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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# They

By ROBERT BARBOUR JOHNSON

*What inexplicable horror waited on the stone slab in  
Dead Man's Canyon?*

"WOULDN'T be stayin' in this here canyon if I was you, Mister," the old man said.

I looked at him curiously. His face was strange.

"Why not?" I asked. "Is there danger?"

The old man spat over his beard.

"Some'd say so," he said.

"But danger of what?" I pressed him. "I didn't know you had wild animals in these parts."

The old man sighed. "'Pends on what you'd call animals," he said softly. "B'ars now, an' catamounts—why, they're all gone long ago. Clem Hawkes he shot the last deer more'n twenty years back. But nobody ain't never shot what's in this here canyon, Mister. I don't reckon nobody ever tried."

Best humor him, I mused. I'd heard that lunatics were violent if you crossed them.

"Aren't you afraid to stay here, then?" I suggested.

The old man grimaced at his long shadow on the grass. "The sun's still up, Mister," he said. "'Long as it's light, there's no safer place in these mountains than Dead Man's Canyon. It's only after dark that They come out. Some say the sun hurts Their eyes. But I say it's Holy Writ that they only got power in the night. 'The pestilence that walketh in darkness,' Mister. That's what the Writ says. And anyhow, They don't never come out. That's why no one knows what They look like."

I lit a cigarette. The trembling of my hands annoyed me. Altitude, of course! I wasn't being taken in by this old nut with his wild story. . . .

"If you don't know what these things look like," I sought to reason with him, "how do you know they're here?"

The old man spat. "How do I know the moon's over beyond them hills?" his voice intoned. "I can't see it, can I? But I know it's there. It'll come up when the sun goes down. And They'll come out. They'll come out like they done the night Roy Timmons got lost here. We found Roy in the morning, what there was left of him. Over on that slab yonder."

I looked at the slab. It was huge and dark, with a vague suggestion of having been quarried. An altar, that was what it looked like: some sort of prehistoric stone altar, set against the background of the towering trees and the slope.

"Then there was little Sue," the old man went on. "We never dared let Sue's mother know what shape we found her in. We buried her over there under the trees. Told everybody we hadn't located her. Her mother's still believin' that the kid will come back home. Sometimes, to see her settin' there and hopin'—why, it'd jest break your heart, Mister. But she mustn't ever know."

I looked apprehensively at the sun. It was very near the horizon. Six o'clock it must be, I decided—or perhaps nearer seven. But the month was July; the days would be very long.

"Oh, They're in here all right," the

old man droned on. "Why, we've seen their footprints lots of times. The funniest footprints—like a little baby's. And Mike Collins (him that has that farm over there on the hill), he's heard Them hollerin' and carryin' on in the night, and seen lights flicker around that slab until dawn sometimes. He had a couple of big dogs, an' he sicked 'em into the canyon to see if they'd catch anything. But the dogs never come back an' Mike never found no trace of neither one." His voice trailed off.

"Gettin' along toward sundown, Mister," he began again after a pause. "Don't you reckon you'd better be headin' toward town?"

"But you?" I pressed him. I'd some vague idea of getting him to an alienist. "You can't stay here alone. You'd better come with me. We'll be safer together, you know."

The old man chuckled sadly. "Don't do no worryin' about me, Mister," he said. "I'm nearly always here. Come sundown, of course, I'll head fer the road down yonder. I got to wait until the last minute, though. Mebbe you ain't the only feller that'll come through here."

I said, "You mean you stay here every day to warn people off? You're a sort of sentinel?"

The old man nodded. "Me and old Sam Timmons changes off," he told me. "Sam was Roy Timmons' dad. At first we tried puttin' up signs. But They took 'em down. Mebbe They can't read our writin', Mister, but They musta known somehow what them signs said. So now we jest stay here ourselves. They can't do us no harm, 'cept sometimes they chuck a few rocks long about sundown——"

He broke off. A stone whanged into a tree, grazed off and fell into a bush. I looked about for the thrower, but there was nothing inside except the green wall of underbrush.

"See that, Mister?" the old man chuckled. "That means They're mad!" He raised his gun and fired both barrels in the air. Strange echoes awoke in the still air.

"That'll stop 'em," he said proudly. "They don't like guns and shootin'. It scares 'em. 'Course, they're extra bold now, 'cause it's gettin' along toward the time of the full moon. Then they'll come out to dance around the old slab, and you'll see the lights flickerin' and hear 'em holler until near dawn. . . . But, Mister, you better be gittin' out of here while there's time. Don't worry none about the old man. Some of th' boys from town alluz come to fetch me if I don't show up right on time."

I LEFT him reloading his gun. He was staring into the deepening shadows on the canyon wall, and his face was drawn and pale.

"If only I could git one good shot at Them!" I heard him mutter.

The journey was longer than I had thought it. The pathway was steep and ill-defined; the underbrush caught at my boots. I hurried along as fast as I dared. My imagination was busy with every rustle and crackle of breaking twigs. As the shadows lengthened, I became sure that something followed me unseen. . . .

I was running, and panting for breath, as I came out onto the welcome asphalt of the road that led to town. I rested there for a moment before going on, thankful for the glare of lights and the familiar sound of rushing motors. As I did so, one of the cars drew abreast of me and halted.

"See anything of an old feller with a gun?" its driver queried.

I made out three other men in the vehicle.

"Yes," I said slowly. "I did."

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## They

*(Continued from page 116)*

"Back there in the canyon, I'll bet," the driver said. "That's where we pick him up every night, nearly. Did he warn you about—about anything, Mister?"

"He did," I admitted.

"That's old Collins' weakness," the driver nodded. "I reckon it's only natural, seein' as his granddaughter got killed there only last year. Reckon he got to puttin' two an' two together with old Timmons and they figgered out this 'They' business. They're both harmless enough, though—long as we let 'em guard that there canyon."

"Then—there's nothing dangerous in there?" I asked slowly.

"Dangerous? Why, Mister, what could

there be? This here's a civilized country, ain't it?" The driver slid his car into gear. "Well, good night, sir. We'll go git the old feller now. Good night!"

IT WASN'T until some time later that I began to wonder why every man in that car should have been carrying a rifle; or why their faces were white and set, as the old man's face had been.

Then one day I read in a newspaper about a certain Samuel B. Timmons, age 87, who had been crushed by a falling boulder and unrecognizably mangled. It was an accident, of course—so the paper said. . . .

Dead Man's Canyon is still there, if anyone cares to make a further investigation. For my part . . .