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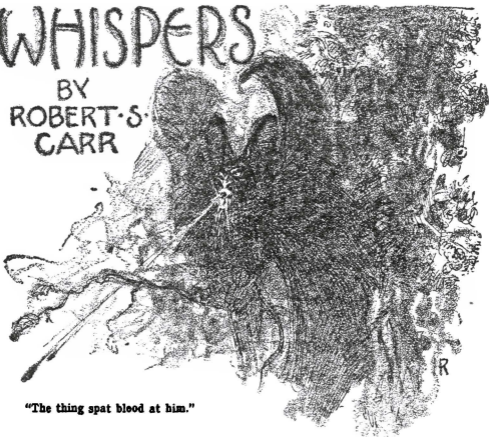
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WHISPERS

BY
ROBERT S.
CARR



"The thing spat blood at him."

TAGGARDSVILLE stirred sleepily as the wheezy dinky-line train puffed into town and paused to get its breath; then sank back into its habitual state of coma as the train lumbered on through the rank swamp-lands.

The one passenger stood on the dilapidated depot platform and viewed the isolated little village with the amused, condescending air that the bred-in-the-bone New Yorker shows toward the rest of the world. His clean-shaven young lips twisted themselves into an expression of scorn. He would never have believed that a civilized nation could harbor such a down-at-the-heels lump of concentrated inertia as Taggardsville.

Gordon Hall laughed loudly, contemptuously. He leaped down off the

platform, walked briskly up the street and noisily entered the shabby general store. The inner gloom of the low, windowless building made him stop abruptly till his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Presently, as he stood blinking and inhaling the mingled odors of pipe smoke and coal-oil, he became dimly aware of his surroundings.

A half-dozen old men were seated in a semicircle. Several gazed at him reproachfully for interrupting their dozing, while the rest eyed him in mild surprise. For a minute he stood there, his eyes taking in the coils of rope, the bags of feed and the fly-specked shelves of canned goods. The circle remained as if carved from wood, chairs tilted far back, battered straw hats on heads, pipes in mouths.

At last Gordon spoke, his words grating harshly on the tranquil silence.

"Anyone around here who can drive me out to the Muller place?"

Stillness reigned for a moment more; then one of the men drawled: "You mean th' swamp-land Mullers out to th' south?"

"I mean the Mullers that own the big cypress plantation."

"Them's th' swamp-land Mullers. You see, there's another tribe of Mullers up to th' hill-lands, so we call one th' swamp Mullers an' th' others the hill Mullers so's we ken tell 'em apart."

"Yes, but as I said before, is there a rig or an auto I can hire to take me out there?" he demanded shortly. The unhurried, monotonous drawl of the old man's voice irritated him.

"I dunno," was the laconic response.

"How far is it? Maybe I could walk."

"Couldn't make it afore dark. An' there's sink-holes to watch for."

"I can keep out of the sink-holes if you'll show me which road to take."

"You couldn't make it afore night." The old man's tone sounded like a foreboding.

"And what if I didn't?" snapped the young man. "I'm not afraid of the dark!"

The grizzled old villager regarded him curiously for some little time, then made the rather cryptic remark: "You would be, though, afore you got there."

Gordon snorted indignantly. Then: "Has anybody got a machine?"

"Jake has."

"Where's Jake?"

"In th' back there." He lifted his voice. "Hey, Jake! Come in here!"

The callow youth that appeared sulkily consented, after some deliberation, to drive him out to the Muller place in his decrepit old flivver. As they left the store, Gordon was con-

scious that the group was eyeing him queerly.

Winding interminably and tortuously over the soggy wagon-trail, the city man could not help wondering at the tropical luxuriance of the unbroken wall of vegetation that rose sheer on each side. The fantastic shapes of the monster cypress trees, hung with long gray beards of Spanish moss, together with the rank greenery on the islands of solid ground, made a ghostly shadowland even in the sunlight.

Later, as they penetrated farther into the gloomy solitudes of the great swamp, the black waters of deep lagoons on each side became more and more frequent, the air became more humid and even the narrow strip of cleared land they traveled became dangerously swampy at times. A huge, bloated water-moccasin slid off a gnarled cypress "knee" and disappeared in the thick water below with an oily splash. A whippoorwill's funeral notes echoed down the dim aisles of the spectral swamp like a weird cry of warning.

For hours they drove steadily onward. Lower and lower sank the sun, slower and slower crawled the puffing auto. Long, velvet-black shadow-fingers lay across the road as if to stay their path. The fetid breath of the swamp-land rose lazily about them in wispy spirals of yellow-green steam from the carpet of matted vegetation and foul muck beneath the cypresses. It seemed to Gordon that they must have traveled many miles. At last, finding the cathedral hush unbearable, he made a conversational sally.

"How much farther is it?" he asked.

A grunt and a non-committal shrug of the shoulders was his answer. He gazed out into the gloomy swamp once more. It was not yet 6 o'clock, but back there in the shade of the twisted old cypress trees it was quite dark. He fancied he saw weird shapes flitting about.

The car came to a halt. Gordon looked at the driver interrogatively.

"Tain't safe to go no farther," growled the villager, avoiding the other's eyes.

Gordon looked ahead. The road seemed to be slightly better, if anything, than that which they had traversed thus far.

"Fifty cents more?" he inquired hopefully.

A negative grunt. Jake started to back the car preparatory to turning around.

"How come?"

"Gotta get back afore dark."

"What's the matter? You've got lights."

The auto continued its backward are.

"Come now; listen to reason. I've got to get there tonight. I'll give you a dollar extra."

"I'm a-goin' back."

Gordon swore under his breath.

"All right then," he snapped;

"have it your own way. How far will I have to walk?"

A long streamer of Spanish moss overhauling the roadway began to swing violently, although there was not a breath of wind stirring. The village boy eyed the swaying moss fearfully.

"How much farther?" repeated Gordon. Jake recovered himself with a start.

"I dunno, a mile or so." He lurched the machine up onto the road, headed downward, and extended his hand.

Gordon paid him. Sullenly the youth pocketed his money, then slowly started the auto. A moment later he leaned out and looked back. The city man was plodding along the muddy road in the opposite direction.

"Hey!"

Gordon halted and turned, scowling. "What do you want?"

Jake appeared to be confused.

"I was just a-goin' to say—you'd better kinda—hurry up. You wanta

get there afore it gets real dark, you know." With that he was gone.

FOR some time the other man stared after him, mystified, then laughed nervously and continued on his way.

The shadows lengthened and the way grew dim. The sticky black mud clung to his feet, making rapid progress impossible. An inexplicable uneasiness grew upon him with the increasing darkness. Several times the lone walker heard uncanny little sounds near by, and once he wheeled about very suddenly as if to catch sight of the Something he was certain was following him.

His walk grew furtive, his eyes darted from side to side in fearful apprehension. The road narrowed, bringing the terrifying darkness on each side closer about him. He could almost have sworn that something brushed against him as he passed through a blotch of misty blackness beneath a giant sypress.

At last, with the suddenness peculiar to the South, the sun dropped beneath the horizon and the narrow path was cloaked in inky darkness. With the abrupt blotting out of even the faintest illumination, Gordon paused to get his bearings and to make sure he was in no danger of stepping into a hidden sink-hole. Then, as he was about to resume his journey, he froze into rigid alertness at a soft sound behind him. . . . Was that a whisper? No, surely it couldn't be, he told himself. Nevertheless, his heart began to thump loudly within his breast.

He listened intently for a moment, but the sound was not repeated. He took a step forward . . . the thick mud made unpleasant little sucking noises about his feet. . . . What was that before him?—but no, it was gone now. Then he pulled himself erect, thrust out his chest and jaw, and marched resolutely onward. He even started to whistle, but the sound died on his lips at the cery mocking that

floated back out of the mysterious black depths of the swamp.

Several rods farther on his way, he glimpsed the lights of the Muller homestead. He quickened his pace and began to breathe more easily. Funny how the dark could get on your nerves, he thought, and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette.

And then—It came! A short, sibilant whispering in his ear, the cold breath of an unseen being against his cheek, a faint tap on his shoulder—and It was gone. With a jerk he wheeled, dropping his cigarette, and like a graven image he stood motionless, soundless, peering into the dark. The moon, a gibbous globe of silver that was strangely cold and distant, slid silently from behind a cloud and bathed the dismal scene in an unearthly luminosity.

There was nothing—absolutely nothing—to be seen. The whisper had sounded not an inch from his ear, and he stood in the middle of the road, with ten feet of clearing on each side, but whatever It was had made its escape in a split second. Presently Gordon shrugged, cursed his imagination, and plodded stolidly onward.

The welcome gleam of the house ahead grew brighter as he approached. He walked rapidly, scarcely heeding his path, and keeping his eyes steadfastly fixed on the lights before him. Suddenly his foot caught under the loop of an exposed root and he pitched headlong to the ground. For a moment he lay there, half stunned, but in that brief time the Thing came out of the blackness once more, whispered its inarticulate and horrible message in the prostrate man's ear, breathed its icy breath upon his cheek, brushed his shoulder with the touch of a grave-cloth, and was off again.

With a piercing scream of terror he rolled over, scrambled to his feet and plunged madly through the dark toward the house. Frantically he beat upon the door and shouted. No answer. In desperation he showered

heavy blows upon the unyielding oaken panels . . . a soft, smooth Something drew slowly across the back of his neck . . . he shouted frenziedly and kicked at the massive portal. . . . Again came that awful, blood-chilling whisper in his ear; again a puff of cold breath fanned his face; a faint and unearthly stench was wafted to his nostrils.

He put his hand to the side of his neck. It came away wet with warm blood.

After what seemed interminable ages of waiting, a pale, frightened face appeared in the crack of the door.

"What do you want?" came the tremulous query.

"For God's sake let me in!" screamed the terrified Gordon; "they're after me!"

Silently the woman admitted him. She seemed to understand what he meant by "They."

He found himself in a crudely furnished room, bare-floored and dingy. Without ado he was made welcome, and he sat down to supper with the family. He briefly explained to John Muller, the rugged old father, that he represented a New York lumber company and that he had come to have a look at the cypress on his land. Old Muller seemed satisfied and even eager to sell. "Be blamed glad to get away," he remarked once during the conversation.

Strangely enough, not a word was said on either side concerning Gordon's terrible experience. He noticed, however, that the whole household—father, mother, grown son and two girls—seemed to be in a constant state of nervous apprehension; slight and unconscious on their part, but nevertheless apparent.

As they filed from the kitchen back into the front room, Gordon noticed a peculiarly shaped scar on the bare neck of the eldest girl, an anemic child of perhaps twelve.

"How did you hurt your neck, girlie?" he inquired solicitously. But the child only looked at him a moment, wide-eyed, then fled as if in terror. The young man put it down as an adolescent sensitiveness on her part and dismissed it from his mind.

The evening passed uneventfully enough except for one thing—Gordon noticed the exact replica of the little girl's scar on the neck of John Muller!

When the time came to retire, Frank, the son, showed the guest up to the room he was to occupy. As they ascended the broad stairway, Gordon could not help but comment on the exceptional size of the house and the number of rooms it contained. He learned from Frank that they confined their living-quarters to the front of the house, the rear rooms being unused and empty. The dwelling had at one time been a historic Colonial mansion and more recently the property of an old recluse—a retired explorer and adventurer. The building and surrounding estate had been in John Muller's possession some five or six years.

The two young men entered the bedroom. In a glance Gordon took in the simple furnishings and old-fashioned four-poster bed.

"It's kind of stuffy in here," he remarked; "guess I'll raise the window."

He started to cross the room but Frank stopped him with a sharp exclamation. "No, don't open the window," he said.

"Why not?"

"They will get in."

"You mean——?" Gordon's eyes grew wide with inarticulate fear.

"Yes." And with that he was gone.

GORDON soon discovered that his room connected with Frank's by means of a door, and he opened it, "just to let the air circulate," as he termed it.

He lay sleepless for a long time. At last the room became so hot and stuffy as to be unbearable, so he got up, tiptoed to the window and raised the sash an inch or two. He wasn't afraid of anything that could get in through so small a crack as *that*, he assured himself, and now he could get a good sleep.

But the harrowing experience he had undergone in the swamp, together with the peculiar creepy atmosphere of the whole dreary place, caused him to sleep but lightly.

About midnight he awoke with a start. His dreams had been a jumbled and distressing fantasmagoria of fantastic shapes. He instinctively turned over and looked toward the window for the comforting sight of the tranquil stars and the cool night sky. To his surprise he saw that the sash was now some five or six inches above the sill! His sleep-bedrugged consciousness was some time in grasping the possible significance of the fact, but when at last the truth dawned on him, he sprang from the bed. Then he got his second shock—his pajama-front was stained darkly with blood!

The faint and spectral moonlight cast a dim illumination about the room. He stood in dumb astonishment for a moment, then galvanized into instant action at the sound of a long-drawn-out gasp from the next room, followed by a low, horrible, gurgling sound. With a leap he crossed the room, to stop short and clutch the door-casing at the sight within.

Slowly every trace of color drained from his fear-chilled cheeks, his eyes dilated with stark, unreasoning fear, and the short hair on the back of his neck prickled as a cold sweat broke out in glassy beads over his horror-distorted face. His fingers gripped the unfeeling wood till his knuckles showed white, and his breath came slowly, heavily, painfully, as if he were in the throes of a blood-curdling nightmare; for there, spread over the

writhing body of the young man, was a huge, misshapen, coal-black **Something**—a Something that made sucking sounds on the mangled and bleeding throat beneath it. The bed-clothing was splashed and dripping, and the room was permeated with the fearful odor of fresh human blood, with which was mingled a subtle scent infinitely more terrible—the peculiar stench of the whispering Thing that had attacked Gordon!

The Horror stirred and ejected a stream of blood from a hidden mouth. The warm crimson liquid spattered to the floor . . . the terror-stricken watcher at the door felt a drop fall on his bare foot . . . felt it trickle . . . and suddenly the room spun before his fear-glazed eyes. He staggered, his overwrought nerves snapped, and with a single despairing shriek he fell forward in a dead faint.

His last impression was a rapid whispering in his ear and a clammy exhalation on his cheek.

AS THE last clinging mists of oblivion lifted from Gordon's brain, he found that he was lying on his bed, a bandage on his neck where the ghastly thing had attacked him. He lay quietly for a time, endeavoring to collect his thoughts. Presently Mrs. Muller appeared at his doorway, her eyes red from weeping. She looked at Gordon in fierce accusation.

"You left the window open and—They came in—and killed Frank!" She lapsed into agonized sobs.

The rest of the day was a torment for Gordon Hall. He had been the direct cause of the young man's death. The family felt bitterly against him; only the father seemed able to understand.

In a clumsy, futile way, he helped the heartbroken people complete the simple funeral preparations. When he had seen the grave dug and the rude coffin carried out of the house for the interment, he asked, brokenly:

"Are—you going to get a—minister to preach the funeral sermon?"

"I reckon not," said old Muller sorrowfully. "There's not much way to get hold of one, 'cause Frank was the only one who run the auto and nobody could get out of here on foot inside of a day."

"Where is the machine? Maybe I could drive it."

Silently the old man led the way out to the barn, where Gordon carefully inspected the old car that Muller showed him. It was of some obsolete make and evidently out of repair.

"Frank allus had a lot of trouble with it," remarked Muller.

Gordon climbed into the driver's seat and experimented with the gears. After a great deal of sputtering, the motor started. Gordon was puzzled with the gear shift; all his slight experience had been with a lighter car of a different type. At last he selected what he believed to be low speed, but it was in reality reverse. He intended to let the clutch in very slowly and cautiously, but his inexperience, together with the sudden taking hold of the warped, old-fashioned cone clutch, caused the auto to lurch backward with sudden violence. The thin, protruding shell of the gasoline tank crashed into a heavy wooden beam, and, with a crackling of metal, burst wide open. The precious gasoline poured out in a colorless flood and was quickly absorbed by the loose soil of the barn floor.

Gordon was aghast. "Is there any more gasoline?" he inquired anxiously.

"No, our big tank is empty."

Then his remorse doubled as he realized that he had not only caused a death in this family, but had now completely marooned them from the outside world by his stupid blunder with the car. Why on earth hadn't he had sense enough to wheel the machine out into the open before investigating its method of operation?

He grew desperate in his efforts to atone for the great unhappiness he had brought these people. Again he questioned old Muller concerning the possibility of making the town on foot.

"Taint no use," replied the old swamp-man resignedly. "It's not that it's so far in a straight line, but the road's so crooked and such hard walkin' that if you got up early an' walked fast all day long, you couldn't get out of the swamp by evening. You know what would happen then. . . . There ain't no short cut at all through this swamp to town."

He spoke as calmly as if he were stating the price of pork. Gordon shuddered at the dread insinuation.

"Doesn't anyone know what this awful Thing is that lives in the swamp?" he demanded. "Why doesn't somebody shoot it or get rid of it in some way?"

"Nobody ken be sure about anything back here in these old swamps. An' you can't shoot a ghost."

"Ghost? There isn't any such thing!" But somehow his tone did not carry conviction.

Muller shook his head.

"I dunno. Something or other has got in the house twice since we been livin' here. See that sear there?" He indicated the gruesome mark on his neck. "That's what it done to me, an' it done the same thing to little Alice onct. It even gets after the pigs if it can catch 'em. Look at the marks on the poor critters; we've got to pen 'em up tight as a drum every day at sundown."

Gordon looked at the inclosure where a score or so of the scrawny little razor-back hogs, common in the South, rooted and grunted. Nearly every one of the wretched animals bore the grisly brand of the invisible terror of the swamp.

"Somebody ought to clear this up. It's terrible!" he exclaimed.

Muller was resigned. "Yep," he agreed, "but who's goin' to do it?"

It's easier to keep the house locked up tight at night than to go a-gunnin' for some danged thing you can't even see. An' it never bothers us in the daytime. We've got kinda used to it, in a way."

A sudden inspiratiocin flashed into the mind of the young man. Here was a way to make at least partial amends—apprehend the murderer! For there must be a tangible explanation, he told himself over and over; a mere fancy couldn't kill a person. Something of flesh and blood and bone had killed Frank Muller; that was undeniable. No vaporous specter would fasten itself to the throat of a sleeping person and suck the life-blood out of his body. And anything of flesh and blood and bone could be killed, too, with a good load of lead slugs in John Muller's immense shotgun.

But in the days to come, Gordon Hall found that it was no easy matter to track a phantom to its lair, especially a phantom which was both invisible and silent and from which one's innermost nature shrank as being of the supernatural and terrible.

DURING the brightest hours of mid-day he explored the nearer portions of the cypress swamp and found the timber to be far better than his employer, back in New York, could have dreamed. Gordon was eager to close the deal, for he knew that it would bring as a reward a substantial raise in salary, but—the cruel reality struck him a crushing blow—he could not get to a telegraph office, or even to a train! To attempt to make the journey on foot would inevitably result in death, possibly some hideous death such as Frank had died. With this, his determination to clear up the mystery of the whispering thing crystallized from a nebulous ambition to an absolute, concrete necessity. He had to get away, but he couldn't do so without first disposing of the unseen danger in the swamp. And so, with

a methodical thoroughness, he began to investigate the matter from every possible angle.

First, he questioned the entire Muller household and learned that the Thing was noticed only at night, never earlier than dusk; that no one had ever got a good look at it—it always seemed just to escape their glance; that its attacks were always accompanied by the cold breath and whispering which he himself knew so well; and that it invariably struck for the neck.

Opinion seemed divided as to the bite of the creature. That it caused no pain was evident, and as the very mention of the subject was painful to the family, Gordon at last desisted from questioning.

The household had long since got into the hard and fast habit of retiring to the security of the house at dusk, keeping all apertures tightly closed and never venturing out after nightfall; so within the last three years attacks had been rare, and always at night, but they often heard the Thing at the windows.

The most baffling aspect of the mystery was the whispering. No one had ever distinguished even a single word: "It just whispered, that's all," as Muller himself had said.

And the uncanny wounds. It struck silently from the rear and opened the skin on the back of the neck without any sensation of pain on the part of the victim. That in itself was enough to make a supernatural agency seem plausible, but Gordon Hall would accept no disembodied spirit. He meant business and he was after results, preferably a dead result lying at his feet with a bloody gunshot wound in it.

A week passed and he was beside himself. Not only had he investigated and analyzed every clue he could find, but he had even dared the Unknown one night with a shotgun and a lantern. However, when he heard the same rapid whispering, shuddered at

the same icy breath and felt warm blood—his own blood—trickle slowly down his back, he retreated hastily into the welcome safety of the house. No more of that for him! He would rather stay here in the swamp and hunt frogs the rest of his life than gain the outside world by battling a demon of the dark in its native element.

ON THE morning of the tenth day he stood, hands in pockets, and subjected every object in the range of his vision to the most exhaustive scrutiny in hope of finding some key to the mystery that he might have overlooked in his previous clue-hunts.

Trees, wood-pile, barn, pigpen and smoke-house were perfectly conventional and commonplace. His gaze wandered over the long lines of the house, up over the eaves, along the high roof-ridge, in every window. All as usual. But wait!—something was strange there; those two windows ought to be closer together than that. Both were in the rearmost rooms where the Mullers seldom ventured.

He pondered. The first window there was in the outside corner of the room, close up against the left wall. The second opened out of the next room and was by the right wall, as near the other window as the architecture of the house would permit. Allowing generously for partitions, there surely ought not to be more than two feet between the casings, and yet there was fully five.

As a drowning man seizes upon a floating spar, so Gordon Hall seized upon this incongruity. He rushed into the house and upstairs. Fifteen minutes later he was sure he had discovered a secret room in the old house. Now to find a door!

Painstakingly he went over every inch of the adjoining walls in both rooms. At last he found it—a clever little spring-door in a wall panel that opened to the touch of a concealed button.

As the door swung silently back, he stooped and looked inside. It was pitch-dark; he would need a light. In a moment he was back at the opening with his flashlight. A sudden fear of the darkness swept over him as he knelt and directed the circle of white light over the interior, revealing a desk littered with papers, a battered old strong-box and a few chairs, with dust—thick, velvety dust—over all.

He banished his fears and crawled inside. He stood up and was examining the papers on the desk when, with the click of an automatic lock, the little door swung shut behind him as if propelled by an unseen hand. He started violently at the sound—so violently that he dropped his flashlight. The fragile instrument struck the floor with a crash, the delicate lens and bulb shattering into a thousand pieces.

For a moment the utter blackness stunned him; then he quickly recovered himself, knelt by the door and endeavored to open it. His trembling fingers scurried over the smooth surface again and again before the truth came to him. There was absolutely no knob, handle or other projection on the inside of the door! Then surely, he reasoned, there must be another secret spring.

Stillling the tiny, mocking voice within his breast that told him that he was trapped, that no one knew he had discovered the room, and that the thick partitions would muffle any outcry, he patiently began to go over every inch of the walls.

Suddenly his very blood froze in his veins and the icy fingers of a dread premonition closed slowly about his madly thumping heart, for he had heard, somewhere in the blackest recesses of that sinister vault, a soft rustling that sounded strangely like a whisper—the incoherent whisper of the Thing!

At first his terror-numbed brain refused to grasp the unspeakable enormity of his situation, but at last, like

the chill of an ice-cold plunge, came the full realization of his awful predicament. He was trapped in a hidden vault with the whispering swamp-fiend! The fast-crumbling throne of reason within his brain tottered and nearly fell beneath the impact of the terrific mental blow.

And then something snapped far back in the thought-chambers of the doomed man. With the strength of a desperate man he hurled himself headlong against the baffling panel. There was the sickening impact of flesh against wood simultaneous with the crash of splintering timber, and Gordon Hall plunged out into the bright shaft of a golden sunbeam—the blessed light of day!

After a moment he got up, brushed off his clothes and started in search of John Muller and a lantern so that they might clear up the mystery then and there. He paused in the doorway and looked back at the gaping hole he had made in the wooden panel. The Thing might escape while he was gone, he reflected, so he blocked the passage effectually with chairs.

OLD Muller was visibly excited as together with Gordon he entered the room leading to the hidden chamber in which lurked the monstrous and blood-sucking Thing. In his right hand he carried his shotgun, loaded to the muzzle with murderous lead slugs and a triple charge of powder, while in his left he swung a heavy, two-bitted ax. "Be ye man, beast or devil," he muttered under his breath, "ye'll not get past John Muller in one piece!" Gordon carried a bull's-eye lantern and a keen pitchfork.

In breathless excitement the two men removed the blockade, piece by piece. For a long time they stood poised for instant action, gun leveled, pitchfork upraised. Absolute silence brooded within and without. At length Gordon lighted the lantern and thrust it into the aperture, brightly illuminating the interior of the little

cell. Still no swamp-demon put in its horrible appearance.

After some minutes of strained waiting, they threw caution to the four winds and, dropping to their hands and knees, crawled into the hole, dragging their sinister weapons after them. Once inside, however, their fear of the unknown returned, for they knew the Thing to be invisible. As they stood in rigidly heroic attitudes of offense, there suddenly came to their affrighted ears the uncanny whispering that they knew so well. Two pairs of eyes were instantly focused on the desk, whence the awful sound had come. . . .

A tiny, brown, bewhiskered mouse stopped his scampering among the papers on the desk and eyed the two men curiously. Sensing possible danger, he plunged back into the dry litter with a soft rustling that sounded oddly like a whisper—the very noise that had so alarmed Gordon!

John Muller looked at Gordon Hall and Gordon Hall looked at John Muller. Each gravely surveyed the grim weapons of the other. Then, with a stream of oaths, Muller crawled out and stamped angrily away. His last audible remark was a profane description of a "blankety-blank mouse-hunter."

Gordon laughed away the fright that the mouse had given him, then began to examine the papers and documents. As he thumbed through an old diary, he suddenly gave an exclamation of surprize and began to scrutinize it intently, his eyes shining with excitement. At last he had found a key to the mystery of the real whispering Thing!

The next morning Gordon Hall did a number of peculiar things. First, after obtaining permission from Muller, he removed the lower pane of glass from a window and substituted a square board having in the center a hole about the size of a dinner-plate and fitted on the inside with a

hinged flap so that anything that pressed inward on the little swinging door would have easy entrance, but once inside could not escape.

Second, at about sundown he killed a shoat and collected a large pan of the warm blood, which he sprinkled freely about the grounds, especially about the window-trap. He even went so far as to paint the outside and inside of the trap-door with blood. The sickening odor of fresh blood pervaded the windless locality for a hundred feet in every direction.

Third, he put two live pigs in the room into which the "ghost trap" opened. Then he asked John Muller a question to which the other made response:

"I've got some sulfur candles; would they do?"

Gordon nodded.

LATE that night the Muller family was aroused to trembling, wet-browed wakefulness by hideous screaming squeals of terror and agony from the imprisoned pigs. Muller was at Gordon's door in an instant, ready for mortal combat with the devil himself if need be.

"Sounds like we had something in our trap, doesn't it?" remarked Gordon nervously.

Peal after peal of the blood-curdling sounds rang out through the stillness of the night. Muller was unnerved.

"Can't we stop that awful noise?" he inquired anxiously. "My wife and the girls are nearly scairt to death."

"All right, then; bring the sulfur candles and come on."

They halted at the door where the swamp-fiend was entrapped. The horrible sounds within were diminishing in volume but growing in their effectiveness. Muller trembled, and even Gordon, who knew exactly what was occurring within that mysterious chamber, grew a little pale.

"Now light the sulfur candles," said Gordon after a moment.

The elder man quickly complied. The acrid fumes burnt the nostrils of the two men before the last candle was lighted.

"Steady now!" exclaimed Gordon. With a deft, quick movement he opened the door a trifle, shoved the burning heap inside, then slammed the door shut. This operation took but a few seconds, yet they distinctly heard the sound of loud, disconnected whispers within.

In two minutes the sounds of agony were stilled by the deadly fumes.

"Can we look in yet?" asked Muller eagerly. He was as excited as a child.

"Not for three hours yet," announced Gordon firmly; "that whispering thing is going to be good and dead before ever I poke my nose in there."

"Tell me what it is, then, before I blow up and bust," demanded the old man.

"Very well. Let's go into the kitchen and sit down."

Old Muller leaned interestedly across the table. Gordon took from the pocket of his dressing-gown an old, yellow-paged diary. Presently he said:

"That old recluse you say lived here some time ago was none other than the illustrious David Dryden, who penetrated the unexplored regions of darkest Africa before any scientific expedition was ever organized. He was a peculiar, wild, romantic man and had a great liking for unusual pets, the stranger the better.

"I believe that the rest of the story can be told by him in his diary. The first is an entry written while he was camping in a still unexplored section of the Uma country. It reads:

"I saw one today and the natives certainly were right. I wouldn't believe their weird tales at first, but I do now—every word of them and more too. Lord! but it was a hideous creature! It was fully three feet in

wing-spread and its nimbleness on the wing is too marvelous to be expressed in words; it must be seen before one can get an inkling of its amazing agility. Its flight is too rapid for the eye to follow—first it is here, then it is gone.

"Its color is a deep jet-black, and the natives tell me that it is the most to be dreaded of all the beasts of the jungle, for it has a superhuman cunning and an insatiable blood-lust. Unlike the other members of the vampire bat family, it goes straight to the neck, usually to the jugular vein for its ghoulish drink, while its blood-brothers are content to draw the blood from a sleeper's big toe or ear-lobe."

"Two days later:

"Did I say blood-brothers? Well, I was wrong. This creature is no more akin to the rest of the bat family than the devil is kin to man! I saw another today, or perhaps the same one, for there surely can't be many such monsters in the world. I was close enough to get a good look at its head, and I am firmly convinced—nor am I a superstitious man—that the native legends, fantastic as they are, stopped far short of the real truth.

"Imagine the wrinkled, shrewd face of an old Hindoo magician, multiplied a thousandfold in keenness and evilness of expression; then reduce the mental image to one-third the size of your palm and you have a faint conception of the face on that bat.

"Again I am wrong. It is *not* a bat; it is what the natives claim it is—the embodied spirit of a very wicked old man who was in league with the devil in life and whom His Satanic Majesty rewarded after death with a pair of wings and superhuman knowledge. The cunning and understanding which that wrinkled little face showed when I suddenly came upon it, gorging itself with blood from a still-struggling wild hog, might indeed have been that of an old,

old man had it not been for one awful feature, and that is—the *mouth!*

“ ‘Perhaps the nearest approach to a simile I can give is the way a blood-thirsty little Savu monkey licks its thin black lips after committing murder on one of its fellows. This bat-fiend did the very same thing in a manner infinitely more horrible, for it *laughed*; laughed in a sort of whispering cackle and then *spit blood* at me!

“ ‘I am a hardened man of the world and I have witnessed horrible sights in the four corners of the globe, but never was I so completely unnerved as when that grinning little black imp tilted back and squirted a mouthful of warm blood at me.’

“ ‘A week later:

“ ‘I have seen him several times. I say *him* because nothing so absolutely fiendish could be of feminine gender, and I speak of him as a definite creature because I know it has been the same one every time—those red-flecked tiny black eyes of his show almost recognition. Each time he lets me come closer to him. His expressions are incredibly terrible because of the size of that hairy little black face—smaller than the face of the newest-born baby, smaller even than the tiniest of monkey-faces and still almost human—that is, all but the mouth with its thin black leathery lips and minute yellow teeth.’

“ ‘Next day:

“ ‘I have examined carefully the marks made by the teeth of my little black imp on the neck of a baby ante-lope and they are *precisely the same as those made by human teeth!*’

“ ‘Later:

“ ‘Even if I have to stay here in Africa twenty years to do it, I shall have that little black flying devil for a pet! Today I found him sitting—*sitting*, not hanging, mind you—on a low branch along the trail. I *know* that he was waiting for me to come that way.

“ ‘He allowed me to come up very close to him. His eyes were on an exact level with my own and we looked straight into each other’s souls for a long, long time—possibly an hour, I don’t know. He kept opening and closing that horrible little mouth and showing his teeth. I could see bits of clotted blood about his lips, and the creature has a very peculiar odor—an odor that I have smelled only once before and that was when I lifted the battened-down hatch of a vessel whose entire crew had been murdered by pirates and thrown down into the hold to rot. It is the grisly odor of death! . . .’

“ ‘Next day:

“ ‘That queer little evil face haunted me all night. I shall never rest till I have him.’

“ ‘Two weeks later:

“ ‘I have him! But no, this is wrong. Better say that he has me. He came to me of his own free will and in a manner both novel and weird.

“ ‘I awoke last night to find him *sitting on my chest* in the dark and staring down at me with his tiny inflamed eyes. I fed him fried meat and fruit at breakfast as he sat on my shoulder and made his uncanny whispering sound in my ear, but I have a gruesome fancy that his favorite delicacy is blood . . . fresh, warm life-blood . . . human blood, even.’

“ ‘Three days afterward:

“ ‘He is a queer, interesting little demon. He has acquired a peculiar habit of flying off at a distance, darting in at one with incredible speed, striking at your throat playfully, and is gone like a flash. The wind from his rapidly vibrating wings gives one the impression of cold breath.’

“ ‘Again:

“ ‘My little black fiend is not so playful after all, for today, in doing his familiar trick of darting up from behind and wheeling off, he bit me on

the side of the neck. I did not know it, though, till I felt the blood run down inside my collar it is strange.'

"Later:

"That flying black devil's bite is painless—possibly he uses some hellish poison that numbs the nerves. But then, he barely grazes the skin, never making a deep wound. Even so, it is decidedly annoying and he seems to take special delight in tormenting me that way. I like him, though . . . he fascinates me. . . ."

"And then," said Gordon Hall, "for more than two years there are constant entries showing the gradual weakening of this bold adventurer's reason under the constant influence of this horrible little beast. One of the very last, written while he was living in this house and in a scarcely legible hand, is significant:

"He sits and looks at me all day long . . . he mimics my speech in his ghostly whispers . . . he's got me . . . he's got me! . . . And it runs off into an undecipherable scrawl."

THE two men sat silently, each wrapped in his own thoughts. The first ghostly pink fingers of dawn crept in through the kitchen windows and fell upon the motionless figures at the table.

Finally Gordon spoke: "Do you know anything concerning this man's death?"

"Stories . . . only stories."

The two men nodded in mutual understanding. Gordon rose and shook as if to free himself from a spell.

"Well," he said slowly, "let's take a look at the thing. It ought to be pretty well fumigated by now."

When the charnel room had aired out thoroughly, they entered, though somewhat reluctantly.

Dryden had described the whispering Thing well as to general build, but by some odd coincidence (or was it the hand of Fate?) the huge bat had fallen into the burning sulfur in its last convulsive struggle, so that its entire upper half was a charred and formless mass.
