

# WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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## Contents for March, 1923

### TWENTY-TWO REMARKABLE SHORT STORIES

- The Mystery of Black Jean.....JULIAN KILMAN 41  
*A story of blood-curling realism, with a smashing surprise at the end.*
- The Grave.....ORVILLE R. EMERSON 47  
*A soul-gripping story of terror.*
- Hark! The Rattle!.....JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS 53  
*An uncommon tale that will cling to your memory for many a day.*
- The Ghost Guard.....BRYAN IRVINE 59  
*A "spooky" tale with a grim background.*
- The Ghoul and the Corpse.....G. A. WELLS 65  
*An amazing yarn of weird adventure in the frozen North.*
- Fear.....DAVID R. SOLOMON 73  
*Showing how fear can drive a strong man to the verge of insanity.*
- The Place of Madness.....MERLIN MOORE TAYLOR 89  
*What two hours in a prison "solitary" did to a man.*
- The Closing Hand.....FARNSWORTH WRIGHT 98  
*A brief story powerfully written.*
- The Unknown Beast.....HOWARD ELLIS DAVIS 100  
*An unusual tale of a terrifying monster.*
- The Basket.....HERBERT J. MANGHAM 106  
*A queer little story about San Francisco.*
- The Accusing Voice.....MEREDITH DAVIS 110  
*The singular experience of Allen Defoe.*
- The Sequel.....WALTER SCOTT STORY 119  
*A new conclusion to Edgar Allen Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."*

*Howard Ellis Davis Relates  
Some Extraordinary  
Adventures With*

# *The* UNKNOWN BEAST

**A**T THE EDGE of the little settlement of Bayou le Tor lapped the black waters from which the village had been named. A mile to the south, they lost themselves in the Mississippi Sound. Northward, they wound among somber swamps, to disappear at last into the marshes above.

Giant cypress trees crowded down to the very edge of the settlement, as if jealous of the small space of cleared land it occupied beside the bayou, and to one not accustomed to the place it seemed that an evil boding lurked forever within the depths of those overhanging, gloomy swamps.

But until the unknown Beast first made its mysterious presence felt, no harm for the people of Bayou le Tor ever had come out of those swamps, except the deadly malaria, which clutched its victims in shaking agues and burning fevers that consumed life as a woods fire might consume a strip of dried sedge grass.

Before this strange death that had come to haunt the night swamps, they shrank in helpless terror. Cows were driven in from their pastures while the sun was yet high. Mothers called in their sallow-faced children from play as soon as the shadows began to lengthen.

The first victim had been Swan Davis, an old fisherman who lived by himself

on the edge of the bayou above the settlement. He had been found in the swamp, dead. At first it was thought that he had been beaten to death, he was so broken about the body.

Finally, however, it was decided he had been crushed by some mysterious, unknown force. Something had caught him and squeezed him until his bones had cracked like dry reeds.

Then the three Buntly boys, driving in a bunch of steers from the marshes, were overtaken by night on the swamp road. The cattle had been going peacefully enough, when suddenly they had become frightened and lumbered off ahead, bellowing madly. Themselves frightened at the queer behavior of the animals, the boys followed, as fast as they could on foot.

That is, two of them did; for when Jard and Peter Buntly emerged from the shadows of the swamp road, they found that their brother, Sims, was not with them.

Terror-stricken though they were, they had returned into the swamp, calling his name. When they saw nothing of him, and he did not answer their calls, they went quickly home and reported what had happened. All night long, bearing flaming torches, the men of the settlement beat up and down the swamp. Toward morning, they found

the young man's body, bruised and broken, but no trace of what had killed him.

When the people of Bayou le Tor gathered to discuss the circumstances surrounding these two mysterious deaths, the negroes, and some others, declared that an evil spirit haunted the gloomy fastness to the north of the settlement, while the more conservative agreed that some creature strange to those parts, some unknown beast, was ranging the night swamps, a creature that killed for the love of killing.

Armed with shotgun and rifle, they hunted him. They set bear-traps, baited with an entire quarter of beef hung above. But no one ventured into the swamps after dark, until, one night, ten of the best men in the settlement formed a party and rode out on horseback through the swamp road.

Armed with pistol and sheath-knife, they rode, two by two, knee to knee, their horses following each other nose to tail, so that if any one of the party were attacked they all could turn and fight in a body.

Nothing happened until they were on their way back; then Walter Brandon—who, because he was one of their bravest, brought up the rear—grew careless and lagged behind. Suddenly, his horse came charging in among the others, riderless.

They could find no trace of Walter, and the other nine could only ride in and break the news to his young wife, who carried a baby at her breast.

The next day, the girl's father, old Arner Horn, secured the services of a small, battered automobile and crossed two counties to see Ed Hardin and beg that he come and deliver them from this unknown beast that, one by one, was killing the men-folk of Bayou le Tor.

**I**N HIS own county Ed Hardin was a deputy sheriff, and the reputation of his prowess had traveled far. Each summer, when the fishing was best on the Sound, he came to Bayou le Tor. Each winter, he came to hunt wild turkeys in the swamps that surrounded the settlement. The people had grown to

know him well, and they knew that he feared neither man, beast, nor the devil.

He returned in the automobile with Arner, bringing with him his young friend, Alex Rowe. When they reached Bayou le Tor, the news awaited them that Walter's body, which bore on it the same marks as those others who had been killed, had been found floating on the waters of the bayou, and that it was being held at the water's edge so that Ed Hardin might see for himself the nature of death which this creature inflicted upon its victims.

After he had seen, Ed Hardin came away alone, grim-mouthed. When he entered Arner's yard, it already was growing dark, the night breeze rustling in the liveoaks overhead. He went to the barn and saddled Arner's bay mare. Having led her to the front fence, he tied her there and went into the house.

In the hallway, which divided the house through the middle, he paused as he heard in the room beside him the low sobbing of a woman. Then he passed on to the room that had been assigned to him and Alex Rowe. A small kerosene lamp had been lighted and set upon the dresser, and in the light of this he was buckling on a belt holding a broad hunting-knife and a pistol when Alex burst in upon him.

"Ed Hardin," cried the young man, "what is that mare doin' at the front fence? Where be you goin'?"

"I'm goin' ter hunt that beast, Alex."

"Yer ain't goin' ter do that thing, Ed! Yer don't know what hit is. How—"

"I'm goin'. Alex."

"But, Ed, hit's *night*. Wait till daylight. The last two times folks went out on the swamp road at night they was er man killed."

Broad-shouldered, sparely-made, the big deputy drew himself up to his full height and turned to gaze for a moment at his young friend.

"I'm goin' now," he said calmly.

"But, Ed, you heerd what they said 'bout the schooner up in the bayou. Hit's been layin' there fer two weeks, 'thout dealin's with nobody. You heerd what Rensie Bucker, the ole nigger what uster be er sailor, said. He said

he paddled up in his dugout by that schooner an' them folks on board is India folks. He says that in their lan' they's strange beasts an' reptiles, an' that mebbe they've sot one of 'em loose in the swamp, mebbe put hit ter watch the swamp road."

"Ef hit's been sot ter watch the swamp road at night," said Ed, "that's jes wher I want ter go. I want ter meet it."

"Wait, Ed. Wait till I git holt of er hoss. I'm goin' with yer."

A soft smile played for a moment about Ed Hardin's grim mouth.

"No, Alex," he said: "I reckon I'll go by myse'f."

As he was untving the mare, those who had returned to the house gathered about him and, as Alex had done, tried to prevent his going off alone into the swamp at night.

But he swung lightly to the saddle and galloped out through the settlement, into the shadows of the giant cypress trees.

**T**HE MARE was a spirited and nervous animal, and she leaped and shied as she danced among the stagnant pools that lay black in the swamp road.

In thus going out deliberately to use himself as a bait for the Unknown Beast, Ed felt that he could depend largely upon her agility and quickness to prevent being taken unawares by a sudden rush from the darkness. He drew from his holster his heavy Colt's revolver and thrust it through his belt in front, within convenient reach.

So dark was the black tunnel of the road that he could see no space in front of him, and he let the reins lie slack on the mare's neck, so that she might be undisturbed in picking her footing. And as he plunged deeper into the swamp, he experienced a lonely boding that was new to him.

Time and again, he had gone fearlessly out alone in the pursuit and capture of desperate men. Now, however, he did not know what nature of creature it was he sought, and he had to invite an attack from the darkness in order to get in touch with it.

The night was murky, almost sticky in its heaviness, and the swamp seemed strangely silent. Only the occasional call of some night bird pierced the stillness. He was familiar with the road, having traveled it frequently, and the places where violence had occurred had been described to him in detail.

A few hundred yards to the left of the road, where he now was riding, the fisherman had met his death. He passed the place where Brandon last had been seen, and, soon after, entered the deeper recess of the swamp where the herder had been snatched into the darkness of death. Plainly, this neighborhood of violence was the creature's lurking-place.

Suddenly, the mare shied, snorted, and stood quivering, her head turned as though she saw or smelled something at the side of the road. He raised his pistol, which he now held ready cocked in his hand, and fired quickly into the darkness. As he had only one hand on the reins, it was some moments after the report before he could calm the startled animal sufficiently to proceed on his way.

Twice more, at indications of terror from his horse, guided by her forward-pointed ears, Ed Hardin fired into the black shadows at the side of the road, the discharges making lurid flashes in the darkness.

The Unknown Beast evidently was near, following him through the brush—or over the treetops. If it were on the ground, he hoped for the slender chance of killing or wounding it before it had an opportunity to attack.

After each shot, as well as he could for the plunging of the mare, he listened intently for some cry of pain, some movement of the bushes; but the silence of the shadows was unbroken. The strain was nerve-racking, and he had a wild desire to whirl the mare about and speed away in mad flight. He could not urge her out of a slow, hesitating walk, and she frequently shied from one side of the road to the other, with those periodic halts of trembling fear.

Then the road ran from beneath the arches of the swamp and passed over a corduroy crossing, bordered on each

side by a dense growth of titi. The mare went more quietly now, and Ed began to hope that some of his shots had taken effect. He breathed more freely, now that the branches no longer drooped overhead.

Presently, however, he found himself beneath spreading liveoaks. These, flanking the road on either side, sent their giant limbs horizontally across. He peered from side to side, his eyes straining to penetrate the gloom, each indistinct tree trunk assuming a sinister outline.

Overhead, the trees towered in cavernous depths, and suddenly, with a swish of leaves and branches, out of them dropped a great, dark object!

**T**HE frightened mare leaped forward; but the nameless creature alighted behind the saddle.

Hardin snatched out his pistol, only to find that he was unable to use it. For he had been caught in a giant embrace that pinioned his arms to his sides, an embrace against which his own great strength was powerless.

The mare ran desperately, her supple body close to the ground, her graceful neck outstretched. Out from the swamp she sped, crossing a reach of flat country, once heavily covered with pines. The timber long since had been cut, only the stumps remaining, charred by forest fires—hordes of black ghosts crowding down to the edge of the road on both sides.

It was a wild ride for the man, with death perched there behind. The great arms, wound about him, were slowly squeezing the breath from his body, and beneath that embrace he felt his ribs bend inward to the point of cracking. Desperately, he maintained his grip on the saddle with his knees.

Then, just before consciousness would have left him, he raised his legs and flung himself sideways. The saddle slipped under the mare's belly. Carried by the momentum, but with that crushing grip never relaxing, the man and the terrible creature which held him hurtled through the air.

They struck with a thud against a shattered stump at the side of the road,

while the frightened mare sped on. The murderous creature was next the stump and at the impact its hold on Ed Hardin loosened. Having slipped from the great arms, Ed flung himself over and rolled for several feet to one side.

The pistol long since had dropped from his nerveless fingers; but he now quickly drew his hunting-knife. Expecting an immediate attack with fang and claw, he lay on his back, his feet drawn up, very much in the position a cat assumes when defending itself. He knew it would be useless to pit his strength against that of the enormous creature, and the best he could hope for was to ward off an attack with his feet and watch for an opportunity to reach and drive home the knife.

And suddenly it was looming there above him. For an instant it seemed to hesitate, then it backed slowly away. With a quick, halting motion, walking upright like a man, it began to circle about him. Its long arms swung below its knees. A round head was set on a neck so thick and short that it seemed to spring from the shoulders themselves. As it circled about him, Ed turned also, keeping his feet always presented.

Again the creature backed off, up the road. Then it turned and walked slowly away.

For a moment Ed Hardin lay watching it, unwilling to change his position. Then, tentatively, he raised himself to a sitting position.

Suddenly, as if, without looking, the creature divined his movement, it turned about, at a distance of perhaps fifty feet.

And then, with a strangely human shriek of rage, it rushed toward him.

**A**N IT came through the gloom, this maddened creature, with its uncouth, hopping run, swinging its long arms from side to side.

The man dropped back into his former position, feet raised, arm held ready to strike with the knife.

Before it reached him, it dropped forward, without in the least pausing, and, propelled by both arms and legs, shot in a great, froglike leap through the air.

The shock, as it landed upon him, drove Ed Hardin's knees back against his chest. His right arm, held ready to strike with the knife, was pinned and twisted painfully.

The knife slipped from his hand. A long arm shot forward and talon-like fingers clutched his hair. With his legs doubled back as they were, once more he was seized in that giant embrace, and he felt that his knees were being pressed into his chest until it soon must crush in like a shattered eggshell.

Then consciousness left him.

When his senses slowly returned, he became aware of lights flashing and horses stamping, and the sound of men's voices.

Jonas Keil was speaking, and Ed had the rare experience of hearing himself discussed after he was thought to be dead.

"—'Most on my bended knees ter git 'im not ter do it. But he said he wouldn't feel right ter let Death run loose unhindered, long as he was livin' an' with strength ter fight. An' when he rid out single-handed an' alone, the bravest man what ever drawed breath was kilt."

From his position, he judged that he had been placed on the grass at the side of the road. Near him was someone who, from an occasional quivering intake of breath, seemed to have been sobbing.

He tried to turn and see who it was, and he found that he could not so much as twitch a finger.

He heard three new arrivals come up the road, a man on horseback and two runners, the two evidently holding by the rider's stirrup leathers. The rider, as soon as he drew up, said:

"We come soon's we heerd you-all was gone ter foller Ed. Arn's bringin' the waggin. Hit'll be here terreckly; we passed hit er piece back. But Arn didn' git the straights from Cy when he come atter the waggin what hit was kilt Ed. Po' ole Ed!"

Old Rensie Bucker, the negro who once had been a sailor, speaking with the *patois* of foreign birth, replied to him:

"Hit ees Jonas, de chile-minded

neegar who was shanghaed from his mammy's shack down on de point ten year back. He had de mind of er chile an' de strength ob five men, wid his beeg wide shoulders an' short neck; wid de hump on his back an' his arms hangin' mos' ter his ankles. He was gentle in dem days; but de East Indee folks tuck heem off an' dey brought heem back er beast. He's frum de schooner, by his clothes, an' dey must have sot heem on de swamp road at night ter watch an' keel.

"Dere he lies, dead. De stump 'gin which he struck when he pull Meester Ed Hardin frum his boss had er sliver which stuck mos' through heem. Den when he fit wid Meester Ed de hurt must have killed heem, because there is no other wound."

The man beside Ed Hardin spoke, and Ed recognized him.

"Alex," he said huskily.

There was a cry of amazement. Alex called for a light. Someone else, evidently startled by the voice coming from what all had thought to be a dead man, started to run, kicked over a lantern, and was cursed roundly by the others, who were crowding up.

When the wagon arrived, he was so far recovered that, with the assistance of the others, he was able to clamber painfully in and sink to the blankets on the bottom, every joint in his body aching.

The two Buntlys had called the younger men to one side and they were whispering excitedly together. Presently the riding-horses all were tied at the side of the road, and when the wagon creaked its way homeward, Ed was accompanied only by Alex, who had refused to leave him, and by old Arner. Rensie had gone with the others.

Two days later, he was able to creep out to the front porch of Arner's little home and sit in the cool of a breeze that swept up from the bayou. After a space of silence, he asked:

"Arn, what'd them fellers do de yuther night? I can't git er peep outen 'em."

"They foun' right smart of stuff in boxes, what Rensie said was some sorter

dope, bein' unloaded from the schooner. But they th'owed hit in the water."

"I ain't intrusted in no dope, Arn. I say what'd they do?"

"The leader of the gang confessed, after he'd been questioned by Rensie, an' when he saw the jig was up, anyhow. They had sot Jonas ter keep folks skeerd off the swamp road at night, by killin' whosomever come there. They was goin' ter git er truck an' haul that stuff off somewheres."

"Well, what'd the boys do?"

Reflectively, Arner stroked his short,

heavy beard. He spat into the yard. Then he turned to the deputy:

"Ed," he said slowly, "yo' comin' down here, an', single-handed an' alone, huntin' out the critter what was killin' us' off will be remembered an' talked about in generations ter come—when these here swamps is cleared off an' drained an' producin' corn an' taters. But sich er little matter as er schooner lyin' at the bottom of the bayou gatherin' barnacles is soon forgot, an' let's you an' me fergit that part of hit, too."

