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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Contents for April, 1929

- Cover Design** **Hugh Rankin**
Illustrating a scene in "The Devil's Rosary"
- Neptune's Neighbors** **Cristel Hastings** 436
Verse
- The Devil's Rosary** **Seabury Quinn** 437
Tibetan devil-worshipers play a thrilling part in this very tale of the French occultist, Jules de Grandin
- The World-Wrecker (Part 1)** **Arlton Eadie** 455
A stirring three-part weird-scientific serial about a scientist who pulled the world from its position in the solar system
- In a Dead Man's Shoes** **Harold Markham** 465
A story of Tyburn gallows and vengeance from beyond the grave—disaster seized the man who betrayed his friend
- Folks Used to Believe:**
The Unicorn **Alvin F. Harlow** 472
One of the strange beliefs of our ancestors

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

The Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain	Thomas de V. Harper	473
<i>A strange tale of anthropomorphism, and the fate that befell the man who investigated the hermit and his dogs</i>		
A Dinner at Imola	August W. Derleth	478
<i>Abandoning poison for once, Caesar Borgia took an unusual way to rid himself of an enemy</i>		
The Dunwich Horror	H. P. Lovecraft	481
<i>A colossal story of eerie happenings in a drab New England settlement—a tale of blood-chilling horror</i>		
The City of Iron Cubes (Conclusion)	H. F. Arnold	509
<i>A two-part weird-scientific story by the author of "The Night Wire"—strange invaders from space land in Peru</i>		
Up Irriwaddy Way	Lieutenant Edgar Gardiner	519
<i>A story of man-eating plants and giant fungus growths that attack human beings</i>		
The Goddess of the Painted Priests	Drury D. Sharp	532
<i>Down into the nest of venomous snakes and sparkling jewels she went, to the amazement of the Indian priests</i>		
Sonnet	Clark Ashton Smith	442
<i>Verse</i>		
The Damsel and Her Cat	David H. Keller	543
<i>The high-born maiden lay in a deathlike swoon, but outside the castle terrible things were happening</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Diamond Lens	Fitz-James O'Brien	547
<i>This was the first of the great weird-scientific stories, and it made its author famous</i>		
Moon Mockery	Robert E. Howard	562
<i>Verse</i>		
The Eyrie		563
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		

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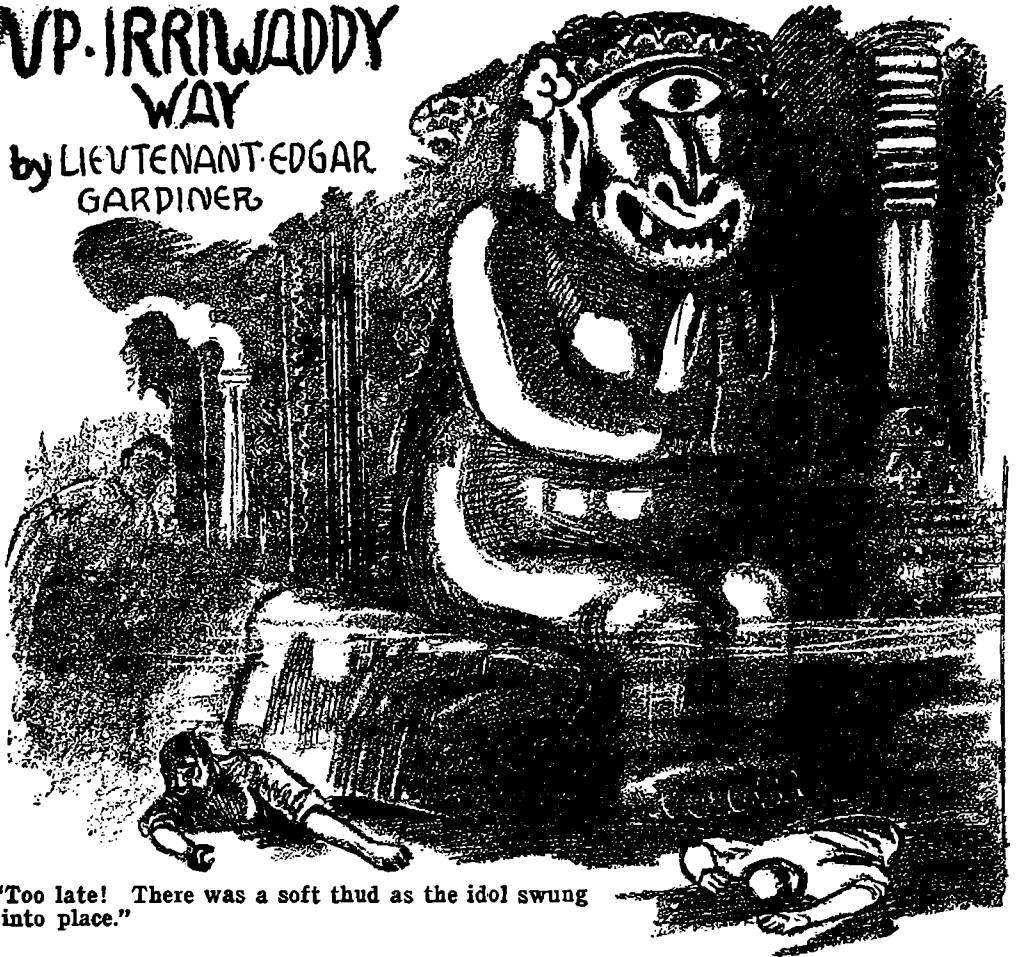
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UP-IRRAWADDY WAY

by LIEUTENANT EDGAR
GARDINER



"Too late! There was a soft thud as the idol swung into place."

IT HAD all been a tremendous mistake. From the time we had left Singapore on what was to prove such a terrible chase, I had felt that it was a colossal blunder. But the others had overruled my half-hearted protests, inflamed as they were by money madness and treasure lust. But one thing could they think of—that tremendous heap of rubies, of wealth incalculable, the secret of whose whereabouts was at last in their hands.

What did it matter to them that this was the treasure-house of a god? They didn't believe in heathen gods—not they! Nor in the supernatural. Trickery—that's what it was, nothing else, and this talk of a god of

destruction whose very name the natives feared to utter was rot; while the tales about the many who had gone to seek this hidden loot never to return—that was nothing but ignorant superstition—native fancy with no basis in fact. Stuff and nonsense!

What did it matter that as far as they knew its devious trail, their information had come a blood-spattered deadly way? That but gave added proof of its genuineness. Men have ever killed for far less than this dazzling pile—history was full of such cases; and it would be so again.

They were positive of the truth and reliability of their map with its ugly brown stains. They were just

as sure of the information that had been gasped out by that native priest as his life slowly welled from his body, so terribly mutilated by native vengeance just when he had almost won clear away. And that information had fired them with a madness there was no staying, even while it chilled me with grim foreboding. Perhaps I had been in the Orient too long, had seen too much that could not be explained away; perhaps too much sun and raw native liquor.

I was overruled, browbeaten, bulldogged, until I gave in against my better judgment.

The trip up-river had been—well, not exactly a pleasure, but then, not so bad, either. I had done worse many times. Things had gone smoothly—too smoothly, I could see now. We had been led on like rats into a trap.

Step by step we had followed the trail as shown on that gruesome map, and as each item proved correct the hopes of my comrades had risen the higher while, oddly enough, my own spirits had sunk the lower; for I was scared—I, who had shot my way out of some mighty tight places and through some pretty rash adventures—I, who was never so cool as when the odds looked hopeless—here I shivered with dread while things went so smoothly—too smoothly.

We had cut our way through the jungle after leaving the last outpost of civilization, so called, the six of us: white men all; as brave and fearless a crew as you ever saw—and as unprincipled. We had come upon the ruined temple, almost swallowed up by the ever-encroaching jungle, with little or no trouble. It lay just where the map had indicated. And while the rest had jubilated over the easy conquest, I had known nothing but sick dread, a vague terror that was none the less real, oppressive, impending.

Our campfire gleaming redly over the ruined moldering idols ranged

round that great room, and on the red-lacquered beams above, seemed to me oddly symbolic. That greatest stone monstrosity of all, seated above us in its niche, seemed a live and sentient thing. It leered at me through the flickering shadows, its one eye following me wherever I moved until I was almost mad.

I begged and pleaded with my comrades to get out while there was yet time, but they only jeered and shouted ribald comments. Forego the loot they had come so far to get? With success just around the corner? Never! To my entreaties that we push on then at once, rifle the cache and go while the night was with us, they turned a deaf ear. Tomorrow was time enough, they argued. No hurry now. It was much the best to wait until daylight before descending below ground in this venerable relic.

At last we lay down, the six of us, and their snores soon proclaimed the others asleep, but the longer I lay the more wide awake I became. Restlessly I tossed and tumbled; then in desperation I got up and crouched above the dying embers. Malevolently that evil image glared down upon us. So sinister it was that I shuddered. When I could stand it no longer I picked up a brand, swung it vigorously overhead until it blazed, and with this torch I clambered into the niche.

What I intended to do up there, I had not the remotest idea: perhaps there was a wild desire to hurl that stone image into the dust—I don't know. What I did instead, was to thrust the blazing brand into the corners and crannies, seeking everywhere for I know not what.

Across the face of the idol I swung the smoking flames, illuminating every hollow above, but saw nothing save the dust of centuries, patched and discolored by the mold of tropic damp. Then, my sanity returning in some measure, with a muttered curse

I turned and was about to throw the brand back to the hard-packed earthen floor, but instead, thought better of it and thrust the torch, with a sardonic humor, into the figure's clasped hands, into a hollow made for the burning of incense.

There! Let him sit once more as he had sat in the heyday of his popularity, with the smoke curling about his Satanic features. But now no devout throng of worshipers groveled on the ground before him. Instead lay five hard-bitten adventurers sleeping the sleep of the just until the morrow, when they would wrest from him his treasures, gathered through the centuries and left behind when his might had declined into obscurity.

A BLOOD-CURDLING scream broke through my musings. One of those five figures raised with a convulsive start and fell back writhing in agony, while the others came to frenzied life with a bound and gathered about him. I came tumbling from the niche in a hurry.

"Wot's th' matter, hi sye?" growled Jeremy Sykes, while the others babbled in excitement not unmixed with fear. The sufferer, however, was beyond answering. A bloody froth flocked his lips, drawn back from his teeth in an animal-like snarl; his limbs threshed wildly as those horrible agonizing tremors passed over him; his face turned a mottled, livid hue.

One glance I took and knew the worst. Of all venomous snakes—and they are myriad in that land—the smallest of them all is the most deadly. Scarce six inches long and red as hell-fire, his bite is the agony of centuries of the pit compressed into a short half-hour: agony so great that sufferers have been known to choose the merciful quickness of the steel in preference, though too often they had no such chance, but bent and writhed in tortures unutterable

until the slow, dreadful end came. And, stop! did not the natives give him the same name as this fearsome image above us?

But Jack's paroxysms were growing more violent and his entire body was turning an ugly mottled purple. His eyeballs seemed straining from their sockets and his back bowed as if it must break, while from his lips burst the noise of a soul in torment unutterable. The cold sweat of horror stood damply on my brow and I was sick within.

Another unearthly scream, broken short by a harsh grunted oath as Jeremy Sykes dropped beside him: a flash of steel shone redly up, then down in a shining arc and cheated that dreadful grinning monster behind us of his last full measure of payment.

"God!" breathed Bill Callaghan, passing a shaking hand before his eyes while he drew a shuddering breath. "What hit him?"

I pointed at that grinning image above.

"Hell's bells!" growled Jeremy Sykes. "Nowthin' of the sort. Snake-bite. A little red devil. No cure for it; but an hour or so of what you saw Jack going through. Often enow I've seen it, and twice it was Gord's mercy to pass th' steel between the ribs to end it. Ugh!" And he turned unsteadily away while the others looked at me.

"It's the truth," I affirmed. "Steel is quick and merciful and no less sure. I'd thank anyone for that choice if it ever came to me. Jeremy did the best possible thing."

There was no more sleep for us that night. We sat instead about another blaze which we had built at the other end of the room, furtively eyeing every moving shadow and studiously avoiding the dreadful figure that lay in the half-gloom staring sightlessly up into the niche.

One gone, I ruminated. One. So soon and so terribly. Who would be

next? For that more would follow him I was sure. Deep within me I felt that as surely as I knew that I was still alive. And those deaths, I felt, would be just as terrible as this first one, whatever form they might take.

The others laughed at my forebodings. It was an accident, such as might occur to anyone, anywhere. These old ruins, they pointed out, were overrun with vermin. This land saw frequent violent deaths in strange guises. Why, one in every ten died from the bite of poisonous snakes! I was an old granny, a superstitious fool.

THE quick dawn put an end to our arguing, and as the details stood out more and more plainly in the grayness of that dim interior, the night seemed more and more like a fantastic dream—except for that horrible thing that lay, putrescent already, offensive and swelling, at the far end of the idol room. With the light came the first bit of the day's humid heat and in contrast our trip underground promised relief. We got out the map again and studied it carefully. Above all things we must not get lost in the labyrinth beneath us. How extensive it was we could not tell, nor did we want to know, save as it led us to the treasure we all felt was there.

"Le'see: we go down back of that big idol," said Peter Drew, his stubby forefinger on the map. "We must. They's no other place in this room that fits the plan," he argued as we objected.

"There's no opening there," I protested. "I was up there when—when—"

"Yeah, I know. But it was dark then. You couldn't see nothin'. The mouth of that underground passage just must be there."

To settle the argument I led the way into the niche, and after looking and prodding everywhere, they

agreed with me that save for a little grille leading upward toward a dim light no other opening existed.

"Damme, it must be here," Peter insisted.

"Where?" I began. "We have tried everywhere."

"Maybe in the ceiling," he began, and jumped up on the idol's spacious lap to investigate.

"Oh, nonsense!" I began.

"Hey, look out!" shouted Jeremy as the huge stone idol tilted slowly forward.

Peter dropped off to one side, cat-like, on all fours, and the idol swung slowly back again.

"You've found it," I shouted in triumph.

"Found what, you fool?" growled Jeremy.

"The opening of the labyrinth. It's under the idol, of course. That big stone god tilts on a balance, and under it is the mouth of the treasure-house. I saw the steps leading down."

"Aw, what bally rot!" from Jeremy again.

"Not at all. It had to be hidden, you know. What better hiding-place than under several tons of stone?"

"But how——"

"You saw how it worked. A man's weight out on the knees of the idol opens the way——"

"And its own weight shuts it again, eh?"

"Certainly it does. One of us has to stay outside to work it while the rest go below. Or perhaps there is some way to move it from the inside. Here, Peter, open it again and I'll go down and try to find out."

Obediently Peter climbed up on his perch again, and slowly the idol tilted forward once more. Down, down, till Peter could stand upon the floor and hold his weight about the figure's neck, leaving a yawning hole through which we might easily enter.

Three times we tried the rocking stone to make sure it would work

without sticking before my companions let me go down gingerly into the darkness. I counted fourteen steps before I reached the bottom, and the matches I lit showed me the corridor sloping slightly downward before me. By their feeble flicker I saw something else—something that made me shout aloud.

“What is ut, Jock?” and Jeremy’s shaggy head was thrust into the patch of light that marked the entrance.

“Two skeletons, Jeremy,” I returned. “The poor devils must have come into this place and the idol closed behind them, shutting them in to a miserable death,” I called as I bent over them. “And wait——”

Into my voice crept such a note of excitement that all but Peter Drew came scrambling down to me. No doubt he, too, would have been there had it not meant the closing of that massive door.

By the flickering light of a candle or two that they had brought with them, my comrades saw the proof that the treasure we had come so far to find was still there.

How long those two had lain there could not be told: a hundred years perhaps, maybe three times that long—long enough to rot away almost every vestige of clothing. Yet one of those two had brought with him from those treasure rooms below indubitable proof that what we sought was still there. Tucked into his girdle perhaps, or in a purse long since gone to dust, he had brought a dozen or so of splendid rubies that now gleamed redly from about the pelvis bones where they had fallen. Each of them was worth a king’s ransom. No wonder we shouted and scrambled for the precious bits of living flame.

A hoarse shout broke on our ears—that was Peter Drew! It brought us up those steps in a panicky run, sent us scrambling into the idol room around the base of the idol that even

now was settling slowly into place. I felt its cold rough edge graze my shoulders as I scrambled out with Jeremy close behind me.

A muffled curse, and in my swift backward glance I saw that Jeremy had dropped one of his rubies. He swept it up again almost without pausing and was scrambling over the edge. But that momentary pause was fatal. The huge block of stone was swinging downward now at a terrific rate.

“Hurry, Jeremy,” I shouted, and grasped his shoulders to drag him from beneath that impending doom. Too late! There was a soft thud as the idol swung into place. A spasm crossed Jeremy’s face. I looked in dazed horror at the swift red spot that grew and grew from about his waist where he protruded from between the stones.

Where was Peter Drew, and why had he not held the stone god down away from the opening? I wondered even as I heard the sharp crack of Bill’s heavy revolver and something flashed past my shoulder in a vivid streak of light. My swift glance showed Bill lying flat on the floor of the niche as cool as though he were at tiffin, the while he pumped an occasional shot into the light-shot gloom of the big room beyond.

And Peter’s failure to keep the idol in place out of the opening was explained by the same glance, for I saw him lying on his face before that grim deity in an attitude of supplication, arms outspread. Poor Peter! His last act in this life! From his back protruded the handles of two of those terrible throwing-knives of which I had seen a few specimens down river.

Poor, poor Peter! *Semper Fidelis* was the motto tattooed upon his massive chest, and that he had been. Always faithful, yes, faithful unto death! With his last breath as his dying grip had loosened he had uttered the warning shout that had

enabled us all to escape from that death-trap.

All? No, not all. There was Jeremy Sykes pinned under that loathsome stone, still alive, still conscious, as I was surprised to discover.

Too well I knew what had happened when that stone settled into place with Jeremy only partly through the opening. How long can a man live when he is mashed into two pieces, I wondered? I had thought perhaps a few moments—surely not as many minutes. Yet Jeremy seemed almost normal in spite of that terrible thing, in spite of that gruesome spreading red flood about him.

"I'm done," he muttered thickly as he caught my eye. "Get these stones—to my wife—you know—address."

I nodded. "If I get out of this alive I'll do it, Jeremy," I promised. The filming eyes lit up joyfully.

"Thanks, old top," he whispered.

A deathly grayness was creeping over his features and consciousness was fast departing. Death was coming almost like sleep.

"Get down, you fool," shouted Bill as another streak flashed past me, and once more Bill's service revolver spoke. It was followed by a blood-curdling scream.

"Gutted him. That's two," Bill grunted in satisfaction. "I wish I knew how many more are out there," he added as I crawled up beside him.

"Mois?" I questioned.

"No. We're too far north for their range. Bandit looters from beyond the northern border most likely. Damme, I missed him," as he pumped another shot at a half-seen figure.

A sibilant hiss drew my attention to our rear. Fergus was there beckoning to me and I crawled swiftly backward.

"I think we can get out through here," he whispered, pointing at the

little grille to which I had paid such scant attention on our first inspection.

Fergus had thrust it partly aside and he now crawled through it into the gloom. I hesitated to follow into that dimly glowing opening that had swallowed him and now reflected the dim light as he crawled forward, lighting matches as he went, or a candle perhaps. Then the light faded out entirely for a few moments, reappeared once more, and then grew brighter as Fergus' head came into view, disheveled and dirty.

"It leads beyond the temple wall into a thicket," he grinned. "I don't think there is a soul about outside, either. They must all be in here. Tell Bill about it and we'll get going."

"And leave all our outfit?" I began.

"We get away with our lives, perhaps," he pointed out. "Our outfit isn't much good to us if we are all dead, is it?"

He crawled out to Bill's side and they conferred earnestly together for a moment. Then he was back again.

"Come on," he whispered. "Bill will hold them off for a few moments before he follows us."

As I edged around the idol again I bethought me of my promise to Jeremy and took from his stiffening dead hands the jewels that had cost him his life, slipping them into one of the pockets of my shorts.

How silent was the festering jungle, as we crawled out into the light once more! Behind us we heard the muffled reports of two shots, sullen and hollow, and a few moments later Bill rose beside us.

"Got another," he commented briefly. "Now let's get out of here."

We moved as silently and as swiftly as possible toward the river, but we had gone only a few hundred feet when we heard a yell of baffled rage.

"They rushed the niche and found us gone, I guess," said Bill as he in-

creased his pace. "And in mighty scant time those devils will be swarming after us. The trail is plain."

Five minutes passed—five long eternities while we made our way as swiftly and silently as might be toward where we hoped the river lay. Behind us the jungle lay quiet and empty.

"They must have missed us," whispered Fergus.

"Don't ever think it," I retorted. "Those fiends are on our trail, never fear. They're slipping along as silently as shadows and not far away right now. Perhaps they've even got ahead of us, some of them, trying to ring us in." I cast an apprehensive glance through the sun-splashed gloom. We stepped abruptly through a leafy tangle into a path or animal run.

"Thank God!" muttered Bill as he quickened his pace. Fergus and I followed closely on his heels. "We might get away now," he continued.

"If it's an animal trail, yes," I began. "If this leads to a village, no. For it might be that the villagers are the ones who attacked us."

"Speed is what counts now," snapped Fergus, "not talk," and he pushed past Bill.

"Something else counts most of all—something that neither of you has got," I growled as I jerked Fergus back and took the lead myself.

As swiftly as possible I moved forward, yet cautiously, too. Our attackers might be ahead of us and it would be an ideal trick to ambush us, slipping the steel into our defenseless bodies as we brushed past some leafy covert. Not a pleasant thought, that.

Yet, somehow, I didn't think they had passed us. Something within me warned me of danger, yet I was sure that any danger from them was in our rear. But if this path led indeed to a village, there was before us a silent danger more to be dread-

ed even than that other. So as I slipped along, my eyes were darting everywhere. I stopped at last, so abruptly that Fergus and Bill, crowding me closely, bumped into each other.

"What's the matter?" growled Bill, his voice a mere whisper.

I pointed at the trail before us.

"I don't see a thing but a leaf or two," he added and tried to push by.

Roughly I pulled him back and, stooping, I carefully lifted a large leaf from the path while they eyed me intently. Carefully I picked up the thorn concealed beneath it, with its gummy message of violent death. Carefully I searched the ground for more. There were no more. It was alone.

Bill's face was white, his eyes incredulous. "God! Suppose we had stepped on it," he whispered through stiff lips.

"Death, eh?" Fergus' voice was steady but a glance at his eyes showed that he thoroughly understood the situation.

I nodded none too cheerfully as I went on again more cautiously than ever. Soon the path forked.

"Which way?" asked Bill.

Almost without a pause I turned to the left. "The other path goes to a village," I whispered. "And it isn't friendly. They want no visitors."

"How do you know?" Fergus was frankly curious.

"You saw that little bamboo lying across the path, didn't you?" I asked, never turning my head. "That is a plain warning. The path is closed to strangers. Beyond it —"

"More poisoned thorns, eh?" he finished quietly.

"Yes, or worse," I promised.

"This path, now," began Bill.

"Probably runs to the river," I cut in. "And if it's not a game trail there may be a boat. If not——"

"If not," Bill interrupted brusksly, "I've got four more clips of ammunition. How many have you?"

"Six." My eyes never left the trail ahead.

We crossed a glade, and as we entered the jungle again Bill stopped.

"Go on," he directed. "I'll join you in a few minutes. I've had a feeling we were being followed."

"So have I. It's been getting stronger and stronger," said Fergus.

The place was ideal to stop those we were confident were so hot on our trail should they cross the glade openly. Should they skirt it, however—but I did not let my mind dwell on that. Bill was a sharpshooter, and in any event he would not go on the long trail alone.

The path was leading downward into a valley. We must be almost to the river. Our luck was still holding. If there were a boat, now—I heard the crack of Bill's pistol—once—twice—three times—then silence. Fergus stopped.

"I'm going back," he snapped. I laid my hand on his arm.

"No use, lad," I soothed. "Bill's all right. He stopped them, at any rate, whether he got any or not. And they haven't got him, I'm sure. He will be streaking it to us now. If he doesn't——"

I didn't finish, but Fergus' face grew grim as he nodded.

"You're right, Jock. It wouldn't do any good. But if he——" And then Bill was with us again.

"Got another," he jubilated. "Right between the eyes. And pinked another, I think. They're Mongols, just as I thought—raiders from the North."

My face lighted. "Fine," I exclaimed. "And they have a hostile village behind them."

"By Jove, that's right," Fergus grinned. "And this racket is more than likely to bring the villagers out, too."

I nodded as I swiftly took the trail again.

PERHAPS our good luck made us careless; certainly there was little excuse for our running into that ambush. The first I knew of it was seeing one of those flashing throwing-knives streak past me. I ducked instinctively and so escaped the withering shower of slugs and scrap-iron discharged by an old smooth-bore muzzle-loader that let go almost at the same instant. Fergus, just behind, was not so fortunate. His hissing indrawn breath told me he was hit, no less than his stagger. Bill's gun and mine exploded at the same instant, and a shriek answered their reports, but whether it was a death cry or not we couldn't tell.

Fergus sank slowly to the side of the trail and a red tide dyed his tattered shirt. Quickly I stooped and got his arm about my neck, then lifted him bodily the while I swung my gun in my left hand in wide arcs covering the jungle before me.

Bill's eager glances stabbed the green gloom about us, but the jungle was still as death. He moved forward close beside the trail like a shadow, taking advantage of every bit of cover while I followed with my burden as well as I could. Fergus' breath came in painful gasps, but he gritted his teeth and doggedly kept on.

It was utter foolhardiness for us to advance so, but with enemies ahead and behind, desperate measures were necessary. And such a desperate play might succeed through its sheer unexpectedness.

So it proved. Bill got in one more shot at a half-seen figure that was gone again in a flash, and, though we crawled along at a snail's pace, we saw no others. Perhaps we had been ambushed by so few that they had no chance in the face of our bold move. Perhaps our one hit had destroyed their desire for combat at close

quarters; at any rate we saw no more of them just then.

The ground beneath our feet was becoming a quivering jelly, a swampy quagmire that betrayed the river's proximity. The gloom was even more pronounced, with an oppressive quiet in the air, a sullen foreboding. Despite the heat I shivered.

On such treacherous footing I was hard put to go on with Fergus, and after several hundred feet of it I was almost exhausted. But the gloom was lightening; the jungle was changing; we must be almost to the river.

I could go no farther. Rest I must; my breath came in whistling gasps; I streamed perspiration. Chase or no chase, I could go no farther.

Close beside the path was a round rock about waist-high, and a short distance away a number of others offered an ideal resting-place as well as shelter should we be attacked. Bill stopped on the path, his glance darting incessantly about, every sense on the alert, and I carefully eased Fergus onto the nearest rock—not a rock after all, but some kind of spongy vegetable growth such as I had never seen before. Warily I rocked on my feet, too spent to take the few steps that separated this growth from the others. Bill dropped back to us and the lines in his face smoothed themselves momentarily as he smiled.

"We'll make it, old things," he encouraged. "It can't be far now."

Fergus' chin slumped forward onto his chest; his body sagged slowly toward us as I jumped for him. He was perilously close to a collapse, though the Lord knows he had gone through enough to try even a well man. His face was gray, his eyes closed. My arm about his shoulders, I strove to raise him, but he seemed made of lead. Again I heaved—no result. Bill stepped to the other side

and we tried together with no better luck.

Then the terrible truth struck home to both of us. Fergus was held fast by that strange vegetable growth on which he sat. His legs seemed half embedded in its rubbery substance. But that was not the worst. All about him, through those plant tissues was a red stain, deepest close to him and fading gradually away.

I think I was the first to understand. Some few carnivorous plants I had seen before, but not of such a size or shape; my experience having been confined to Venus fly-traps and pitcher-plants back in the dim days of my youth.

"We've got to free him from this thing, Bill," I said rapidly. "It's not only holding him fast but it's drawing every drop of blood out of him," and I pointed to that darkening stain.

"God!" gasped Bill as his nimble mind took it all in at a flash. He heaved and tugged till his mighty thews and sinews cracked. As well have tried to pull down a vine-entangled jungle giant bare-handed as to pull that yielding form from the plant's tenacious grip.

"Cut him free with your knife, Bill," I suggested.

"I can't," he groaned. "I lost it crawling out of the temple through the passage."

"I lost mine, too," I admitted hopelessly. Oh, for one of those throwing-knives that had flashed past me not so long ago!

But Bill was heaving and tugging again in a frenzy. In desperation he jumped upon that spongy mass, stooped, and then lifted Fergus with a firm grip under his arms. Just such a heave had I seen him make in Singapore one day when he had lifted the end of a great teakwood timber so they could take the crushed body of a coolie laborer from beneath it. But all in vain: though he

heaved and tugged till I feared for Fergus' body, he never raised him an inch; he merely sank his own feet into the spongy mass to his ankles. And Fergus' legs, I noticed, were now almost buried in that frightful plant, while the red stain had spread through its entire bulk. And Fergus' face and arms were turning a sinister bluish color.

Oppressed by a sudden fear, I thrust my hand within his tattered shirt. I groaned. Fergus was dead. Not the slightest tremor rewarded my exploring fingers pressed over his heart. It was stilled forever.

"He's dead, Bill," I shuddered. "One of those slugs must have got him worse than we thought and he bled internally, or——"

"Or this devilish plant killed him," and then Bill's face became a tragic mask of terror. "It's got me, too," he screamed, while he struggled wildly to free himself from that deadly grip about his ankles. But each violent struggle only sent him the deeper into that yielding mass.

Fergus' legs had vanished entirely into that horrid thing. He was engulfed almost to the waist and sinking slowly ever deeper. Bill had sunk ankle-deep before he discovered he was trapped, and his struggles to free himself speedily sank him almost to his knees.

HELPLESSLY, sick at heart, I watched the hopeless struggle, unable to help in any way. There was nothing I could do bare-handed; no one to whom I could appeal for help. The brigands behind us, the natives behind them—all hostile, all seeking our death.

Bill was the first to recover his nerve. Face to face with a terrible and certain death that had already taken his brother and was about to claim him, he nevertheless refused to yield after his first momentary lapse.

"Go on, Jock," he urged. "You

can make the river, perhaps. Take Fergus' gun and ammunition and his rubies. Here's mine." He tossed me three flashing bits of flame. "They're yours, and welcome. I'll hold those devils back when they come as long as I——"

He shuddered. I knew what he meant by that unfinished sentence.

I shook my head in negation.

"Go on, you fool!" he raged. "There's none to mourn me. Good riddance to bad rubbish. The world's the better for me leaving it," and he grinned wryly. "Perhaps I can do a little bit of good now to offset all the bad. Go on, old top, and good luck." So in the end I was persuaded.

Heavy-hearted I went forward, carrying with me the loot of two dead men and that of another who faced horrible death and hopeless odds as I may some day hope to face them, unafraid and smiling.

A gun in each hand, I crept slowly along that shaking, sucking path that threatened each moment to dissolve into abysmal ooze beneath my feet—onward to I knew not what, I knew not where. Death, certain and terrible, was behind me where it had already overtaken all of my comrades in most horrible forms. Would it get me too, I wondered? Would the powerful long arm of that long-forgotten, long-neglected god of destruction reach out even to me? In my heart was a sick dread, and a determination to do my best, whatever the odds.

I made my way through the gloom, my eyes ever ahead, my ears turned backward to where that grim, terrible thing was happening—or was it all over? What a cowardly fool I had been to leave! Yet, perhaps I would have been a greater one to have stayed.

No, it was not all over yet. I heard Bill's pistol cracking spitefully—half a dozen times; then after a pause, another string of shots.

Good old Bill! A man at the last, whatever his faults. Going down like a hero, game to the very last, never giving up, even though the odds were overwhelming.

My mind was engrossed over what was behind me when it should have been most concerned with what lay ahead. That is my only excuse for what happened. The path dissolved suddenly into nothingness; I scrambled madly for another precarious foot-hold; half turned, and began sinking slowly into that deadly muck—sinking to a death no less terrible, no less certain than those others had been.

I felt the muck creeping slowly and steadily upward. Already my thoughts pictured its constricting clutch about my chest, its deadly entry into my throat and lungs. Ugh! What a way to die—unseen, unheeded!

But wait! Perhaps there was a more merciful death even now creeping along that path behind me. I strained my eyes through the semi-gloom, hoping to see the skulking forms of the bandits. Better the merciful crash of a destroying bullet or the stabbing pain of one of those deadly knives than this slow, sucking horror about me.

Knee-deep already, I made no useless moves that might drive me down the faster. Though death seemed certain, I would not give up hope until the last. My guns in my hands, I would go down shooting if the enemy came. If not—well, I would go down anyway, perhaps with a last mercy bullet from my own hand.

What was that movement back there along the trail? Had they caught up so soon? Yet, it couldn't be. It might be monkeys, perhaps, in the trees above the trail; humans were hardly likely to come so.

Dimly through the oppressive gloom I made out a round, brilliant blue globe swaying at the end of a slender stalk and gathering to itself

the faint light of that dense growth until it seemed to glow like a monster jewel. While I watched, several more of them appeared, rising above the lush jungle growth and bobbing gracefully above the path I had come. Odd how such trivial things should register on my mind in this extremity.

Slowly I sank into the slime—waist-deep—then more slowly yet until that filthy mess was up about my chest. But so slowly now was I sinking that I could scarce tell it. The minutes dragged endlessly by; each seemed like an eternity.

Would they never come, I wondered, after what seemed years of waiting? Had Bill's last fusillade beaten them off for good? I think I really hoped for the bandits' coming; anything was better than this slow, horrible approach of death, alone and unheeded.

Again and again I twisted my head around to view that path along which I had come, but it was utterly without movement save for the swaying and bobbing of those lustrous blue globes above the rank, steaming jungle growth.

TEN more minutes passed—or perhaps it was an hour—I don't know. The ooze had risen no higher. Though I felt nothing solid beneath my feet, I had failed to sink any deeper; I must be floating in that semi-fluid mess. My heart rose at the discovery, yet my reason told me that it meant nothing: I was helpless unless assistance of some sort arrived. Though I might not suffocate under that filthy ooze, I was doomed no less surely.

I felt, rather than saw, a movement beside the path; my quickened senses warned me that my pursuers had arrived. By straining to the utmost I could swing my arm around so that my gun commanded the path. Carefully I sighted into the thick of that dense growth; blindly I pressed

the trigger, and the spiteful crack of my revolver broke through that brooding oppressive silence, to echo and re-echo against the thick leafy growth that hemmed me in.

I saw the bullet shatter one of those bobbing blue globes; saw the shattered shards drop, followed by a blue smokelike cloud of dust that settled slowly. Again I fired, aiming blindly, and yet a third time, but the only tangible result was the shattering of yet more of those odd things, followed by other clouds of that blue dust that sank slowly out of sight behind that luxuriant jungle growth, spreading as it dropped.

Had I imagined the presence of an enemy? Were my senses giving way under the strain of this terrible ordeal? It would seem so. The jungle was as motionless as ever. Not a sound, not a movement betrayed the proximity of man. Ah, I had it! They hadn't seen me yet; they were trying to locate me.

A scream rang out—wild, inarticulate with fear, with agony. And hard on its echoes the jungle woke to life with a chorus of them; the death-still growth sprang to motion as half a score of frenzied figures broke out into the path.

It was the end, I told myself grimly, the last desperate charge that must surely overwhelm me. Very well. Let them come. It was at least a relief after all these horrors. I was ready to die. But I would not go alone. I would hold my bullets until I could make them all count. There would be plenty to join me as I took that last long trail.

But it was not the rush of an attack after all. These terror-stricken Chinese half-castes were too utterly demoralized to think of anything but blind flight—flight in any direction in their frenzied efforts to get away from that accursed spot. While I watched I saw two of them pushed headlong from the path into that morass that hedged it so closely, to

sink into its depths still struggling madly and screaming eerily at the top of their singsong voices.

In God's name, what had happened there? Another dropped across the path, writhing in agony, and yet another. In all directions they sprang, colliding blindly with the jungle growths, slipping heedlessly off the path to sink into that deadly slime, or dropping in their tracks to lie threshing with pain. One huge, half-naked fiend sprang directly toward me, dropping into the ooze only a few feet away, where he twisted and clawed blindly.

As I watched his death agonies my dazed mind dimly grasped its stupendous horror. My bullets had not gone so wild as I had expected after all. True, I had hit no human body, but I had loosed upon these cut-throats something more deadly for them than mere bullets. Those slowly sinking, spreading blue clouds had dropped upon their naked bodies, unnoticed perhaps, but only so for a few moments.

Dustlike spores they must have been, of some gigantic fungi unknown to science, growing in that almost unknown land; another of those terrible carnivorous plants such as had laid hold of Bill and his brother a short while before—or was it ages ago?

The gleaming yellow body so close to me was stilled now; its struggles were over. Even as I watched, a terrible change was going on—a change that my mind refused almost to believe. Swiftly its color was changing from yellow to blue. Its outlines grew indistinct. The upper part of the torso seemed dissolving into a mass of little tentacles that grew rapidly and stretched upward in a compact group. Higher and higher they rose until they stood a foot above the level of the morass—two feet—three—. And now from among them were pushing up colorless spikes that gleamed whitely as

they rose swiftly. Up, up, up, until only by straining my head backward with all my might could I see their tips.

Their upward growth was stopped, yet they seemed still in motion. The rods were becoming more slender, the tips were thickening rapidly. Now the whiteness of them was changing to a deep glistening blue and the thickened tips were becoming those glistening blue globes I had seen rising above the jungle growth, while the compact mass of tentacles at their base was assuming a wilted, shriveled appearance, to fall over at last, a putrescent mass, upon what had once been a human body vibrant with life. Only upon the path I saw the leg lying of what had so short a time before been a man.

Dimly in the back of my mind some memory was struggling toward the surface of its consciousness. In my school days, in my youth I had watched slimes and molds under the high-powered microscope and had seen those tiny infinitesimal growths complete their life cycle so. But they had been tiny growths, fractional parts of an inch in height—never such monstrosities as these. And their similar upthrust sporangia held in their shells the dustlike spores of another such life circle, even as these blue globes that bobbed about in the air above me.

So far I reasoned, when like a flash, my own danger came to me. These spore-cases bobbing above me so lazily held another such cycle within their gleaming shells. In the fullness of time they would open, dropping another slow-floating, blue, dustlike cloud to settle down, down, down upon me held fast by the ooze beneath them.

In that moment I think I went stark, raving mad, screaming curses at the top of my voice, beating wild-

ly at the viscous unresisting filth that held me there, until at last reason fled.

WHAT happened after that I could dimly reconstruct when, I know not how long after, I woke once more to reason within the high latticework hut of a native village. So weak that the slightest move took prodigious effort, I opened my eyes to the blazing sunlight and stupidly watched a native woman busy at her mud hearth preparing a meal. She turned and smiled as she saw my eyes upon her, calling in her musical voice while the hut shook as someone climbed the ladder without and a man entered; a golden-hued native like the many I have met in that upland country.

For many days I dwelt with them, slowly regaining strength under their ministrations, until at last I could travel again. From that hut, one of the pitiful few that formed the village, under the guidance of the native, I made my way back to the Irriwaddy and the trader's landing.

Of the scene on that jungle path or the ruined temple with its forgotten treasure they could not or would not tell me. Nor would they talk of my rescue. I surmised that the man had come along that path of sucking, treacherous death and had plucked my unconscious body from its slimy embrace, bringing me to the village. Of my guns or the rubies there was no sign; they must have been sucked down into the ooze.

Back once more at the river's edge, I loaded my guide with what was to him a veritable treasure of brass rings and armlets, smiling a return to his thanks while my eyes traveled over the breast of that tawny stream that would carry me away forever from that still powerful though forgotten god whose arm had so nearly taken me.