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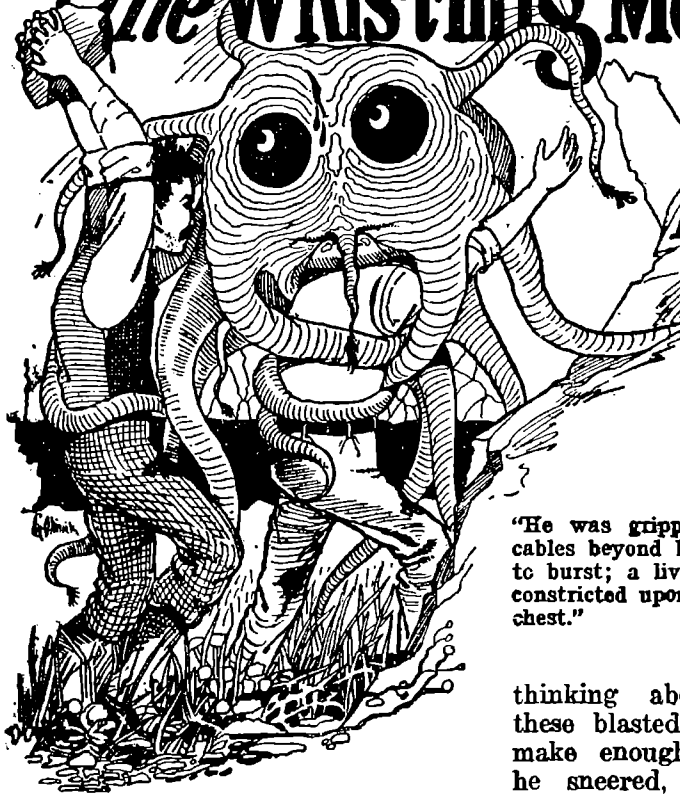
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The Whistling Monsters

by
B. Wallis



"He was gripped by seeming steel cables beyond his desperate strength to burst; a living, strangling horror constricted upon his throat, face and chest."

DEEGAN groaned. He lay tightly trussed on the narrow strip of shingle beach that stretched from the placid, somber pool to the great cliff here thrusting its vast bulk across the chasm, which hereafter continued simply as a gloomy, narrow cleft riven possibly by some Cyclopean convulsion of by-gone eons.

The man by his side made no response and continued to stare at the opposite wall with increasing intensity, as though oblivious to the tight-drawn rawhide thongs which bound them both. With a scowl of irritation, Deegan painfully twitched his grizzled head to one side and succeeded in catching a fleeting glimpse of Vance, his partner.

"Well, what are you so quiet about?" he snarled. "What are you

thinking about, anyway? When these blasted thongs dry out you'll make enough noise, I'll gamble!" he sneered, alluding to the fact that the Indians with customary cruelty had soaked the lashings, previous to the trussing, so that their captives might taste the tortures of hell for many fearful hours before death released them. Indeed, now and again a slight twist of lip or quiver of muscle already indicated that the thongs were contracting, and no more than an hour had passed since the two men had been brutally flung on the sharp-edged rubble.

"Thinking about? Well, what would I be thinking about—grand opera or Einstein?" replied Vance with no effort to conceal the contempt which for some while had been simmering within him; in so many ways had his partner fallen short of the clean-cut standard the college-bred man held as the unquestionable creed of good fellowship.

"Reckoned you was sayin' your

prayers, or maybe worryin' over havin' no pajamas," sneered Deegan with ponderous sarcasm, inwardly assured that the young fellow was flushing with resentment.

Curiously these two had come together and joined fortunes in this wild crude country. Barely a month before, a few drinks in a garish saloon had afforded the only introduction the etiquette of the Guianas demanded. For six months Dick Vance had manfully wrestled with the appalling accounts of a certain branch bank to which the influence and indifference of a wealthy uncle had banished him when the crash following upon his father's sudden demise exposed the flimsy structure upon which the departed parent had built his reputation for probity and solidity. Straight from Harvard to this dreary slavery could have but one ending for such a spirited, athletic young fellow, and the inevitable happened. Moreover, Deegan required the five hundred which constituted Vance's sole legacy from a father who had often thrown away more than this upon a single night's entertainment. Had it not been Deegan, then certainly some other and possibly more unsavory adventurer would have pulled the trigger which shot Vance from his desk into the savage wilds of the interior.

From the first day's strenuous upstream paddling the partnership had proved far from amicable, close association discovering a diversity of habit and temperament neither could bridge. The college man of cleanly habits and sensitive breeding held no point of kindred amity with the grizzled illiterate partner who had doggedly held his own since early boyhood in bitter warfare with the roughest of his kind and the rawest of implacable nature.

In a hundred trifling daily details each jarred on the other and aroused his enmity, and indeed, had it not

been that mutual welfare demanded the protection and aid of each other, their partnership would have been brief. However, this was impossible; possessed of strong wills, neither had the slightest intention of abandoning the search for the gold, of whose presence in the distant range Deegan affirmed he had reliable testimony. And it was this range for which they were heading when disaster overtook them. Therefore, though entirely against their liking, they held together.

To such a length had this intolerance of each other carried them that on every occasion when divergence of opinion was possible a set course was adopted only after a prolonged wrangle; and twenty-four hours back, on arriving at an outlying spur of their objective, they had decided to encamp and reconnoiter for a day or so. Even on such slight provocation they came into conflict, Vance preferring a space of almost clear and level ground backed by a bluff and affording unbroken observation on all other sides, a practical and common-sense suggestion Deegan would naturally have adopted had Vance not unfortunately voiced his approval. Immediately Deegan had proffered bitter opposition, and in such matters the weight of years and experience prevailed against youth and inexperience. And it came about that their camp lay close to a strip of dense jungle sweeping from the level ground far up a steep slope between two outflung ridges. As dawn broke the disaster occurred; rushed by the wild Amaripas—a little known and implacable savage people of the upper Guiana—the two men were quickly overpowered before they had time to snap a trigger.

Expecting at the best an instant and bloody ending, the captives were surprized to find themselves picked up quietly and borne shoulder-high by some half a dozen stalwart sav-

ages. An hour or so later they had been silently flung on the shingle beach, and after a hasty but very efficient tightening of the bonds their captors had departed with barely a dozen words spoken. And in truth Vance had noted that they appeared ill at ease and eyed the spot with alert glances of apprehension.

FROM where Vance lay, he failed to note any reason for the Indians' apparent dread of the place. True, it was wild and forbidding like all canyons, though lower down he had noticed many sections where the walls on each side receded and gave place to steep slopes of broken hillside running to the base of distant bluffs. But here at the journey's end the walls drew in and towered aloft in vast frowning heights, and the canyon terminated, or at any rate continued only at a higher level, for the shallow creek through which the two men had often splashed now fell from a great height into the wide black pool they lay beside. Certainly it was a wild, cheerless spot, and the walls were grimly black, and stained by weather and age, and dank with a pervading seepage from the surrounding hills; only coarse ferns and pendulous giant mosses clinging to clefts and niches to hint that life could still survive even in this grim sterility. Yet beyond the inborn antipathy of the human species to gloom and solitude Vance failed to note any reason for their marked distaste of the spot.

"Deegan, you're a blithering fool, and a blind one, too," asserted Vance dispassionately, and the deliberate insult of his tone pierced the tough armor of its target.

"You—you blasted pup!" was all the enraged Deegan could retort.

"Suppose we cut out this stuff," suggested Vance in a bored and weary tone. "I merely intended to draw your attention to the fact that

the rubble across this pool is, I presume, a fair sample of the beach under us, and if you note closer to the wall the fragments are larger and, being higher up, not waterworn. Now it seems to me that possibly by a distressing effort we might reach this jagged stuff, and—well, perseverance and friction have been known to have a deteriorating effect on many substances," he added meditatively.

"Curse your highbrow junk! What in thunder are you——?" And then abruptly Deegan's wrathful growl subsided and a sudden surprize and fierce hope swept into his eyes.

"Huh! That's so—well, what of it? We ain't there," he said grudgingly, yet commencing to strain and contract his muscles in an effort to roll on his side and verify Vance's surmise.

About the same second both succeeded in facing the bluff. Hardly a dozen feet distant it towered upward for at least two hundred feet, and for the first fifty feet it presented a face almost as smooth as a vast sheet of plate glass, black, vitreous and sheer. Plainly an intrusive stratum of igneous origin, for across the pool also lay this forbidding face; while above and to each side of its thirty-foot width the enclosing bluff was badly shattered, a jumbled mass of deep fissures, broad ledges, and receding terraces where grew a matted miniature jungle of stunted shrubs, rank creepers and giant mosses fed by the seepage from many a mile of surrounding range and here coalescing into tiny rivulets that ceaselessly dripped as a transparent veil down the bare lowermost wall. Age, extreme age, was indelibly stamped on this somber chasm, and the grim walls were touched by vanished eons when the new-born world scarce had been released from the labors of its birth.

But for the two fettered men there lay but one absorbing problem—the dozen feet of sloping rubble which

stood between them and the more recent droppings of larger sharp-edged fragments which lined the base of the bluff. How could that space be traversed? For only by the most strenuous effort and a more than Spartan stoicism had the little matter of a mere turning where they lay been effected, already their drying rawhide fetters had drawn so taut.

Deegan was the first to break the silence. "I dunno," he said thoughtfully. "But I'll try." And for the first time in many days his voice had lost the jeering, overbearing note which had so angered his partner. "Say, Vance, are you game to help? It'll be hell, but we got to win, and I ain't sure I can stay with it alone." And as if the acknowledgment exposed a flaw in his manhood, his voice betrayed a shy hesitancy almost ludicrous in one of his self-reliant, assertive nature.

"Go ahead, Deegan, I'll do my best," said Vance simply. As before he had been the nearer to the pool, so now he was the farther from their goal, though barely by a pace.

"Well, it's this way. I got it doped out I'm going to roll up this blasted slope, but if I ain't got a stopper behind I'll roll back sure. If you could hitch around to grab my pants in your teeth I reckon between us we might make shift to wedge you T-shape agin' my middle and you'd act as a stopper for my next turn uphill. It'll hurt like hell, partner," Deegan added gravely and apologetically.

"What if it does? If you can stick it, that goes with me," Vance replied stubbornly, though not ill-naturedly.

And without further parley they commenced as frightful and gruelling a contest as ever was waged; for from the first moment it required indomitable will to endure the excruciating agony which racked every inch of their swollen, tortured flesh—a trial of endurance and fortitude in which neither of the contestants would ad-

mit a better man than himself, and each would rather have died of agony and exhaustion than suffer defeat.

Inch by inch they wormed their way across the sloping rubble, and with every inch some stiffening thong cut even more deeply in the sunken furrows where the flesh had burst and the thong vanished. Sweat and blood bathed them in mingled streams, clotted and dried as it welled through their garments, so that soon they caked and rasped the flesh beneath, wearing it into broad raw weals where the exposed nerves ceaselessly writhed in torment.

Life had resolved into a mere sensation—a frightful nightmare of pain—and an obsession which dominated it: the obsession that no torture hell could conjure would compel either to slacken for a single second and acknowledge himself the lesser man. Alone, or with a kindred spirit, then the thing would have been impossible—simple flesh and blood could never have endured it, and life itself would have been gladly surrendered to sink into the Nirvana of surcease.

How long the passage of that dozen feet encompassed they never knew. Time had ceased, swallowed up in the greater dimension of sensation, and alone was marked by the inches of the gory trail they had come. And at last they scaled that slope.

"Done, by heaven!" croaked Deegan raucously.

And Vance simply laughed a harsh, choking cachinnation more animal than human; then for a little both lay still and silent.

"Got to get moving—scrapes stiffen soon," muttered Deegan, and the thick utterance issued from his cracked lips as though dragged forth by rack or fire.

"I know—keep moving," mumbled Vance in response to some hazy train of reasoning. And at once his muscles responded to the suggestion and commenced to work and strain

against the hellish bite of his fetters.

A little fumbling and squirming and Deegan found a sharp-edged fragment firmly lodged, and successfully wedging himself in a position which brought his bound wrists in contact with it he commenced a ceaseless sawing movement that only his iron muscles and indomitable will could have sustained. Between his fettered wrists, where he essayed by this primitive tool to fray the thongs, the space would scarce have housed a knife-blade, and quickly the jagged stone had rasped the flesh from his wrists and hands as each slight motion backed by the weight of his bulk drove the rough edge deeper between them. But moment after moment, without pause, the clocklike pulsing of muscle held on, and ever his upturned rugged face was set as grim and passionless as the rock beneath him. Then suddenly Deegan rolled on his side and a deep groan broke from his blood-stained lips, and in the same breath there followed a whispered curse.

"Hell's curses on the scum!" he said with intense bitterness.

"You're free!" exclaimed Vance harshly.

"I got the use of my arms—but the blasted things seem made of red-hot stone," growled Deegan as he strove to recover their mobility. And in a little his arms, moving in curious mechanical jerks, obeyed his will. "I'm boss of you, anyway!" he muttered, savagely eyeing with morose vindictiveness the offending members. Then picking up a sharp-edged splinter of the black rock, he turned his efforts upon his legs, and shortly the last thong had been severed.

"Blast you!" he cried, and picking up a handful of the crimson-painted lengths he cast them savagely into the pool below; and scarcely had they alighted with a loud swish and a flutter of spray when a deep-noted, resonant whistle rang out, echoed from

wall to wall and died away in a trembling whisper.

THE slightest movement now was for Vance unspeakable torture, yet with a single convulsive heave he turned on the instant to face the apparent source of that astounding sound, some twenty feet up the opposite dank bluff where at the lower end of the pool the black ledge gave place to the fissured, friable country rock. Deegan had jerked unsteadily to his feet and stood staring blankly across the pool.

"What in thunder was that?" he cried in a hushed voice as the echoes ceased.

"How should I know?" replied Vance in a hoarse whisper. "A whistle! But who would whistle here? And where is he?"

"But it *was* a whistle!" asserted Deegan irritably. "And it came from up there," he added, pointing to the spot both had instantly identified as its source. Yet it was plain that there no human being could have escaped immediate detection; for though the rock was badly fractured and fissured, and rank growths of giant mosses and broad-leaved creepers lay in dense covering, it was obvious that no cover existed for anything approaching the bulk of the human species.

As their gaze swept searchingly the grim and aged wall, that clear, shrill, single note was again repeated, but now in a higher key and rising to a penetrating clarity of volume at its abrupt cessation; and now it seemed located at the extreme limit of the canyon where a transverse rent gaped mistily through the veil of spray into which the little creek in its final leap had dissolved before reuniting in the somber pool.

"But what is it?" exclaimed the elder man in a hushed tone of great bewilderment as he leaned forward and peered frowning at the partly

opaque veil of saturated vapor through which loomed but mistily the fissure, thereafter passing behind an outflung buttress which seemed to conceal some slight recession of the wall at that spot.

"Say, Deegan, it might be as well to cut me loose," said Vance impatiently; for unable to view this fresh location his pangs with avid savagery renewed their torture.

"Sure! Anyway, the quicker we beat it the better. There's something mighty queer around here," replied Deegan as he straightway dropped to his knees and, selecting a sharp-edged splinter of rock, rolled his partner quickly, though not ungently, face downward and commenced to saw vigorously at the thongs about his wrists. For all his thick fingers and stiffened muscles he wrought so skillfully that he barely grazed the swollen flesh that almost hid the taut lashings. And as he worked, the astounding whistle several times burst out afresh in new and widely separated locations, yet never for a second did he relax his toil until the numbed arms fell apart and the agony of liquid fire coursed through Vance's quickened veins.

"Keep your arms moving, no matter how it hurts," counseled Deegan tersely as he turned to the other fetters, apparently oblivious of the increasing numbers and volume of the vibrant metallic chirpings, each succeeding its predecessor so rapidly that it seemed as though some signal was being transmitted from one to another of their unguessable sources.

Then the last thong had been severed and Vance was free; and though for the succeeding few moments his release afforded him no greater freedom of movement and his sufferings were no less, yet the clamor had abruptly increased so obviously that his gaze fitted in startled surprise from point to point, seeking some tan-

gible source of the momentarily increasing din.

"Look there! I saw the brush move up there!" exclaimed Vance as he extended jerkily a stiff and swollen arm, pointing to a spot within the narrowed radius of vision from his prone position; here a wide V-shaped crack came to an apex almost at the canyon floor a little below the lower end of the pool, and so densely massed were the dwarfed rank growths therein that the least move amid it could not help but sway a wide area above.

"Yes, I get it! There's more above—must be a crowd, whatever it is," asserted the older man, staring intently at the spot which from his erect position he could discern much more extensively and distinctly. And the movement swaying the vegetation was at once perceptible to him.

Then Vance, who had not ceased his efforts to regain control of his limbs, succeeded in struggling to a sitting posture. Now another angle of the canyon was thrust upon him, and his field of view embraced their own side of the water. High up the towering wall where the grim igneous strata dipping at a sharp angle sank below the enclosing broken bluffs, a bold boss of weathered surface exposed its smooth nudity. Here a something, neither shrub nor creeper, had caught his eye.

"Deegan, what's that?" he cried in an urgent whisper, and his partner, wheeling sharply, glimpsed for a second the moving thing before it vanished with a soundless flowing swiftness.

"Like a snake," declared Deegan, pondering. "But it wasn't a snake," he added with conviction. And then just beside them a little fragment of stone hit with a harsh clatter and bounced to the rubble slope below, in a fraction of a second spanning the space they had blazed with their blood and an hour of frightful agony.

"What the devil now!" exclaimed Deegan as he jerked back his thick muscular neck and stared up at the black height above them.

At the same second they both saw it.

"Hullo!" cried Vance.

"Hell!" growled Deegan.

For a moment they gazed in wonder at the clear-cut crest, fully fifty feet above where the crumbling, riven rock had sloughed away and left a broad, sharp-edged shelf.

"Say, this gets on my nerves! We'd better get a move on; can you make it?" cried Deegan with anxious solicitude.

"In a fashion—once I get moving I guess I'll be all right," replied Vance doubtfully. And as they spoke both men remained staring intently at the queer, dull yellow blotch that lay balanced and motionless in unnatural poise partly overhanging the edge of the shelf.

This thing was unlike anything they had ever seen, or dreamt of. It seemed such an indescribable, structureless mass for a living creature to possess; yet no doubt of its living nature had lain upon them from the first glimpse. But what was it?

Unconsciously groping for some base of familiar similarity by which to mend their abruptly shattered certitude, they utterly failed to grasp a single point of resemblance to any form of terrestrial life within their knowledge. In some dim fashion there lay a suggestion of remote kinship to those lingerers of a long by-gone age, the marine octopi, this thing having an indefinite number of long tapering tentacles and an oval central mass maintaining an erect posture, gourdlike in shape, and a sickly yellow hue which tinged every inch of its many folds and ridges. But here resemblance ceased, for the snaky limbs arose from a wide, thick membrane fully three feet in diameter, which radiated from the central pro-

tuberance, of which it was plainly an extension that dwindled to a mere parchment webbing between the repulsive tentacles at their base. Two smooth grisly lengths were drooping down the wall and obviously gripping tightly to some slight prominence, for their great sinews rose like steel cables far into the flaccid membrane. It was the nameless thing of a nightmare; so bizarre and inexplicable that for a moment the two men stared in blank amazement—stared until an undulating movement swayed the thick membrane and another tentacle came rapidly writhing down the smooth black rock, swinging gently from side to side, touching lightly and searchingly here and there until some feet below it had reached its full extension and there it remained tapping softly at the glassy surface as if seeking to discern a second point of hold. Then from the motionless mass above broke a deep, clear, metallic whistle; and as if the note conveyed some intelligible message the neighbor chorus that had somewhat diminished now burst out afresh from a score of varied points.

"There must be dozens of these uglies!" exclaimed Deegan in surprise.

"Here, Vance, I don't cotton to these freaks—what in tarnation they are beats me! Let's clear out of this—can you make it?" he queried uneasily as he stared frowning about the canyon.

"I'll do it somehow—this din seems to be getting closer. Give me a hand," said Vance in a low voice as he stiffly stretched out a swollen arm.

AS VANCE arose to unsteady balance by the aid of his partner's arm, a dark shadow swept above them across the rubble slope and drove with a loud splash into the pool and vanished amid the flying foam.

"What's that?" exclaimed the two startled men as with one voice, whip-

ping around to eye the agitated waters where rings of speeding ripples sped to the shore; yet nothing but these broke the somber expanse of water. Whatever had dropped had vanished. With unity of thought they wheeled around to stare again at the queer thing perched above—it too had vanished!

"Why, it must have been that brute leaping!" cried Vance.

"Beats me—never saw the mate of it!" asserted the older man as both once more turned to gaze at the still heaving waters. But the pool was no longer untenanted, for gently rising and falling with the slight ripples there floated the bulbous dome and yellow drapery of the queer thing they had wondered at. Now they could discern the monster in more detail, and it was quite clear that this bizarre structure was as interested in them as they were in it. The two large circular spots they had glimpsed were undeniable eyes which with unwinking stare observed their least move intently. Coal-black, glassy, oval, lidless, they yet contained that indefinable something that the intelligent eye alone has command of. And the seamed and wrinkled dome in which they were set vastly emphasized the impression that a cold, calculating entity was coolly scheming some malignant move. Too, they perceived that this creature was provided with formidable mandibles, dull white hornlike prongs which rested crossed just beneath the implacable eyes; sharp, curved and tapering, they looked capable of inflicting a terrible wound, though the puffed and puckering surface behind them appeared repulsively flaccid. All around this queer nodding dome floated the thick membrane from which long tentacles, half-submerged, sprang at close intervals. For a moment the men regarded this inexplicable thing in blank amazement.

"I don't like the cut of that thing

—it ain't noway seared," said Deegan in a low voice. "It's giving us the once-over before starting something."

"Looks like it—by George, yes! It's on the move!" cried Vance, eyeing it uneasily. And with reason, for of a sudden the heavy, wide membrane had moved, contracted rearward, and apparently impelled by the rapid thrust the creature shot forward with the undulating ease and celerity of a fish. Again the movement was repeated, bringing it closer to the bank on which they stood, and it was coming with deadly earnestness straight for them. Yet the whole extraordinary creature was so obviously of such a flaccid, unstable texture that one could not view its approach with serious concern—and yet the brute was heading straight for them!

"Sheer off, you blasted abortion!" exclaimed Deegan somewhat contemptuously as he snatched up a couple of small rocks and sent them whizzing viciously at the nearing thing. Thud! the first stone had struck it between the great saucer eyes, appeared to sink deep into the conical creased surface, then fell aside with a distinct rebound as though impelled by something akin to the elasticity of rubber. The second missile flew skidding across the streaming membrane. Instantly its progress was arrested, and long, thin, snaky tentacles arose from the water and lashed with savage whippings, churning the vicinity into a miniature vortex of swirling foam.

Something in the sight seemed to quicken a dormant ferocity within them, and in a flash the two men were snatching at the rubble and raining stone after stone upon the wounded brute, insensate rage warming and limbering their powerful muscles. Though Vance was yet unsteady on his feet, at such short range the fusillade would have felled a steer; in a moment the flailing arms lashed but

feebly, then subsided to a mere convulsive twitching on the surface, though in such confusion of half-submerged tangled loops and knots that it was impossible to descry any particular effect of the bombardment. It had drifted close to the beach, yet neither man seemed eager to view more closely the mangled mass.

They stared for a little in silence, then Vance said slowly, "What's happened to its mates?" And for the first time it came to them that the weird whistling had ceased and not a whisper of sound echoed from the grim walls. Yet the silence was as the soundless vibrations of alert watching things saturating the air with the intensity of their desire.

"Hanged if I know," said Deegan; then with sudden decision: "I ain't stuck on this layout—let's beat it. Can you make it?" he queried. "Come on, I'll give you a hand till you limber up," he added impatiently as he caught the younger man by the elbow and pulled him, not ungently, in the direction they had come.

"One second—there's something I want," said Vance quietly as he freed himself and in a couple of rapid, unsteady strides reached the dripping black face of the forbidding ledge. Quickly snatching up a large jagged fragment he struck a few heavy blows where a wandering vein of rougher surface, though of similar hue, ran diagonally upward.

Looking closely, one might note that numerous similar thin streaks meandered across the wall. Something, two small fragments no larger than a pigeon's egg and curiously oval in their cleavage, dropped into his waiting hand. These he slipped into a hip pocket as he swung around and regained his open-eyed partner.

"What're you doing? I'll gamble there ain't a grain of yellow in the whole caboodle," cried Deegan, contemptuously impatient.

"Likely—but it's interesting," said Vance shortly; and Deegan, flicking upon the black wall a shrewd glance of disapproval that but confirmed the indifference with which he had from the first viewed its somber nakedness, again caught his partner by the arm, and straightway they hurried toward the neck-shaped outlet of the canyon.

THEY had gone but a few steps when the whistling broke out anew, with a clamor far exceeding its former volume. Every crack, fissure and niche appeared to add its vociferous quota to the harshly vibrant chorus. And each note was now louder, shriller, and more vehement, as if expelled by the stress of maddened craving and diabolic rage at the retreat of the two men. It needed no fine sensitiveness to grasp that these invisible things were utterly inimical and malignant.

"By God!" exclaimed Deegan, startled; "these things are watching us—they mean to rush us!" And in his tone lay no trace of its former contempt.

"Looks that way," assented Vance. "Hullo!" he cried, and the two men suddenly halted as first one, then quickly following it a second dark mass shot from the opposite cliff out of the broken face above the alien ledge. Broad blotches of shadow flung across the speckless fading blue roof of sky as they came with the planing swoop of a waterfowl clear over the pool and alighted with soft thuds on the beach at the water's edge—alighted on a fringe of drooping tentacles which for a foot from the outspread membrane were so rigidly tensed that they acted as a cushion for the landing.

Before the staring men could move a hand the strange things were on the move and coming straight for them with a rapid gliding motion, their tentacles in swift ever-changing

movement darting ahead in apparent confusion, while other writhing lengths in the rear with lightning change of rigidity held the bulk of the things above the ground. Each movement was so rapidly executed that no pause or hesitation could be discerned, and the result was an odious, undulating progress. Abruptly a sense of impending awful peril came upon the watching men, and snatching at the sole weapons remaining to them they shot a hail of jagged rubble crashing into the repulsive brutes. At such short range, no more than half a dozen paces, every shot struck with terrific force, and in an instant the loathsome things were halted and beaten to the ground, where with wildly lashing tentacles they savagely strove to combat the hail of biting missiles which were tearing and gashing deep pits and long ragged furrows, wounds exuding ghastly entrails and revolting yellow-tinted slime in abominable squirming tangles and hideous gushings.

Eviscerated, almost cut to ribbons, their tenacity of life was amazing, the great mutilated membranes throbbing and heaving incessantly while even the severed tentacles writhed and lashed out viciously. Yet it had been a simple matter to overcome these extraordinary brutes.

"Settled their hash quick enough, anyway!" cried Deegan exultantly. "But what are they?" he added, viewing the horrible welter with a puzzled scowl.

"I never even dreamt such things existed," said Vance; and the two men stepped forward a pace from their line of march alongside the face of the bluff, to view the remains more closely.

In that second it happened! Neither actually saw, though likely each sensed, the noiseless dropping of the deadly thing. Something clammy and soft, yet weighty, fell full upon Vance, covering his head and shoul-

ders with a slimy, clinging darkness. No mere inert blotting out of vision, but a living, strangling horror constricting upon his throat, face and chest with an unrelenting pressure that every moment grew more deadly and agonizing. Around his arms and chest gripped seeming steel cables beyond his desperate strength to burst, holding him helpless while he suffocated in the black unknown.

For the first second or so he heard a faint shouting as if coming from an immense distance; then it ceased as the buzzing in his head grew to a roaring that engulfed every other sound. Only he knew that something caught him up and leapt far in one swift motion. Then he was prone on the rubble and jarred by a rain of racking blows. But ever that frightful embrace of death was closing in tighter and tighter upon him, invading ears, eyes, mouth, nostrils. His head was bursting with the clamor of blood-engorged veins, and stabs of awful pain swept flames of crimson through black nothingness.

Then suddenly the terrible pressure ceased and the horrible mask was torn away; blurred daylight drenched his eyes and his heaving lungs were rapturously gulping honest air, though through a viscous, filthy-tasting slime that lay around his lips and in his eyes. His face was being rubbed roughly, and in a moment he saw again the glorious sky and rocks and the rugged, anxious face of Deegan peering close to his and calling over and over, "Don't move, Vance! Don't move!"

Though still dazed, he recognized that he lay stretched close alongside the grim black bluff where a concave face almost roofed them. A pace or so away throbbed and writhed a fearful mangled thing of squirming tentacles and a great, flat mass with revolting, dragging entrails crawling from a gaping ragged wound that had slit the thing from rim to center.

At the sight a violent nausea came upon him.

"That's it, get rid of the poison! I had to cut the damned thing in two before it would loosen up," said Deegan with apologetic approval.

"It leapt on me!" queried Vance with a shiver as the sickness passed and his strength returned.

"Sure! And if another had jumped me we'd both be dead meat by now. Though they ain't too tough to carve," asserted his partner grimly. "But this ain't only the start, there's hell a-coming—half a dozen flopped into the pool while I was busy. They ain't doing nothing yet, just watching—going to rush us for sure," he growled, angrily nodding toward the water.

"Half a dozen!" exclaimed Vance hoarsely, as he leaned forward, and at the sight of the strange floating masses he involuntarily shrank back against the wall. There was no gainsaying his partner's estimate, for a space many yards in diameter was covered with the repulsive yellow membranes, each surmounted by the globular headlike excrecence, their great flat eyes turned intently upon the men. Silent and motionless they stared as if but awaiting some decisive second, though as Vance moved a slight stir pulsed through the entire mass.

"Yes, and by their music I reckon there's six hundred more to come. They're killers—a couple could strangle a buffalo," he added, eyeing the floating things appraisingly. "I tell you these ain't no garden bugs, and we got to get. Hullo! here's another bunch of the joy-birds," he cried in grim irony as fully a dozen of the brutes shot from the opposite cliff and in a planing dive dropped beside their fellows, where after the momentary commotion of their arrival they rested quietly.

"I don't figure what they're aiming at," said Deegan in a low voice.

"But there's no mistaking they've got us in a tight corner—if we quit this for the open they'll jump us from above. Yet if they come for us we can't hold them off—not a bunch like that. Say, Vance, take a squint up the way, maybe there's a chance of pulling out that way. I'll watch—by God! Quick! They're on the move!" he cried excitedly, with a sudden tense note.

AS VANCE, with nausea vanished and pain-stiffened muscles abruptly supple, wheeled to scan the cliff, in that fraction of a second he glimpsed the ghastly welter of weird things awake to vigorous movement and come in a solid mass through a swath of foam straight for the beach at their feet. Noiseless, swift, and direct, there could be no doubt of their deadly intention.

Then came the whirr and hiss of heavy missiles as Deegan desperately sought to stay their advance for but a few fateful seconds. With eager searching eye Vance scanned the naked wall in which the canyon ended. In an instant he grasped the fact that the heights here were not entirely hopeless, for everywhere lay great seams, gaping cavities and projecting ledges, where the dying throes of some titanic convulsion had plucked asunder this vast chasm. Behind the veil of falling spray loomed the dark blur of a huge rent that swept upward from the quiet pool until a sharp turn of the canyon—obviously some shallow offshoot and cul-de-sac—hid its higher flight. Steep it certainly was, but not impassable; and so deep and high-roofed a fissure that one within need hardly stoop as he clambered. Still higher the bluffs were badly shattered and the whole cliff-face fell back in a series of vast irregular steps whose every rung would likely harbor a miniature plateau where a man could rest in perfect safety. Yet it was entirely a

gamble; ascent might become impossible at a score of points: but they were desperate men and instantly his mind was made up.

"Listen, Deegan!" he cried quickly. "It's just a bare chance—there's a crack behind the fall, big enough to stand in—goes away up, lots of foothold above—looks as if we might make it. What do you say? It's a chance!"

"Sure!" like a whip-crack came the voice of Deegan. "Quick! sling the dope—these blasted things are landing!" he gasped between the delivery of a storm of missiles.

"Hug the bluff to the end, then jump for the pool, clear through the fall—lower end of the crack this side. Say when!" cried Vance.

"All set! Go ahead!" And as he shouted he whirled around, and brushing the cliff-face, tore madly to the canyon end. And in that second the hidden swarming life of that dreadful place forsook concealment and came hurtling, from a score of gaping fissures and deep shelves, through the heavy stagnant air. Dark masses of inconceivable frightfulness of outline passed above the racing men and landed splashing in the pool, at its brink, or thudded horribly on the rubble beach. In a moment both the pool and the beach behind them were seething with a solid mass of hideous, writhing life; yet as if their trussed helpless prey had earlier drawn the things to an invisible migration, but an odd one or two dropped abreast of them, and the bulk were concentrated many paces in the rear, a mischance that they instantly sought to remedy. On they came in a crested rushing wave of lashing and fighting tentacles, striving to clamber and expedite advance upon one another's bodies. But now the two men were abreast the fall, and without a second's hesitation had wildly leapt across the rubble and hurled themselves clear through the

liquid veil. Emerging from the green depths they had but to stretch forth a hand to grip the upward sloping shelf. A scramble, and both stood safe upon it, in the twilight of the space held void and dry by the roof above. To their relief the shelf proved wide and none too steep for ascent, though greasy with slime and oily weed. The thought of that frightful onrushing wave of malignant monsters spurred their muscles to the utmost limit.

"Watch yourself!" cried Deegan as he took the rise with an agility amazing in one of his years and bulk.

In a moment they had passed from the sheltering curtain and were clambering ever steeper heights. The rent narrowed as it swept upward and followed the turn of the shallow offshoot, and now they had to grip with hand and foot most precariously. Then some twenty feet above the summit of the odd intrusive stratum the passage dwindled to a mere thread utterly untenable. But luck was now as friendly an ally as before it had been obdurate, and not ten feet below lay a little plateau; a few feet of flat smooth rock, the first of the innumerable rungs in semblance of giant steps which reached to the distant summit.

Lithe and silent at once both men dropped, and breathing hard they stood side by side with fierce eyes minutely scanning the neighboring fantastic crags. In a hundred spots amid this chaos of riven, seamed, cluttered rock hideous death might lurk unseen and almost brushing them. That these horrible things could scale such heights was indisputable, and that very second they might be noiselessly clambering to them amid the jagged surrounding crags.

Motionless and tense the two men listened, but never a whisper broke the deathly silence; even the melancholy note of the fall was here by some acoustic freak unheard, and the

now invisible pit from which they had ascended might well never have existed for all the proof that came to them of its loathsome occupants. Those few tense moments of escape had seemingly obliterated the horror that preceded them. Yet in the suspense of dread waiting they experienced even more fully the peril of their position.

"Vance," said Deegan in a gruff whisper, "this cursed place has got my goat! We've got to get a move on or dark will be on us—and night here——"

"Dark! Night!" echoed Vance with a shiver of horror. "Not here—anything but that! You lead, you're a better man than I am here," he added simply.

"Come on!" said Deegan, swinging round and making inward, where a steep slide of huge fragments debouched to the little plateau.

As he moved, a dark, ragged mass hurtled above Vance, passed indeed so close that the wind of its descent stirred his wide-brimmed headgear, and struck something with a sickening squelch, and there was Deegan staggering and fighting desperately, tearing at long, sinuous tentacles that implacably gripped at the flailing arms and in a second had bound them with a score of grisly twining coils; while the thick raging voice was abruptly quenched and usurped by abominable inarticulate mumblings and inhuman whisperings. Vance gazed with benumbed horror at a headless trunk which swayed with grotesque stumbling and pointless motions. From feet to start of the massive chest it was Deegan; above, coil upon coil of rigid tentacle hid and held his arms immovable, and a great formless sprawling mass—yellow, oily, wrinkled—completely covered every inch above like a ghastly hood—a hood that with loathsome contractions and undulations was fitting it-

self as a mask into every contour of shoulders, throat and head.

Vance was no weakling, and never a drop of craven blood coursed through his veins, yet only the stimulus of desperation nerved his muscles to the deed as he hurled himself upon the frightful thing and with bare hands tore frantically at the tough, viscous cables. Not by a fraction of an inch could his fiercest efforts loose their steel embrace, but from the smooth and oily lengths his fingers slid impotently away. Indeed, so tremendous was their contractile strength that the coils were almost buried in the victim's body, and in many places the sole evidence of their existence were the swollen ridges on each side. Instantly Vance realized that the ghastly pressure of those frightful coils must have expelled the breath from Deegan's lungs even as the impervious hood was closing hermetically upon him. Assuredly this creature was the most horrible engine of death the world had yet engendered, it was appalling beyond imagination! And the horror of the thing reached its culmination in the utter soundlessness of the killing; coldly, implacably, noiselessly the brute was strangling its victim, and never a whisper of his death agony now pierced the deadly hood, only the jarring clash of rock and Deegan's iron-shod boots broke the shroud of silence which encompassed them.

There was no time to search for a weapon such as Deegan found to hand on the rubble below, around lay naught but clean-swept, unbroken surfaces; farther on, a rock slide debouched upon the little plateau where doubtless search would discover some crude weapon, but meanwhile the precious seconds spilled the sands of ebbing life.

Madness, a vast overwhelming volcanic rage swept upon him; with a hoarse scream of insane wrath and hate he leapt straight at his partner

and bore him crashing to the smooth floor, and without a second's pause thrust his face savagely into the heavy viscous folds where the hood had contracted in the depression below its victim's jaw. The lance-pointed, horny mandibles opened wide and snapped fiercely with a click as the brute writhed violently to meet this unexpected attack, but the strong jaws and teeth of the attacker were buried deep in the glutinous thing and held with bulldog grip; yet never a tentacle released its frightful grasp.

Worrying the thing like a starving wolf, by main force he tore loose a strip of the foul stuff, a strip which came away in long, clinging, ragged strands which stretched with rubber-like elasticity and parted recoiling to his face in sticky tenacity. In a flash his teeth had closed again deep in the gaping wound. For the moment he was an elemental caveman, born of ancestors barely emerged from inarticulate bestiality, who craved to tear his foe in shreds with the only weapons nature had given him. Now whipping tentacles assaulted him, strove with vicious might to enwrap him in their grasp, but the greater number still gripped tight their prey, and every second the strong white teeth were tearing, burrowing, rending silently deeper and deeper into the clammy slime and glutinous stringiness. Foul clots of greasy filth and gushes of heavy, stinking liquid filled his nostrils, eyes, and mouth. Yet the brain of the caveman was wide-awake, and a savage triumph pulsed through it as with terrific force he hurled, assailant and victim crashing against the wall from which they had dropped, at the same second by a mighty heave twirling the living missile so that the full force of the impact was taken by the central globular mass. With a vile squelch the thing burst asunder into a dozen ragged segments, and a

shower of warm greasy slime splattered his face and hung in clots and a drapery of adhesive, sluggish, dripping entrails. At once the binding tentacles lost their rigidity. In a flash he was tearing them apart, heedless of their savage death throes; one supreme effort and he had wrenched the thing from its anchorage, swung it on high and whirled it crashing many feet away, where with convulsive flailings it lay an indescribably hideous sight.

In terror he gazed at the silent figure of Deegan. The thought that after all death might be the victor and he be left solitary in that frightful wilderness was a thought too appalling to endure. It came to him that the rough, unlettered Deegan was indeed a tower of strength and security; and in that moment the scales of prejudice and petty class distinction dropped forever from his inner vision.

But as he bent to listen for the beat of that staunch heart Deegan's eyelids trembled, then slowly opened. In a flash Vance had loosed his partner's throat-band, and using his hat he fanned gusts of reviving air upon him. As the massive chest drank ever deeper of the craved elixir, soon life flamed up again unimpaired. Weakly he raised his head, and at once his gaze was rooted in horror on the mangled, palpitating thing that had so nearly wrought his destruction.

"That thing! It fell on me!" he muttered hoarsely. "That thing!" he repeated dully as though stupefied by horror.

"It strangled me—and I was helpless in that awful choking darkness. Oh my God!"

"I know—a nightmare of hell!" said Vance, and his voice shook. "But Deegan, we've got to get through right away—dark will be on us soon. That crowd down there will scent us for sure if we stay here—I reckon this brute was just an odd loafer hanging around. Anyway we can't

stop here," he urged impatiently, for Deegan, though evidently greatly recovered, still remained motionless, staring like one hypnotized by the squirming of the loathsome thing. Then suddenly he became aware that Vance was watching him.

"All right—give a man a chance to get his wind back," he growled sullenly. "But you're right—it is near sundown," he added, rising quickly to his feet with such obvious agitation that it was plain the mere thought of approaching night had aroused in him an almost frenzied terror.

"All right, this looks as good a chance as any other," said Vance shortly, and now his voice was cool and firm as he swung into the lead, while Deegan, closely following, did not notice the order of their going.

DEEGAN sat on the park bench stolidly smoking, just as he had sat for nearly two hours, and just as Vance had left him. That very morning, penniless and wofully dilapidated, they had landed in exotic Georgetown, and dumped two very efficient though unlovely rifles alongside their meager baggage in the stuffy compartment assigned them by the half-caste proprietor, who with a single shrewd glance apportioned to a day the tenure justified by such slender assets. Thereafter, unable to endure the fusty poverty of their apartment, they had gravitated to the trimly beautiful Botanical Gardens—at this hour virtually deserted—and here had entered into a desultory discussion of the ways and means of alleviating their indigency. Deegan, save for the labor of his hands, had no solution to offer; and Vance shortly sinking into an apathetic self-commune and betraying but the most ephemeral interest in the subject, naturally the discussion languished.

Abruptly Vance had risen and casually observed, "Say, Deegan, there's a man I know hangs out in this burg

—I'm going to look him up. He may know of something—wait here for me." And then immediately he made off at a brisk pace, leaving his partner open-mouthed but uncomplaining to his solitary vigil.

That was nearly two hours back: and the great-thewed, rough-hewn Deegan, whose daily life for forgotten years had been an almost monotonous repetition of desperate risks lightly accepted and miraculously survived, became at once a hesitating, even timorous, intruder amid such alien environment. Visions of unguessable accidents, or fateful, youth-enticing allurements, assaulted his imagination more and more persistently as the moments sped.

Yet never a twinge of doubt had sobered him when with Vance, in the gray of dawn, like a living tornado the two men had burst upon the slumbering savages, yelling roaring curses as they laid about them with rough-fashioned clubs; in a twinkling they had swept their despoilers into a panic-stricken rout, never doubting but their assailants were the loosed diabolical spirits of defunct men thirsting to wreak vengeance upon the guilty; a rout that lost nothing of its frenzied haste when the crashing reports of two retrieved rifles added to the din and left the demoniac visitants with undisputed leisure to the salvaging of their pilfered packs. Then came toil-filled weeks of unavailing search for the yellow lucre, defeat, and the wearisome return.

"Hullo, Deegan! Longer than I reckoned," hailed a cheerful voice, and Deegan awoke from his gloomy reverie. "About time we had some eats," added Vance with decision.

"Eat? Yes, we got to eat—I reckon there's nothing for it but to slough the guns; lucky if we raise ten bucks apiece—and I hate like hell to do it," was the grudging assent of the seated man.

"Guns? Not this trip. See here!"

And pausing, Vance lugged from his hip pocket a little wad of bills, and peeling off several, thrust them into his partner's thick fingers, saying: "A hundred apiece—that should keep us going till we pull out."

"Pull out? What you talking about?" said Deegan blankly as he stared in wonder at the notes.

"Well, here's the short of it—just a hunch, fool luck, you can't beat it! Likely you remember I pocketed some bits of rock from that queer ledge, also maybe you noticed now and again a chunk you fired into that awful bunch was heavy as lead?" queried Vance tersely.

"That's so, even then the heft of some of it worried me," said Deegan thoughtfully. "But just junk—not a color to a ton, I'll take my oath," he added with conviction.

"Right, there wasn't; but it lay in veins all over and black as the ledge itself—lying trussed, I was closer than you and couldn't help marking them, then somehow it got rubbed into me that some of the rubble had an odd shape—all curves and round lumps like small plums sticking out. Just now I've come from a man who used to do business with the bank I was in, got to be quite friendly with me. Likely you've heard of him, Cameron, mining expert and manager of the Arequipa mines. Took a chance on his being straight or throwing me out; well, he's a white man—'nough said. Just took a squint at the chips I dumped on the table, promptly shut the door and said: 'Young man, spit it out!'

"When I'd got it off he studied a while then observed quietly, 'I

don't know if you two went crazy or had a nightmare, but I'm going to chance it. I'll stake you both, though I want you to get a hustle on, beat it back to that crazy canyon and stake the whole country. Your partner is wise to the outfit necessary—go to Ramon's, tell him to bill me. Leave those stones with me, too risky toting them around; and mind, not a drop of booze until the stakes are in. By the way, we go fifty-fifty—that suit you?'

"I nodded.

"All right, see me before you leave,' he said. 'Good day.'

"But what is it?' I asked, staggered by all this.

"What is it! My suffering aunt! He asks what is it!' said he, glaring at me. 'Well, you young lucky ass, it's about the richest samples of pitchblende, the radium ore, I ever clapped eyes on; worth heaven only knows how much. Which reminds me likely you haven't got any too much now—here, I'll 'phone the bank to cash this.' And he was scrawling a check as he spoke.

"Before I knew what had happened he'd shooed me out. That's all there was to it. Now let's eat; we can chew the rag over a decent meal."

"Well, I reckon luck's your middle name, and even chances he's white—but you're the whitest guy I ever struck, which is aces high with me," said Deegan slowly. "Yes, we'll eat—and after that we'll raise the dust on the trail back to blow that nest of devil-spewings to the hell they came from," he added in fierce triumph, as, rising, the two adventurers swung off to town and hard-earned success.

