

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 26

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1922, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Toad Idol

By KIRK MASHBURN

*A ten-minute story about a horrible stone toad that came from
an Aztec temple*

THE thing—the toad—comes from a small, ruined Aztec temple in Central Mexico. My standing as an archeologist has not come unearned, and I know that none of the Aztec gods was represented by a toad; nor does evidence exist that the reptile had any other sacred significance in their religious symbolism. Yet this one occupied the place of honor in the temple; and except for it, there was no image in the ruins.

The thing struck me with an odd loathing, a sense of dread and oppression, almost at sight. As for my Indian workmen, they were persuaded to enter the temple only with difficulty. No explanation was obtainable, but their terror of the place was manifest.

When I removed the toad from its pedestal overlooking a small altar, they groveled on the ground in abject misery, frantically beseeching me to leave the image undisturbed. It was nothing but a small, curved piece of obsidian stone (though I have already admitted the ma-

lignant impression I received from it); yet I strongly suspect that, had I not been formidably armed, the Indians would have forcibly compelled me to leave it untouched. I would to God they had done so!

Overcome by a perverse fascination for the thing, notwithstanding my dislike of toads and reptiles in any form, to say nothing of my steadily mounting (if then unreasoning) repugnance for the thing, I smuggled out the amphibian idol upon my return to this country, circumventing the Mexican laws which prohibit exportation of archeological objects.

Who has not experienced similar attraction for some very thing that repels and disgusts, even while it fascinates? So, in my case with this toad. Instead of turning it over to the museum, I placed it upon the writing-desk in my study. Each passing day has added to my repugnance; but now, finally, something of the horror and terror of those Indians has succeeded my former mere loathing.

For the toad has come *alive!* It deserts my desk, by night, to sit upon the floor, looking at the windows, waiting—for God alone knows what.

As I write, I feel the beady eyes of the accursed reptile, the loathsome, mottled toad, burning into my back from where it squats behind me in a corner of this room. It is but a common, ordinary toad, to all appearances; and that is what lends it the significance of a small but horrific monster out of hell—for it should be a thing of carved volcanic obsidian, lifeless upon my desk. I have not even the power to touch it, cast it with loathing through the open window. I have tried, once, and failed. . . .

WHETHER I am mad, or the victim of hallucinations induced by some tropic fever hitherto dormant in my blood—whether I have, in violating the Temple of the Toad, brought upon my head some dread, nameless curse, I do not know. I am aware, only, that the figurine monster upon the floor has become an obsession of torment and dread. More than anything else, it is the thing's attitude of *waiting*. . . .

I have lived and worked alone in this house for years; the one servant who attends my scant wants stays only through the day. Thus, as usual, I was alone in my study, resting wearily at my desk, upon the evening when the toad first moved. It was dusk; but there was yet enough light for shadowy visibility. Something intruded upon my tired thoughts; some indistinct prompting impelled me to raise my head and look down to the floor in the nearest corner of the room.

It was then that I saw the toad, removed from its place upon my desk—and alive. What I saw was not of itself alarming, to other eyes than mine. But I knew the toad, huddled in the corner with its beady eyes meeting my own, for

the idol that should have rested upon my desk—the idol come alive.

I am naturally neurotic, and the apparition stabbed at every taut nerve in my body. I determined to evict the thing; to throw it out and have done with it, once and for all. I rose and, taking a section of newspaper in order to avoid contact of my bare hand with the reptile's loathsome hide (I was convinced the thing was clammily alive), I stooped to take it from the floor and cast it out the window.

The toad made no effort to escape as the paper descended, and I gathered it up. I could not feel my captive beneath the several thicknesses of paper; but I had no doubt of its being wrapped in the wad of newsprint I tossed through the window. I turned with a feeling of relief and satisfaction—and there in the corner the toad squatted as before.

With an exclamation of annoyance, I again moved to enfold the reptile in paper, using a small, thin piece. Again it appeared that I had secured the thing; but this time I turned my hand over, to make certain. Expecting to see the bloated belly of the creature exposed, I beheld, instead, nothing but the wadded newspaper! The toad blinked balefully up, from the floor at my feet!

Stupidly, I stared from the paper in my hand to the toad upon the floor. A third time I essayed to seize the elusive monstrosity, in the same manner as before—and with the same result. I moved then to turn on the lights, as dusk had deepened into night. My hand trembled so violently that I pressed the switch with difficulty.

I decided to dispense with the paper and, overcoming my natural repugnance, grasp the toad with my naked hand. Determinedly, I bent down; my fingers swooped to snatch the thing. With a gasp I straightened, stepped back uncertainly. I had thought to scoop up the toad, but

my hand had clutched nothing more than empty air!

I laughed. Even in my own ears, the sound possessed a startling quality. The thing had been a carved stone toad upon my desk, and had become alive. And now, to my touch, there was *no* toad!

"Hallucination," I muttered; "I am seeing things that do not exist."

The implications of that conclusion were far from comforting, however. And whatever I might think—or whatever else than a stone idol it might be—there it sat upon the floor, its sardonic eyes unswerving from my face, blinking . . . *waiting*. . . .

I SAT down at the desk, stared back, baffled—and afraid—into those cold, glittering eyes. Gradually, sullen rage possessed me. I sprang up, furiously, and stamped upon the small monster. I fell upon my knees, sought to seize it with my hands, to tear and rend it into nothingness. Each time I lifted my grinding heel, each time I drew back my clawing fingers, the thing was there: gloating up at me with its cold, demon's eyes.

Finally, I staggered again to my chair, and fell forward across the desk, burying my head in my arms. I awoke in that position, in the chill, gray dawn that succeeded. My first coherent thought moved me to rouse, groaning with misery, and look toward that corner where the accursed toad had huddled the night before. Even in abjection, I found heart to rejoice, for the living creature that had been upon the floor was gone with the night; and the small idol rested in its accustomed place atop my desk—clearly, a carved, lifeless piece of obsidian.

But chill dread awoke with the sudden thought that life might return with another night. All through that day, the apprehension lay like a somber shadow upon my mind. I left the house, returning after

nightfall. When I came to the door of my workroom, I hesitated for long minutes before entering.

Groping through the darkness, I switched on the lights. After one fearful, revealing glance, I sank into my chair, utterly abject with terror and despair. For, settled in the same corner it had occupied the night before, the toad regarded me with bright, malevolent eyes.

If I am mad, I have every reason to be. Night after night, for so many nights that it wearies me to number them, I have been stared out of countenance by a fiend in the shape of a malformed toad. Hoping that its manifestations were confined to this room, I have fled the house more than once at night. But wherever I seek to hide, my familiar demon appears with darkness. Seemingly, it has been ages since I have known sleep that was not induced either by drunkenness or soporific drugs; more often than not, neither of these suffices to bring merciful oblivion.

Tomorrow, I shall leave this country for ever; I have already completed my arrangements. Perhaps if, as I intend, the end of my flight places half the world between us, I shall elude my tormenter.

That I am not mad, I have established to my satisfaction, by writing this account. Obviously, the effort and orderly thought required for a coherent narrative of this length is outside the scope of a deranged mind. And in the course of this exercise, there remains but one further item to be set down.

This has to do with the pebbles that have accompanied the idol's latter nightly transformations. I noticed the first of them, a little longer than a fortnight ago. Upon each succeeding night, there has been one more pebble, each about the size of a small walnut, added to the growing pile beside the creature. These appear only at night, like the living reptile that squats beside them; they are not on the

desk with the lifeless, obsidian toad in the daytime.

What this addition to the toad's nocturnal animation may portend, I have sought to fathom, with growing unease. I have lately recalled that there was a pile of just such pebbles, heaped at the foot of the altar in the ancient temple, from which—may God forgive the stupid act!—I took the vile toad. . . .

SOMETHING very dreadful has occurred since I wrote the preceding words. I am impelled to write the few remaining lines that will be necessary—or possible—by some power, some gleeful and *triumphantly* malignant force outside of me:

While I was writing, I felt a blow upon the back of my head. It was more as if I had been hit forcibly, *inside*, upon my uncovered brain, by an object thrown from behind my back. For a moment, I was unable to move, so great was the pain. Partly recovering, I turned to discover the source of the missile with which I had been struck. Then my blood chilled, seemed truly to freeze in my veins. . . .

The toad has moved out of its usual squatting position. About it there is an unfathomable impression of unholy joyousness; I know without understanding, that the thing no longer is waiting—its hour has struck!

I wrote that the toad has moved. It stands erect, upon its deformed and twisted rear members. Grotesque and unnatural

as that is, the circumstance that constricts my heart is that, raised above its head in the act of casting as I turned—the frightful little monster gripped a pebble in its tiny, hand-like forefeet! Even as I saw and gasped, the missile hurtled through the air, struck *inside* my forehead with stunning impact.

The pile of pebbles—those pebbles, the purpose of which I *now* know!—probably is diminished by more than half. At intervals, one of them crashes into the back of my brain. I am paralyzed now, all except, oddly, this arm with which I write. I can not move aside, seek to evade the battering pebble hail. But I feel that I should not escape, though the power to move, to cry out, still remained to me.

All about this room, there are intangible rustlings and scurrings. There are things around me, unseen but present, that have come to watch with grim, unhallowed satisfaction as the toad hurls pebbles into my brain.

My death, beyond doubt, will be attributed to cerebral hemorrhage. My head, to all outward appearances, will be whole and un mutilated; for the toad's missiles pass unscathing through my skull, by some unholy means, and batter only upon my brain.

I shall die—very soon, now—beneath the barrage of pebbles cast by the paws of that thing in the corner behind me. I shall die as, in all likelihood, no man ever met death before: stoned to death by a foul, loathsome *toad!* . . .

