



The

Black

Cat

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**July 1902**

The Jockey Who Went to Sleep. Louis Weslyn.

**\$200 Prize Story.**

AUXONS. Julia Truitt Bishop.

**\$100 Prize Story.**

Lights Out! Frederic Laurence Davis.

The White Death. Don Mark Lemon.

The Freeze that Thawed Her. Walter E. Andrews.

**\$200 Prize Story.**



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## The White Death.\*

BY DON MARK LEMON.



HE was an American. He had come to the country in search of gold. He should have remained on his estate at home in Virginia. But no, he must come to South America and prospect in Tarantula Valley. He proposed it first to his Mexican guide, Lozo. Lozo grew white about the lips, despite his tawny color, and shook his head.

“Why not?” the American questioned.

“The White Death, señor; it is there!”

“Where — in Tarantula Valley?”

“Yes, señor.”

“What is the White Death?”

Lozo drew his lips firmly together and again shook his head. Evidently the White Death was something to be silent about, as well as to fear.

“Is it a pestilence of some kind?” the American questioned.

“No, señor.”

“Is it a snake?”

“No, señor.”

“A wild beast?”

“No, señor.”

“Is it death from poisonous gases?”

“No, señor.”

“Is it death by the hand of men — banditti, for instance?”

“No, señor.”

“Hunger? thirst?”

“No, señor.”

“Then what the devil is the White Death?”

The American spoke angrily, but Lozo made no reply. He only drew his lips tighter together and looked more frightened.

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The fellow — half savage that he was — feared he might draw the anger of the White Death upon himself should he describe its nature.

“Queer!” the American muttered, greatly perplexed. Then he tried policy. “Come, I’ll double your pay if you’ll act as guide.”

“No, señor.”

“Treble it.”

“No, señor.”

“Give you ten dollars a day — American gold.”

“No, señor.”

The American considered awhile. Then he said, “That decides me; I’ll prospect Tarantula Valley and see if I can’t stack a mortgage on this White Death — and I’ll go it alone.”

The Mexican was a Catholic. He crossed himself and looked unhappy. There was no reason he shouldn’t look unhappy. He liked the American, in his rough way; besides the American’s pay was good — and certain. And now the American was going to meet the White Death!

Having made up his mind to prospect Tarantula Valley at any cost, the Virginian looked about for another guide than Lozo, but his labor was wasted. No one would accompany him on his proposed prospecting tour, nor explain what was meant by the White Death.

Was it something so strange, so far removed from common nature, that human speech could frame no description of it? Or did the superstitious villagers fear that they might draw the anger of the White Death — whatever it was — upon themselves should they go into particulars?

The next day the American set out alone for Tarantula Valley, very curious and not at all nervous. He was well provisioned — one burro bore his supply of food, another his blankets and mining outfit — and well armed. He didn’t reason that there might be something lurking in the Valley before him against which his Winchester would be no protection — some Shape such as might haunt the Infernal pool and make it more hideous than even a diseased poet could imagine. No; he didn’t reason at all.

Tarantula Valley, in appearance, was a pleasant place, with a

wooded river flowing through it and a wooded lake, or large pool, in its centre. The American thought what a paradise it would be in which to dream away the rest of his life with One by his side who was waiting for him in Virginia.

Yet, despite the sylvan charm of the Valley, the American soon grew lonely, for there really wasn't much society about. To be sure, there were the two burros, an occasional snake, a few horned toads, and some buzzards; but, apart from these, the dumb creatures to be seen were not at all sociable. Not sociable, at least, like the buzzards. *They*, in one particular, were almost as good as human society, taking, as they did, a very evident interest in the American's state of health.

Then, too, there was a half-wild burro in the Valley. At least a half-wild burro passed through the vale one day and for a few minutes fell in with the pack animals of the American. Of course dumb beasts can't talk with one another, yet, somehow, after that half-wild burro had fooled awhile around the ears of the two tame burros, as a man fools around the ear of a friend to whom he is giving a tip, those two tame burros, in company with the half-wild one, made such quick tracks from Tarantula Valley that to the astonished American the animals seemed like three dirty streaks of light making for the hills ten miles beyond. Evidently the creatures were frightened at something — not at something they saw, but at something they feared they might see.

And what was still more curious, there wasn't an animal in Tarantula Valley that didn't appear half dead from fright. Actually the American came to the conclusion that the dumb habitants of the Valley were all so subdued by fear that they hadn't the sense left with which to migrate.

But, strangest of all — of which fact there could be no doubt, as the Virginian had the witness of his own eyes — were the collections of bones scattered over the Valley, and especially about the lake. On his first day in the vale he had lighted on one of these collections of bones. He examined it. It looked like a little open-air cosmopolitan graveyard. Within a circle about twenty feet in diameter was collected the skeleton of a burro, the skeleton of a buzzard, the skeleton of a large wild animal of the cat tribe, the skeleton of a cow, several skeletons the species of which the

American couldn't determine, and last, but not least, the skeleton of a man.

It was evident that some wild animal had lately ravaged in that part of the country, gathering into one feeding ground the prey of a month or so.

The second day he spent in the Valley the American lighted on a second collection of bones. It was much like the first, only the human skeleton bleaching in the sun was that of a woman and not a man. At this the Virginian got very angry, though without especial reason. The woman, surely, couldn't have died any harder than the man.

The third day he lighted on a third collection of bones, and the skeleton of a man and woman lay side by side. With this he began to wonder seriously what manner of thing it was that had turned the Valley into a charnel. Was it a great panther of some kind — or a huge snake? Or — but no, it couldn't be a man. That was something too hideous to believe. And a man or band of men it was not.

Then he struck gold. He slipped into the river one morning, scraping the bank in his fall, and there in the river-bank he found the gold. It was placer and so rich that in less than a week he got enough to satisfy a woman, let alone a man. Then he laid off a day and went down the river in search of game, and, without especially looking for it, he found a fourth collection of bones which, from its condition, seemed to be the latest feeding ground of the Thing — the White Death.

Now, when a man has a cool million in sight — or thinks he has — he feels more secure from personal danger than when he has little or nothing, so the American decided to hang about that fourth collection of bones and try to bag something.

Straightway he found a suitable spot beside a rock, and, leaning his Winchester within easy reach, proceeded to watch. About thirty feet distant was a huge collection of boulders; perhaps hidden in the wide fissures of these boulders was the thing he sought.

For a half hour, or, rather, forty minutes, the American gave his whole attention to the business in hand, then, nothing appearing, he got tired and began to scratch his sweetheart's name in the

dirt at his feet. It was a pleasant thing to do, though, to be sure, rather foolish for a man on watch — for Something — he didn't know exactly what.

When he had finished writing Her name in the dust, then his own name, and then had traced around both a rude figure more like spades than the human heart, he looked up.

At first he thought there was something wrong with his eyes and he winked them several times. Then he thought his brains were tangled, and so he multiplied several figures mentally, but, getting the right answers, for four times four *is* sixteen, six times three *is* eighteen, and eight times seven *is* fifty-six, he concluded it was something else than his reason at fault. Then he reached out his hand for his Winchester, but desisted before touching the rifle, for he chose rather to watch the Thing squatted upon the pile of rock than handle an uninteresting weapon. But perhaps he had no choice in the matter — perhaps he couldn't do other than watch. The Thing was so very fascinating.

It was looking directly at him — the Thing on the rocks — and, though it made not the slightest noise to attract his attention, there was no reason he should not see it. For it was as big as an ox lying down. But it wasn't an ox. Neither was it anything like an ox.

*It was a gigantic spider or tarantula, large as a full-grown tiger, with long white hair all over its huge and horrible body!*

“Why,” the American began. Evidently he was going to say, “Why, if I had known of such a thing as that around here, I would have stayed away.” But he got no further than “Why,” for it was more fascinating watching the Thing than talking or thinking.

Then, again, the American tried to reach for his Winchester, but the light that came out of the eyes of the squat Thing upon the rocks paralyzed his arm. Or perhaps it was only surprise that deprived him of the power of motion, for he well knew that there is no such thing as hypnotic power in the eye of man or beast.

Then suddenly the long white hair of the Thing began to tremble and the American felt as if his whole body were blistering from some intense heat, and, as the eyes of the White Death stood out farther from its horrible head, and its great legs drew closer

together for the thirty-foot spring, the Virginian began to cry — to whimper — and a single word dropped from his maudlin lips. That word, puerile enough for a strong man, was “Mother!” The face of the American’s mother had suddenly flashed before his soul somewhere in the back of his head. The face had the mouth of his sweetheart. He should have known, for he had kissed the mouth several times before leaving Virginia.

Then the squat Thing upon the rock began to tremble throughout and its long white hair to shiver and its legs to collect closer and closer. Whereupon the American began to laugh foolishly, like a baby, and beat and paddle his hands in the dust, and his body grew flaccid and flabby and his breast sank down into his stomach.

Then, like a flash of white light struck out of the rock, the squat Thing leapt thirty feet through the hot air, and, as it sunk its horrible fangs into the neck of the American, his lips were bowed down into his sweetheart’s name in the dust, and he babbled, “‘Now — I lay me down — to sleep.’”

