Yes, sir." He went placidly on straightening the tent.

"But I've decided it isn't so very good after all. It isn't very big. These people who built it weren't so much; it isn't worth wasting time on."

His beady eyes flashed a bit. "But if you could see the real city, sir."

I tried to make my voice very casual. "There isn't any other city. This is the only real Mayan city and it's pretty poor. Everyone says it's the only city."

"They lie, sir; this isn't the biggest city."

"Oh, come now; how can I believe that?"

"My father said so, and he had it from his father. The real city is south."

"Oh, south? How far south?"

"A long way."

That wasn't much help. The electric torch lighted the tent only in patches. I could not see Monty's face distinctly. He might be lying; but why should he lie?

"Well, I don't believe it."

"I could show you. I could find the way from my father, though we have never been there. It is big, much bigger than this." He was talking with unusual animation.

"You could take me there?" I tried to sound bored.

He had sunk back into almost his accustomed apathy. "My father might know. I know nothing," he muttered.

"Listen, Monty." I leaned forward. "If you will take me to this city of yours I'll give you a watch, a real watch, and your father one, too."

Monty was moved but cautious. "I'll go see my father," he compromised.

WE PACKED up the next day and returned to Campeche. Monty disappeared into the brush and I waited for three days, the longest three days I have spent. It hardly seemed credible that such luck was mine; to find the greatest city of the Mayas! There must be some catch somewhere.

When Monty returned he was willing enough to show me the city, not particularly interested one way or another; and he did want the watch. His directions were vague: to follow the coast to a certain point with islands, then go up a river. That was all he would say, but he persisted that he could find it. I left Monty to hire the natives and sailed for New Orleans to charter a steamer and buy new equipment. Perhaps you wonder why I believed Monty; at times I do myself. It must have been intuition. There are times when I wish I never had questioned him or followed him; but at other times—well.

At New Orleans I chartered a single screw steamer named the *Laughing Sally*. I bought the brush hooks, tents, whatever I would need; but I had no captain or crew. I found my captain one night lying drunk on my doorstep. He was quite young, about twenty-five, with light brown hair and blue eyes. I liked his looks from the first, which is why I took the trouble to sober him up. He was obviously of a good middle-class family and said he had had two years at a state university before he had been expelled. His papers were in order and I hired him. He would have no chance to drink on my expedition. His name was Dan Chipman. He got together a crew and we returned to Campeche.

Monty had collected fifteen Indians and we started down the coast, waiting for him to say when to stop. The steamer was not fast. Dan and I became very good friends. I had made few new friends in the recent years, I had had so little time and been away so long, and now for the first time I began to realize what I had missed. Dan was not an overstrong character; but he was intelligent, cheerful, and very good company. We became more and more attached. Gradually I told him the purpose of our expedition. It fired his imagination and he became even more enthusiastic than I. Finally I consented to allow him to accompany me into the interior.

The third day Monty became excited. We were coasting along British Honduras and had reached the mouth of the Belize river when he came to me. His guttural voice was two pitches higher than usual.

"Here," he said.

We put in at Belize, docked the *Laughing Sally*, discharged the crew, hired river canoes, and started up the river.

IT WAS rather hard going up the Belize. Whenever we landed and encountered natives I instructed Mon-

ty to ask about the city; but either he did not ask or they refused to tell, for we never had word of it. We must have gone sixty miles up the river when Monty suddenly led us off through the forest. That was harder going than the river, for we had to hack our way through the thick growth. We were heading due south.

The sixth day we reached it. All day we had climbed upward until finally we mounted above the woods and came out on an arid stony hillside. I do not yet understand how Monty found his way; though, as I said, he was probably of Mayan descent. He led us along the hillside for some miles to the west until he reached a narrow cleft. Unhesitatingly he turned in. Dan and I were so excited we fairly tiptoed as we followed him. The passage was deep, the sides smooth. It widened, and we stood on the top of a little path running down into the valley. The path was made of slabs of stone cemented together.

In the center of the valley lay the city I sought. Even now its size, its grandeur, its age overwhelm me. A stream flowed down one side of the valley; below us was a grassy plain; on the other side of the city we could barely discern a forest. A low wall surrounded the city. Most of the houses and temples were still standing. It looked as if it was still occupied, and at the same time as if it had never been occupied. This was partly because it was not overgrown; there were no bushes or trees in the entire city. In the center was an open place, a square, and in this square rose a pyramid. So far as I could see, it rather resembled the ones at Uxal and Chi-Chien in Yucatan; but somehow it was different.

I don't know how long I had been looking at this wonder that I, Stephen Grayton, had discovered, when Dan touched me. "Look at Monty," he whispered.

Monty was standing a little in front of us, on the stone path, facing the pyramid. He was holding one hand before his eyes, the other was stretched outward, palm up. He looked immovable, and suddenly seemed to have acquired a new dignity. There was something about the whole attitude I did not like.

"Monty," I called sharply. He seemed to come out of a half-dream and turned obediently to me. His face was more animated than I had ever seen it before.

"Look," he pointed to the city, "I told you; and I have brought you." He beamed in a self-satisfied way. All traces of dignity were gone. I patted him on the back.

"I'm sorry I said I didn't believe you. You've done very well. I'll give you a gun, too."

He grinned, then ordered the bearers to follow him. They were as stolid as ever; the discovery of a new city was nothing to them. They led the way down the path. Dan and I followed. That path cut straight through the grasses as cleanly as if it had been laid the week before.

An archway in the wall introduced us to the city. It was the typical Mayan pointed arch; but executed with a new grace, a new poise. Then I saw why the city was not overgrown. It was paved; the whole city was paved with slabs cemented together. There was no possible foothold even for grass. It looked swept and garnished and uncannily bare. There were no streets as we know them, and the houses were placed irregularly. Twisting between them we made our way to the central square. It was almost an eighth of a mile on a side and empty except for the pyramid in the center. This stood to the four points of the compass and was at least four hundred feet high. It was flat on the top like those of Yucatan, but its base resembled the pyramids

of Egypt, only the blocks were not so large and were highly carved. On the west side was a stairway mounting to the platform.

It was nearly sunset. I ordered Monty to occupy one of the temples on the west side of the square and prepare supper and sleeping quarters. The whole square was in gray shadow, but the top of the pyramid was golden when Dan and I finally climbed the 499 steps to the platform. It was square, about sixty by sixty. In the center was a temple. The walls were about twelve feet high and were made of huge stones carved in high relief. The one door was toward the west. Suddenly I wanted to go in that door more than I had ever wanted to do anything else. One part of my brain urged me in, another, a larger part, held me back.

"You get an awfully good view," said Dan, casually glancing over the city, "but I want to see what's inside."

So did I. I put my hand on his arm and we entered together. It was quite plain inside, no carving of any kind. Something urged me forward. We took a step. Then I looked down.

"Look out," I yelled and jumped back, dragging Dan. At our feet yawned a black hole. It was octagonal in shape and at least fifteen feet across. The floor sloped down a trifle and was worn very smooth.

"How funny!" Dan was interested but not alarmed. "Let's look down." He lay on his face and crawled forward. I held on to his feet and he put his face over the edge.

"Can't see a thing." His voice was muffled, then thrown back and forth from the sides of the well until it became a chorus of hoarse unintelligible boomings. "Pull me back!"

I jerked him away. He rose. His face was quite pale.

"It's too black; but I bet it's deep. Funny thing, just for a second I wanted to throw myself in. Wasn't that dumb? Wonder how deep it really is. Let's throw something in."

He began to hunt around the room. The light had faded and the gray was changing to black, the same heavy black as the black of the hole. In one corner he found something.

"Here," he showed it to me, "I'll throw this."

I had barely time to see it; it was a stone cut into the form of a cross-asada topping the Mayan symbol, which resembles the crossed I. I tried to stop him; but he had thrown it. We strained our ears to hear. There was no sound over the whole valley, the stillness was waiting for something which never came. We waited two minutes; but there was no indication that the carved stone had reached the bottom. We turned, left the temple, and descended the steps hurriedly. A bottomless well on top of a pyramid did not seem quite right.

The Indians had brought in wood from the forest and Monty had supper almost all cooked in the courtyard of the west temple. Dan and I talked volubly; but we avoided all mention of that black hole.

AFTER supper the Indians went to sleep. Dan and I sat smoking by the fire. The flames lit one corner of the wall, bringing out the carvings in sharp distinctness. I strolled over to look at them. They were rather like those at Chi-Chien; but different in that they seemed oddly familiar, as if I had seen them in some other place. One central figure, constantly repeated, drew my attention. It was a pyramid, but covered with a veil; a tiny figure of a man mounted one side and on the top stood a cross-asada. That was why the inscriptions looked familiar; they looked Egyptian, not de-

cisively so, you understand, but vaguely, in features, head-dress, postures. I returned to Dan. That veiled pyramid and the man mounting the side troubled me.

Dan was still cheerful. "How do you feel now, sir? We've reached here at last. What do you make of it?"

"Well, it is obviously the Mayan city and antedates those of Yucatan by many centuries. That they had an extraordinarily high civilization is very evident. I don't believe we'll find anything in the buildings; they have been deserted, and probably plundered, for so many thousands of years. We will explore in the morning. But, Dan, I want you to promise me you won't go up the pyramid, or allow anyone else to, unless I am along."

"All right, sir." He did not seem surprised. "But I do wish we had some rope: I'd like to see what's at the bottom of that hole. There must be something pretty good to make me want to go in after it. Good-night, sir."

THAT night one of the Indian bearers disappeared. No one knew anything about it. Monty seemed particularly surprised, but not alarmed. I could not stop to be bothered by such things.

We devoted the next day to exploration. Those houses were marvelous; why, those people had even known enough to—but I haven't time to go into all that; I must get on with what happened.

I had ordered all away from the pyramid. We tried to find the missing bearer, at least Dan did; but there was no trace. I could think of no reason why he should leave.

The next morning it was found another bearer had disappeared. The men seemed a trifle uneasy; but not

actively so. Monty said he had probably gone to join the other, perhaps in the forest. They might return. I became immersed in the study of the hieroglyphics. I acknowledge the fault; but how was I to know?

The third morning Dan proposed we study the pyramid by light. I had wanted to, myself, at least a part of my mind had been wanting to. We examined the base carefully; there was no entrance. We climbed to the platform. The view was even more marvelous by daylight. The hills, the forest, and that great dead city all stood out with unusual distinctness. It made me feel very small and very young to think of all those buildings with no life in any of them, and the number of years that had passed since there had been people there. Then we went into the temple. I began to study the structure. In a moment I noticed the smell; it was very faint and very pleasant; too pleasant, rather like incense but not pungent, and slightly stupefying to the senses. Something made me look for Dan. He was on his hands and knees crawling slowly, very slowly and almost unwillingly, toward that dark hole. His eyes were intent and staring, he seemed not to breathe. I dragged him back and hauled him to his feet. It was almost a minute before his brain cleared.

"What's the matter? What was I doing?" He seemed vaguely to remember something, then he looked with loathing horror at the empty blackness. "Ugh—take me away."

I did, quickly.

When we were back at the temple he asked me seriously, "Do you know what's in that hole, sir, what it is that makes me want to go into it?"

I answered even more seriously, "No, I don't, Dan. I've felt that same influence myself, a bit. When I get time I'll try to find out what it

is. Until I do, Dan, don't go near the place."

He shuddered. "I certainly won't—if I can help myself."

Dan and I moved into another temple; the proximity of the Indians had not been enjoyable. For two days we worked together on the hieroglyphics, barely leaving the temple at all. He was a great help to me; his fresh mind, his interest and his energy were invaluable. As I said, he was not intellectual or keen-minded; but he was quick and cheerful.

On the fifth day of our stay he went into the next temple for a knife. He came back with a white, frightened face.

"There are only four Indians left, and Monty."

I could hardly believe him. The news astounded me; but in comparison with the advances I was making, slow but sure, in deciphering the undecipherable, all else was of little importance. Some vague notion that they were in the forest persisted. Again I admit the blame.

That night, however, I began to think of those Indians, stolid creatures but easily imposed upon and led. I could not sleep. I rose and went to the entrance of the temple. Dan rose and came beside me; and we stood looking out upon the great square. The moon was nearly full. The white light shone directly on the west side of the pyramid, so that it stood out from the massive blackness on its sides.

Dan clutched me. "Look!" he gasped.

I looked. Toiling slowly up the steps were two figures. The first one was mounting backward, steadily and surely, its hands outstretched toward the other, who followed passively. They were almost at the top. I rushed out into the square.

"Come here!" I shouted as loudly and forcefully as I could. As well call to the wind! The two figures

disappeared in the open doorway. I returned to Dan.

"You know," he confessed miserably, "I've been feeling the most awful urge to go up there again. Oh, I haven't gone! but how I want to! It gets stronger all the time, too. It's like someone drawing me."

I put an arm around his shoulder. "Dan, you're all right. Just hold out. I'm going to stop studying and see what I can do about this. I want you to stay with me, always, and I'll keep you in my mind, urge you to stay here, and so try to counteract that—Thing. I'm going to see if I can think what this is."

We turned to enter the temple, but halted. There on the steps of the pyramid a lone figure was descending, backward, with its hands raised toward the summit. Now I was sure. It was Monty. Probably unconsciously obeying the instincts of his ancestors dormant these thousand years he was sacrificing to his god. I drew Dan inside and sat beside him until he slept. Then I began to think.

IN THE morning I found that Monty alone was left. I was not surprised. He offered no explanation, acted perfectly natural. Oddly enough I did not anticipate a like fate for him. I was sure we three were safe; he was so natural and unconcerned.

Then I told Dan what I had decided. "You know something of Egyptian religions?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Very little."

"I will try to explain as simply as possible. The ancient Egyptian priests in some unknown way controlled the elements, fire and water, or rather the elementals, as these forces are called. Somehow this civilization here is derived from or related to that of Egypt, of Thebes, of Luxor. You know the force of human magnetism. My guess, and it can only be a guess, is that these Mayas got control of the elemental of the force of magnetism,

personal magnetism, which works on and draws the minds of humans; that they worshiped it, sacrificed voluntary victims to it, and that it is enclosed in that pyramid. We leave here tomorrow. In the meantime, stay with me."

Monty came, stolid as ever. I told him we were leaving; no emotion crossed his face. Together he and Dan began to put the remaining food into three packs. I was convinced we could make our way to the coast somehow.

Just before lunch Monty brought me something. "Found it there," he said, indicating the temple on the eastern side of the square, one I had not carefully explored. I was too busy and hungry to look at it and laid it aside.

It was very hot that afternoon, almost stifling, though the temple was as cool as any place would have been. Unconsciously I found myself thinking how cool that dark well would be—deep, dark, damp. I jerked my thoughts away. Dan was looking out of the door with that intent, far-off expression. I called to him, with no effect. I went over and sat beside him and began to discuss how we would reach the coast and then New Orleans. But I was beginning to be afraid; I no longer had the steadying support of my work.

Monty had gone to bring back the last load of equipment to store with the rest; for even then I was determined to return, sometime. The afternoon wore on—no Monty. Dan proposed to look for him. We went together. There was no sign of Monty to be found. In spite of the day-time he was gone. After leading the Indian bearers to their death he had found that same influence too strong for him and he had been drawn to it. The force he had not known of before, the force he had worshiped for the last five days, had destroyed even its devotee.

Dan and I looked at each other. The bands of suspense grew tighter. I could almost sense that Thing in the pyramid; and if I could do so, how much more could Dan who had not the bulwark of a strong will? It was late afternoon, almost dusk, or I think I might have left the city then. But I didn't; and I liked Dan as much as I have liked any man in the past ten years.

We talked quite a bit at supper, about other things. Very early Dan said he was sleepy and lay down. I was determined to sit up all night. I turned on our last electric battery. It showed Monty's present to me, a brass cylinder full of papers. I settled myself on one side of the entrance and began to read.

THE papers were written by one John Culver, Gent., who had sailed from Biddeford April 17, 1531, on the *Golden Girl* to seek for the Golden City of the Incas, or Aztecs, it mattered little. I skipped the first part. I wanted to know how it had reached this place. It seems (I'll tell it very briefly) that the adventurers had landed, wandered around the cape finding nothing but fever and hostile natives, until finally five survivors reached this city. Their food was almost gone, there was no prospect of more. They explored the city, the pyramid; and there one, crazed by privation and fever, had thrown himself into the hole before their eyes. Shaken, the others had descended. They wanted to leave; but they had no place to go; and something held them here. Each night one disappeared. The last entry was at night. Culver was alone, the food was gone. His last words were, roughly, these: "And I would rather die of starvation by myself than join the others in that fearsome hole; but my will is weakened, I fear I cannot hold out against the Thing. I fear that I am going. May the Lord have mercy on my soul!"

I looked up. The battery was flickering wanly, struggling feebly with the encroaching darkness. For the first time I noticed the stillness—the heavy, menacing stillness. I felt very much alone. I looked over to Dan; at least I had one companion left. For one moment I sat numbed. Dan was gone! Then I rushed to the door. The moonlight was even brighter than it was the night before, bright with a hard, laughing brightness as it shone on the west face of the pyramid. There, on the steps, almost at the top, was a figure mounting slowly. What could I do? Before I could cross the square and climb the four hundred odd steps Dan would be inside, gone forever, gone into that abominable hole. There was only one thing to do. I still think it was the only thing. I went for my rifle. I was back in a moment; but the figure was almost to the platform. I took very careful aim and fired, and fired again. He was killed instantly. The figure swayed and rolled with dull thuds down the side of the pyramid to the square below.

It must have been fully an hour that I sat with my face in my hands. I knew I had been right in what I had done. I know so still. I couldn't let Dan, my friend, pitch headlong into that black hole, headlong into—what? And I think when the Last Reckoning comes I shall be told that I was right.

I brought one of the canvas tents and rolled Dan in it. I dragged him into one of the inner rooms and left him. There was nothing else I could do. I reloaded my gun and started to mount the pyramid, filled with rage that was all the greater because it was impotent. I had some crazy notion of emptying my gun into those depths, though it could have no effect. I had ascended some hundred steps when a wandering breeze brought that sweet, numbing odor down to me. It must have gained in strength from
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The Thing in the Pyramid

(Continued from page 478)

the recent additions to its force the elemental had received. For a mad moment I wanted to go on, to pit my will against that hideous unseen force; but common sense prevailed. I returned to the temple, took up one pack, and started out of the city. The moonlight seemed beating my back with hard, mocking blows. My footsteps rang out as never before. I was alone in the dead city of the Mayas, alone and afraid. I hurried toward the hills. Before dawn I had reached the forest, the living, murmuring forest.

That trip to the coast is a nightmare. Looking back I do not understand how I ever succeeded. But I did; I reached Belize three weeks later. I sent the *Laughing Sally* back to New Orleans and came north on a tramp steamer; anything was preferable to the *Laughing Sally*.

Since then for three months I have been resting. Now I am determined to go back. Away from that influence, perhaps I underrate its effect; but I am going back to decipher those Mayan hieroglyphics. I believe I can, with the aid of Egyptian and Aztec. I know I can. I also believe I can successfully resist the Thing in the Pyramid. My party will camp just over the rim of the valley and I will spend one day out of four with them. At the first sign of weakening on my part I will leave. But I must go back to find the key to the secret of the Mayas.

THAT is the story my friend Stephen Grayton told me the night of August 31, 1924. He sailed the next day and has not been heard from since. We are going to find out what has happened to him; and to destroy the Thing in the Pyramid.