

July, 1979

About the Cover

We hope our cover reached up with outstretched arms, entreating you to pick us up and find out what is going on inside! The illustration, by Elinor Mavor, interprets "The Big Blow-Up" by picturing one of its aliens inside a "bubble" symbolizing his protective powers. See Page 108.

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Science Fiction • Fantasy • Sword & Sorcery



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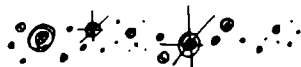
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The Worm





The Worm

by David H. Keller, M.D.

What in the world is happening to this old man's peaceful, predictable life? And why does he stay in his home where such havoc occurs? Do you find him witless, perhaps senile ... or is he possibly the most courageous of men, refusing to knuckle under, regardless of the outcome? Curl up with this one for an intriguing interlude; but lock the doors (especially the one to the basement, if you have one!)

THE MILLER patted his dog on the head, as he whispered: "We are going to stay here. Our folks, your ancestors and mine, have been here for nearly two hundred years, and queer it would be to leave now because of fear."

The gristmill stood, a solid stone structure, in an isolated Vermont valley. Years ago every day had been a busy one for the mill and the miller, but now only the mill wheel was busy. There was no grist for the mill and no one lived in the valley. Blackberries and hazel grew where once the pastures had been green. The hand of time had passed over the farms, and the only folk left were sleeping in the churchyard. A family of squirrels nested in the pulpit, while on the tombstones silent snails left their cryptic messages in silvery streaks. Thompson's Valley was being handed back to nature. Only the old bachelor miller, John Staples, remained. He was too proud and too stubborn to do anything else.

The mill was his home, even as it had served all of his family for a

home during the last two hundred years. The first Staples had built it to stay, and it was still as strong as on the day it was finished. There was a basement for the machinery of the mill, the first floor was the place of grinding and storage, and the upper two floors served as the Staples homestead. The building was warm in winter and cool in summer. Times past it had sheltered a dozen Stapleses at a time; now it provided a home for John Staples and his dog.

He lived there with his books and his memories. He had no friends and desired no associates. Once a year he went to the nearest town and bought supplies of all kinds, paying for them in gold. It was supposed that he was wealthy. Rumor credited him with being a miser. He attended to his own business, asked the world to do the same, and on a winter's evening laughed silently over Burton and Rabelais, while his dog chased rabbits in his heated sleep upon the hearth.

The winter of 1935 was beginning to threaten the valley, but with an abundance of food and wood in the mill, the recluse looked forward to a comfortable period of desuetude. No matter how cold the weather, he was warm and contented. With the inherent ability of his family, he had been able to convert the water power into electricity. When the wheel was frozen, he used the electricity stored in his storage batteries. Every day he puttered around among the machinery which it was his pride to keep in perfect order. He assured the dog

that if business ever did come to the mill, he would be ready for it.

It was on Christmas Day of that winter that he first heard the noise. Going down to the basement to see that nothing had been injured by the bitter freeze of the night before, his attention was attracted, even while descending the stone steps, by a peculiar grinding noise that seemed to come from out of the ground. His ancestors, building for permanency, had not only put in solid foundations, but had paved the entire basement with slate flagstone three feet wide and as many inches thick. Between these the dust of two centuries had gathered and hardened.

Once his feet were on this pavement, Staples found that he could not only hear the noise, but he could also feel through the flagstones the vibrations which accompanied it. Even through his heavy leather boots he could feel the rhythmic pulsations. Pulling off his mittens, he stooped over and put his finger tips on the stone. To his surprise it was warm in spite of the fact that the temperature had been below zero the night before. The vibration was more distinct to his finger tips than it had been to his feet. Puzzled, he threw himself on the slate stone and put his ear to the warm surface.

The sound he now heard made him think of the grinding of the millstones when he was a boy and the farmers had brought corn to be ground into meal. There had been no corn meal ground in the mill for fifty years, yet here was

the sound of stone scraping slowly and regularly on stone. He could not understand it. In fact, it was some time before he tried to explain it. With the habit born of years of solitary thinking, he first collected all the available facts about this noise. He knew that during the long winter evenings he would have time enough to do his thinking.

Going to his sitting room, he secured a walking stick of ash and went back to the cellar. Holding the handle of the cane lightly, he placed the other end on a hundred different spots on the floor, and each time he held it long enough to determine the presence or absence of vibration. To his surprise he found that while it varied in strength, it was present all over the cellar with the exception of the four corners. The maximum intensity was about in the center.

That evening he concentrated on the problem before him. He had been told by his grandfather that the mill was built on solid rock. As a young man he had helped clean out a well near the mill and recalled that, instead of being dug out of gravel or dirt, it had the appearance of being drilled out of solid granite. There was no difficulty in believing that the earth under the mill was also solid rock. There was no reason for thinking otherwise. Evidently some of these strata of stone had become loose and were slipping and twisting under the mill. The simplest explanation was the most reasonable: it was simply a geological phenomenon. The

behavior of the dog, however, was not so easily explained. He had refused to go with his master into the cellar, and now, instead of sleeping in comfort before the fire, he was in an attitude of strained expectancy. He did not bark, or even whine, but crept silently to his master's chair, looking at him anxiously.

The next morning the noise was louder. Staples heard it in his bed, and at first he thought that some bold adventurer had come into the forest and was sawing down a tree. That was what it sounded like, only softer and longer in its rhythm. Buzzzzzz — Buzzzzzz-Buzzzzzz. The dog, distinctly unhappy, jumped up on the bed and crawled uneasily so he could nuzzle the man's hand.

Through the four legs of the bed, Staples could feel the same vibration that had come to him through the handle of his cane the day before. That made him think. The vibration was now powerful enough to be appreciated, not through a walking stick, but through the walls of the building. The noise could be heard as well on the third floor as in the cellar.

He tried to fancy what it sounded like — not what it was — but what it was like. The first idea had been that it resembled a saw going through oak; then came the thought of bees swarming, only these were large bees and millions of them; but finally all he could think of was the grinding of stones in a gristmill, the upper stone against the lower; and now the sound was Grrrrrrrr — Grrrrrrrr instead of Bzzzzzzzzzzzz or

Hummmmmmmmm.

That morning he took longer than usual to shave and was more methodical than was his wont in preparing breakfast for himself and the dog. It seemed as though he knew that sometime he would have to go down into the cellar but wanted to postpone it as long as he could. In fact, he finally put on his coat and beaver hat and mittens and walked outdoors before he went to the basement. Followed by the dog, who seemed happy for the first time in hours, he walked out on the frozen ground and made a circle around the building he called his home. Without knowing it, he was trying to get away from the noise, to go somewhere he could walk without feeling that peculiar tingling.

Finally he went into the mill and started down the steps to the cellar. The dog hesitated on the top step, went down two steps and then jumped back to the top step, where he started to whine. Staples went steadily down the steps, but the dog's behavior did not add to his peace of mind. The noise was much louder than it was the day before, and he did not need a cane to detect the vibration — the whole building was shaking. He sat down on the third step from the bottom and thought the problem over before he ventured out on the floor. He was especially interested in an empty barrel which was dancing around the middle of the floor.

The power of the mill wheel was transferred through a simple series of shafts, cogs, and leather belting to the grinding elements

on the first floor. All this machinery for transmitting power was in the basement. The actual grinding had been done on the first floor. The weight of all this machinery, as well as of the heavy millstones on the first floor, was carried entirely by the flooring of the basement. The ceiling of the first floor was built on long pine beams which stretched across the entire building and were sunk into the stone walls at either side.

Staples started to walk around on the slate flagstones when he observed something that made him decide to stay on the steps. The floor was beginning to sink in the middle; not much, but enough to cause some of the shafts to separate from the ceiling. The ceiling seemed to sag. He saw that light objects like the empty barrel were congregating at the middle of the cellar. There was not much light but he was easily able to see that the floor was no longer level; that it was becoming saucer-shaped. The grinding noise grew louder. The steps he sat on were of solid masonry, stoutly connected with and a part of the wall. These shared in the general vibration. The whole building began to sing like a cello.

One day he had been to the city and heard an orchestra play. He had been interested in the large violins, especially the one that was so large the player had to stay on his feet to play it. The feeling of the stone step under him reminded him of the notes of this violin the few times it had been played by itself. He sat there. Suddenly he started, realizing that in a few

more minutes he would be asleep. He was not frightened but in some dim way he knew that he must not go to sleep — not here. Whistling, he ran up the steps to get his electric torch. With that in his hand, he went back to the steps. Aided by the steady light, he saw that several large cracks had appeared in the floor and that some of the stones, broken loose from their fellows, were moving slowly in a drunken, meaningless way. He looked at his watch. It was only a little after nine.

And then the noise stopped.

No more noise! No more vibration! Just a broken floor and every bit of the machinery of the mill disabled and twisted. In the middle of the floor was a hole where one of the pavement stones had dropped through. Staples carefully walked across and threw the light down this hole. Then he lay down and carefully put himself in such a position that he could look down the hole. He began to sweat. There did not seem to be any bottom!

Back on the solid steps he tried to give that hole its proper value. He could not understand it, but he did not need the whining of the dog to tell him what to do. That hole must be closed as soon as possible.

Like a flash the method of doing so came to him. On the floor above he had cement. There were hundreds of grain sacks. Water was plentiful in the millrace. All that day he worked, carefully closing the hole with a great stopper of bags and wire. Then he placed timbers above and finally

covered it all with cement, rich cement. Night came and he still worked. Morning came and still he staggered down the steps, each time with a bag of crushed stone or cement on his shoulder, or with two buckets of water in his hands. At noon the next day the floor was no longer concave but convex. On top of the hole were four feet of timbers, bags and concrete. Then and only then did he go and make some coffee. He drank it, cup after cup, and slept.

The dog stayed on the bed at his feet.

When the man woke, the sun was streaming in through the windows. It was a new day. Though the fire had long since died out, the room was warm. Such days in Vermont were called weather breeders. Staples listened. There was no sound except the ticking of his clock. Not realizing what he was doing, he knelt by the bed, thanked God for His mercies, jumped into bed again and slept for another twenty-four hours. This time he awoke and listened. There was no noise. He was sure that by this time the cement had hardened. This morning he stayed awake and shared a Gargantuan meal with the dog. Then it seemed the proper thing to go to the basement. There was no doubt that the machinery was a wreck but the hole was closed. Satisfied that the trouble was over, he took his gun and dog and went hunting.

When he returned, he did not have to enter the mill to know that the grinding had begun again. Even before he started down the

steps, he recognized too well the vibration and the sound. This time it was a melody of notes, a harmony of discords, and he realized that the thing, which before had cut through solid rock, was now wearing its way through a cement in which were bags, timbers and pieces of iron. Each of these gave a different tone. Together they all wailed over their dissolution.

Staples saw, even with first glance, that it would not be long before his cement "cork" would be destroyed. What was there to do next? All that day when hunting, his mind had been dimly working on that problem. Now he had the answer. He could not cork the hole, so he would fill it with water. The walls of the mill were solid, but he could blast a hole through them and turn the millrace into the cellar. The race, fed by the river, took only a part of what it could take, if its level were rapidly lowered. Whatever it was that was breaking down the floor of the mill could be drowned. If it were alive, it could be killed. If it were fire, it could be quenched. There was no use to wait until the hole was again opened. The best plan was to have everything ready. He went back to his kitchen and cooked a meal of ham and eggs. He ate all he could. He boiled a pot of coffee. Then he started to work. The wall reached three feet down below the surface. A charge of powder, heavy enough to break through, would wreck the whole building, so he began to peck at the wall, like a bird pecking at a nut. First a

period of drilling and then a little powder and a muffled explosion. A few buckets of loosened rock. Then some more drilling and another explosion. At last he knew that only a few inches of rock lay between the water and the cellar.

All this time there had been a symphony of noises, a disharmony of sounds. The constant grinding came from the floor, interrupted by the sound of sledge or crowbar, dull explosion of powder, and crashing of rock fragments on the floor. Staples worked without stop save to drink coffee. The dog stood on the upper steps.

Then without warning the whole floor caved in. Staples jumped to the steps. These held. On the first day there had been a hole a few feet wide. Now the opening occupied nearly the entire area of the floor. Staples, nauseated, looked down to the bottom. About twenty feet below him, a mass of rocks and timbers churned in a peculiar way, but all gradually disappeared in a second hole, fifteen feet wide. Even as he looked they all disappeared in this median hole.

The opening he had been breaking in the wall was directly across from the steps. There was a charge of powder there but no way of going across to light the fuse. Still there was no time to lose and he had to think fast. Running to the floor above he picked up his rifle and went to the bottom of the steps. He was able to throw the beam from his searchlight directly into the hole in the wall.

Then he shot — once — twice, and the third time the explosion told him he had succeeded.

The water started to run into the cellar. Not fast at first but more rapidly as the mud and weeds were cleared out. Finally an eight-inch stream flowed steadily into the bottomless hole. Staples sat on the bottom steps. Soon he had the satisfaction of seeing the water fill the larger hole and then cover the floor, what there was left of it. In another hour he had to leave the lower steps. He went out to the millrace and saw that there was still enough water to fill a hundred such holes. A deep sense of satisfaction filled his weary mind.

And again, after eating, he sought sleep.

When he awoke, he heard the rain angrily tapping at the windows with multi-fingers. The dog was on the woven rug by the side of the bed. He was still restless and seemed pleased to have his master awake. Staples dressed more warmly than usual and spent an extra half hour making pancakes to eat with honey. Sausages and coffee helped assuage his hunger. Then with rubber boots and a heavy raincoat, he went out into the valley. The very first thing that he noticed was the millrace. It was practically empty. The little stream of water at the bottom was pouring into the hole he had blasted into the stone wall hours before. The race had contained eight feet of water. Now barely six inches remained, and the dread came to the man that the hole in the cellar was not only

emptying the race but was also draining the little river that for thousands of years had flowed through the valley. It had never gone dry. He hastened over to the dam and his worst fears were realized. Instead of a river, there was simply a streak of mud with cakes of dirty ice, all being washed by the torrent of rain. With relief he thought of this rain. Millions of tons of snow would melt and fill the river. Ultimately the hole would fill and the water would rise again in the millrace. Still he was uneasy. What if the hole had no bottom?

When he looked into the basement he was little reassured. The water was still going down, though slowly. It was rising in the basement, and this meant that it was now running in faster than it was running down.

Leaving his coat and boots on the first floor, he ran up the stone steps to the second floor, built a fire in the living room and started to smoke — and think. The machinery of the mill was in ruins; of course it could be fixed, but as there was no more need of it, the best thing was to leave it alone. He had gold saved by his ancestors. He did not know how much, but he could live on it. Restlessly he reviewed the past week, and, unable to rest, hunted for occupation. The idea of the gold stayed in his mind and the final result was that he again put on his boots and coat and carried the entire treasure to a little dry cave in the woods about a half mile from the mill. Then he came back and started to cook his dinner. He

went past the cellar door three times without looking down.

Just as he and the dog had finished eating, he heard a noise. It was a different one this time, more like a saw going through wood, but the rhythm was the same — Hrrrr — Hrrrrr. He started to go to the cellar but this time he took his rifle, and though the dog followed, he howled dismally with his tail between his legs, shivering.

As soon as Staples reached the first floor, he felt the vibration. Not only could he feel the vibration, he could see it. It seemed that the center of the floor was being pushed up. Flashlight in hand, he opened the cellar door. There was no water there now — in fact there was no cellar left! In front of him was a black wall on which the light played in undulating waves. It was a wall and it was moving. He touched it with the end of his rifle. It was hard and yet there was a give to it. Feeling the rock, he could feel it move. Was it alive? Could there be a living rock? He could not see around it but he felt that the bulk of the Thing filled the entire cellar and was pressing against the ceiling. That was it! The Thing was boring through the first floor. It had destroyed and filled the cellar! It had swallowed the river! Now it was working at the first floor. If this continued, the mill was doomed. Staples knew that it was a Thing alive, and *he had to stop it!*

He was thankful that all of the steps in the mill were of stone, fastened and built into the wall. Even though the floor did fall in, he could still go to the upper rooms.

He realized that from now on the fight had to be waged from the top floors. Going up the steps, he saw that a small hole had been cut through the oak flooring. Even as he watched, this grew larger. Trying to remain calm, realizing that only by doing so could he retain his sanity, he sat down in a chair and timed the rate of enlargement. But there was no need of using a watch: the hole grew larger — and larger and larger — and now he began to see the dark hole which had sucked the river dry. Now it was three feet in diameter — now four feet — now six. It was working smoothly now — it was not only grinding — *but it was eating.*

Staples began to laugh. He wanted to see what it would do when the big stone grinders slipped silently down into that maw. That would be a rare sight. All well enough to swallow a few pavement stones, but when it came to a twenty-ton grinder, that would be a different kind of a pill. "I hope you choke!" he cried. "Damn you! whatever you are! I hope you choke!" The walls hurled back the echo of his shouts and frightened him into silence. Then the floor began to tilt and the chairs to slide toward the opening. Staples sprang toward the steps.

"Not yet!" he shrieked. "Not today, Elenora! Some other day, but not today!" And then from the safety of the steps, he witnessed the final destruction of the floor and all in it. The stones slipped down, the partitions, the beams, and then, as though satisfied with

the work and the food, the Thing dropped down, down, down and left Staples dizzy on the steps looking into a hole, dark, deep, coldly bottomless surrounded by the walls of the mill, and below them a circular hole cut out of the solid rock. On one side a little stream of water, a tiny waterfall, came through the blasted wall and fell below. Staples could not hear it splash at the bottom.

Nauseated and vomiting, he crept up the steps to the second floor, where the howling dog was waiting for him. On the floor he lay, sweating and shivering in dumb misery. It took hours for him to change from a frightened animal to a celebrating god, but ultimately he accomplished even this, cooked some more food, warmed himself and slept.

And while he dreamed, the dog kept sleepless watch at his feet. He awoke the next morning. It was still raining, and Staples knew that the snow was melting on the hills and soon would change the little valley river into a torrent. He wondered whether it was all a dream, but one look at the dog showed him the reality of the last week. He went to the second floor again and cooked breakfast. After he had eaten, he slowly went down the steps. That is, he started to go, but halted at the sight of the hole. The steps had held and ended on a wide stone platform. From there another flight of steps went down to what had once been the cellar. Those two flights of steps clinging to the walls had the solid stone mill on one side, but on the inside they

faced a chasm, circular in outline and seemingly bottomless; but the man knew there was a bottom and from that pit the Thing had come — and would come again.

That was the horror of it! He was so certain that it would come again. Unless he was able to stop it. How could he? Could he destroy a Thing that was able to bore a thirty-foot hole through solid rock, swallow a river and digest grinding stones like so many pills? One thing he was sure of — he could accomplish nothing without knowing more about it. To know more, he had to watch. He determined to cut a hole through the floor. Then he could see the Thing when it came up. He cursed himself for his confidence, but he was sure it would come.

It did. He was on the floor looking into the hole he had sawed through the plank, and he saw it come: but first he heard it. It was a sound full of slithering slidings, wrathful rasping of rock against rock — but, no! That could not be, for this Thing was alive. Could this be rock and move and grind and eat and drink? Then he saw it come into the cellar and finally to the level of the first floor, and then he saw its head and face.

The face looked at the man, and Staples was glad that the hole in the floor was as small as it was. There was a central mouth filling half the space; fully fifteen feet in diameter was that mouth, and the sides were ashen gray and quivering. There were no teeth.

That increased the horror: a mouth without teeth, without any

visible means of mastication, and yet Staples shivered as he thought of what had gone into that mouth, down into that mouth, deep into the recesses of that mouth and disappeared. The circular lip seemed made of scales of steel, and they were washed clean with water from the race.

On either side of the gigantic mouth was an eye, lidless, browless, pitiless. They were slightly withdrawn into the head so the Thing could bore into rock without injuring them. Staples tried to estimate their size: all he could do was to avoid their baleful gaze. Then even as he watched the mouth closed and the head began a semicircular movement, so many degrees to the right, so many degrees to the left and up — and up — and finally the top touched the bottom of the plank Staples was on then Hrrrrrr — Hrrrrrrrr, and the man knew that it was starting upon the destruction of the second floor. He could not see now as he had been able to see before, but he had an idea that after grinding a while the Thing opened its mouth and swallowed the debris. He looked around the room. Here was where he did his cooking and washing, and here was his winter supply of stove wood. A thought came to him.

Working frantically, he pushed the center burner to the middle of the room right over the hole he had cut in the floor. Then he built a fire in it, starting it with a liberal supply of coal oil. He soon had the stove red hot. Opening the door he again filled the stove with oak and then ran for the steps. He was

just in time. The floor, cut through, disappeared into the Thing's maw and with it the red-hot stove. Staples yelled in his glee, "A hot pill for you this time, a hot pill!"

If the pill did anything, it simply increased the desire of the Thing to destroy, for it kept on till it had bored a hole in this floor equal in size to the holes in the floors below it. Staples saw his food, his furniture, the ancestral relics disappear into the same opening that had consumed the machinery and mill supplies.

On the upper floor the dog howled.

The man slowly went up to the top floor, and joined the dog, who had ceased to howl and had begun a low whine. There was a stove on this floor, but there was no food. That did not make any difference to Staples: for some reason he was not hungry any more: it did not seem to make any difference — nothing seemed to matter or make any difference any more. Still he had his gun and over fifty cartridges, and he knew that at the last, even a Thing like that would react to bullets in its eyeballs — he just knew that nothing could withstand that.

He lit the lamp and paced the floor in a cold, careless mood. One thing he had determined. He said it over and over to himself.

"This is my home. It has been the home of my family for two hundred years. No devil or beast or worm can make me leave it."

He said it again and again. He felt that if he said it often enough, he would believe it, and if he could

only believe it, he might make the Worm believe it. He knew now that it was a Worm, just like the night crawlers he had used so often for bait, only much larger. Yes, that was it. A worm like a night crawler, only much larger, in fact, very much larger. That made him laugh — to think how much larger this Worm was than the ones he had used for fishing. All through the night he walked the floor and burned the lamp and said, "This is my home. No Worm can make me leave it!" Several times he went down the steps, just a few of them, and shouted the message into the pit as though he wanted the Worm to hear and understand, "This is my home! No Worm can make me leave it!"

Morning came. He mounted the ladder that led to the trap door in the roof and opened it. The rain beat in. Still that might be a place of refuge. Crying, he took his Burton and his Rabelais and wrapped them in his raincoat and put them out on the roof, under a box. He took the small pictures of his father and mother and put them with the books. Then in loving kindness he carried the dog up and wrapped him in a woolen blanket. He sat down and waited, and as he did so he recited poetry — anything that came to him, all mixed up, "Come into the garden where there was a man who was so wondrous wise, he jumped into a bramble bush and you're a better man than I am and no one will work for money and the King of Love my Shepherd is" — and on — and then —

He heard the sliding and the

slithering rasping, and he knew that the Worm had come again. He waited till the Hrrrrr — Hrrrrr told that the wooden floor he was on was being attacked, and then he went up the ladder. It was his idea to wait till the Thing had made a large opening, large enough so the eyes could be seen, and then use the fifty bullets — where they would do the most good. So, on the roof, beside the dog, he waited.

He did not have to wait long. First appeared a little hole and then it grew wider and wider till finally the entire floor and the furniture had dropped into the mouth, and the whole opening, thirty feet wide and more than that, was filled with the head, the closed mouth of which came within a few feet of the roof. By the aid of the light from the trap door, Staples could see the eye on the left side. It made a beautiful bull's eye, a magnificent target for his rifle and he was only a few feet away. He could not miss. Determined to make the most of his last chance to drive his enemy away, he decided to drop down on the creature, walk over to the eye and put the end of the rifle against the eye before he fired. If the first shot worked well, he could retire to the roof and use the other cartridges. He knew that there was some danger — but it was his last hope. After all he knew that when it came to brains he was a man, and this Thing was only a Worm. He walked over the head. Surely no sensation could go through such massive scales. He even jumped up and down. Meantime the eye

kept looking up at the roof. If it saw the man, it made no signs, gave no evidence. Staples pretended to pull the trigger and then made a running jump for the trap door. It was easy. He did it again, and again. Then he sat on the edge of the door and thought.

He suddenly saw what it all meant. Two hundred years before, his ancestors had started grinding at the mill. For over a hundred and fifty years the mill had been run continuously, often day and night. The vibrations had been transmitted downward through the solid rock. Hundreds of feet below the Worm had heard them and felt them and thought it was another Worm. It had started to bore in the direction of the noise. It had taken two hundred years to do it, but it had finished the task, it had found the place where its mate should be. For two hundred years it had slowly worked its way through the primitive rock. Why should it worry over a mill and things within it? Staples saw then that the mill had been but a slight incident in its life. It was probable that it had not even known it was there — the water, the gristmill stones, the red-hot stove, had meant nothing — they had been taken as a part of the day's work. There was only one thing that the Worm was really interested in, only one idea that had reached its consciousness and remained there through two centuries, and that was to find its mate. The eye looked upward.

Staples, at the end, lost courage and decided to fire from a sitting position in the trap door.


Taking careful aim, he pulled the trigger. Then he looked carefully to see what damage had resulted. There was none. Either the bullet had gone into the eye and the opening had closed or else it had glanced off. He fired again and again.

Then the mouth opened —

wide — wider — until there was nothing under Staples save a yawning void of darkness.

The Worm belched a cloud of black, nauseating vapor. The man, enveloped in the cloud, lost consciousness and fell.

The Mouth closed on him.

On the roof the dog howled. 



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