

Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Kelpie

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

*What was that Thing that rose up out of the little aquarium?—
a brief tale of horror*

NO SOONER had Cannon closed and latched the door than Lu was in his arms, and they were kissing with the hungry fierceness of lovers who doubt their own good fortune. Thus for a delirious, heart-battering moment; then Lu pulled nervously away.

"We're being watched," she whispered breathlessly.

The big, dark man laughed down at her worried blue eyes, her shining wealth of ale-brown hair, her face like an ivory heart, the apprehensive tautness of her slender figure. "That's guilty conscience, Lu," he teased. "You know I wouldn't have invited you to my apartment without giving my man the night off. And even if someone did see us, why be afraid? Don't we love each other?"

She allowed him to bring her into the parlor and draw her down beside him on a divan, but she still mused apprehensively.

"I could swear there were eyes upon us," she insisted, half apologetically. "Hostile eyes."

"Maybe they're spirits," Cannon cried gayly, his own twinkling gaze sweeping around to view in turn the paintings on the walls, the hooded lamps, the bookshelves, the rich, comfortable furniture, the big box-shaped aquarium in the darkest corner. Again he chuckled. "Spirits—that's a pun, you know. The lowest form of wit."

From a taboret at his elbow he lifted a decanter of brandy and poured two

drinks with a humorous flourish. Lu, forgetting her uneasiness of a moment before, lifted her glass. "To us," she toasted.

But Cannon set his own drink down untasted and peered around a second time, this time without gayety. "You've got me thinking it now," he muttered.

"Thinking what?"

"That something is watching—and not liking what it sees." He glanced quickly over his shoulder, then continued, as if seeking to reassure them both. "Nothing in that corner, of course, except the aquarium."

"What's the latest tenantry there?" Lu asked, glad to change the disquieting subject.

"Some Scotch water plants—new laboratory project." Cannon was at ease the moment his hobby came into the conversation. "They arrived this afternoon in a sealed tin box. Doctor MacKenzie's letter says they were gathered from the Pool Kelp, wherever that is in his highland wildernesses. I'm letting them soak and wash overnight. In the morning I'll begin experimenting."

Lu sipped more brandy, her eyes interested. "Pool Kelp," she repeated. "It sounds seaweedy."

"But these are fresh-water growths. As I say, I never heard of the pool before." Cannon broke off. "Here, though, why talk botany when we can——"

His lips abruptly smothered hers, his arms gathered her so close as to bruise

her. But even as she yielded happily to his embrace the telephone rang loudly in the front entry. Cannon released her with a muttered curse of impatience, rose and hurried out to answer. He closed the door behind him, and his voice, muffled and indistinct, sounded aggrieved as he spoke into the transmitter.

Lu, finishing her brandy alone, picked up the drink Cannon had set down. As she lifted it to her lips she glanced idly over the rim of the glass at the moist tangle in the aquarium. In the dim light it seemed to fall into all manner of rich greens—darkest emerald, beryl, malachite, olive, grass, lettuce. Something moved, too, filliped and swerved in the heart of the little submerged grove.

Cannon was still talking. Lu rose, drink in hand, to stroll curiously toward the big glass box. As she did so the moving trifle seemed to glide upward toward the surface. Coming closer yet, Lu paused to peer in the half-light.

A fish? If so, a very green fish and a very small one—perhaps a tadpole. A bubble broke audibly on top of the water. Lu, genuinely interested, bent closer, just as something rose through the little ripples and hooked its tip on the rim of the aquarium.

It was a tiny, spinach-colored hand.

Half a second later another fringe of tiny fingers appeared, clutching the rim in turn. Lu, woodenly motionless, stared in her effort to rationalize. She could see the tiny digits, each tapering and flexible, each armed with a jet-colored claw. Through the glass, under and behind the fingers, she made out thumbs—deft, opposable thumbs—and smooth, wet palms of a dead, oystery gray. Her breath caught in mute, helpless astonishment. A blunt head rose slowly into view behind and between the fists, something with flat brow, broad lump of nose and wide

mouth, like a grotesque Mayan mask—and it was *growing*.

Lu told herself, a little stupidly, that she must not have seen clearly at first. She had thought the creature a little green minnow, but it was as big as a squirrel. No, as big as a baby! Its bright eyes, white-ringed, fixed hers, projecting a wave of malignant challenge that staggered her like a blow. The full, lead-hued lips parted loosely and the forked tip of a purple tongue quivered out for a moment. A snaky odor steamed up to Lu's nostrils, making her dizzy and weak. Wet, scabby-green shoulders had heaved into view by now, and after them the twin mounds of a grotesquely feminine bosom. The thing was climbing out at her, and as it did so it swelled and grew, grew. . . .

THE brandy-glass fell from her hand and loudly exploded into splinters upon the floor. The sound of the breaking gave Lu back her voice, and she screamed tremulously, then managed to move back and away, half stumbling and half staggering. The monster, all damp and green and stinking, was writhing a leg into view. Lu noted that, and then everything went into a whirling white blur and she began to collapse.

Faintly she heard the rush of Cannon's feet, felt the clutch of his strong arms as though many thicknesses of fabric separated them from her. He almost shouted her name in panic. After a moment her sight and mind cleared, and she looked up into his concerned face. With all her shaken strength she clung to him.

"That thing," she chattered, "that horrid female thing in the aquarium—"

Cannon managed a comforting tone. "But there's nothing, dearest, nothing at all. Those two brandies—you took mine, too, you shameless glutton—went to your head."

"Look at it!" She pointed an unsteady finger. "Deep down there in the weeds."

He looked. "Oh, that?" he laughed. "I noticed it, too, just before you came. It's a little frog or toad—must have been gathered with the weeds and shipped all the way from Scotland."

Lu caressed her throbbing forehead with her slender white hand and mumbled something about "seeing things." Already she believed that she had somehow dreamed of the green water-monster. Still, it was a distinct effort to walk with Cannon to the aquarium and look in.

Through the thick tangle of stems and fronds that made a dank stew in the water she could make out a tiny something that wriggled and glided. It was only minnow-size after all, and seemed smooth and innocuous. Funny what notions two quick drinks will give you. . . . She lowered a cupped palm toward the surface, as if to scoop down and seize the little creature, but the chilly touch of the topmost weed-tips repelled her, and she drew back her arm.

"You'd never catch it," Cannon told her. "It won't wait for you to grab. I had a try when I first saw it, and got a wet sleeve—and this."

He held out his left hand. For the first time that evening Lu saw the gold band that he wore on his third finger.

"A ring," her lover explained. "It was lying on the bottom. Apparently it came with the weeds, too."

"You put it on your wedding finger!" Lu wailed.

"That was the only one it would fit," Cannon defended as she caught his hand and tugged with all her might at the ring. It did not budge.

"Please," she begged, "get rid of it."

"Why, Lu, what's the trouble? Are you being jealous because a present was given me by that mess of weed—or maybe by the little lady frog?"

The tiny swimmer in the tank splashed water, as if in punctuation of his joke, and Cannon, falling abruptly silent, suddenly began wrenching at the gold circlet. But not even his strength, twice that of Lu, could bring it over the joint.

"Here, I don't like this," he announced, his voice steady but a little tight. "I'm going to put soap on my finger. That will make the thing slip off."

Lu made no reply, but her eyes encouraged him. Cannon kissed her pale forehead, strode across the room and into a little corridor beyond. After a moment Lu could hear the spurt of a water-jet in a bowl, then the sound of industrious scrubbing with lather.

IN COMMAND of herself once again but still a trifle faint and shaky, Lu leaned her hand lightly upon the thick, smooth edge of the aquarium glass. A fond little smile came to her lips as she pondered on Cannon's eagerness to please her whim. Not even in a silly little matter like this one did he cross her will or offer argument that might embarrass or hurt her. The shedding of that ring would be a symbol between them, of understanding and faith.

Her eyes dropped to the table that stood against the aquarium, with its litter of papers and notebooks. At the edge nearest Lu lay a thick volume bound in gray—a dictionary. What was the term she had puzzled over? Oh, yes. . . . Still lounging with one hand on the glass, she flipped the book open with the other and turned the pages to the K's:

Kelp: Any one of various large brown seaweeds of the families *Laminariaceae* and *Fucaceae*,

Her hazy memory had been right, then, about the word. But why should a body of fresh water be called Pool Kelp? Glancing back at the page, her eyes caught the next definition.

It answered her question.

Kelpie: (Gael. Myth.) A malicious water spirit or demon believed to haunt streams or marshes. Sometimes it falls in love with human beings, striving jealously against mortal rivals. . . .

The words swam before her vision, for the snake-smell had risen sickeningly around her. And something was gripping the hand that rested on the rim of the tank.

Lu's mouth opened, but, as before, terror throttled her. Like a sleeper in the throes of nightmare, she struggled half-heartedly. She dared not look, yet some power forced her head around.

The grip had shifted to her wrist. Long, claw-tipped fingers were clamped there—fingers as large as her own, scrofulous green and of a swampy chill. Lu's eyes slid in fascinated horror along the scale-ridged, corded arm to the moldy-looking body, stuck and festooned over with weed-fronds, that was rising from the water. Another foul hand stole swiftly out, fastened on Lu's shoulder, and jerked her close. The flat, grotesque face, grown to human size, was level with hers, its eyes triumphant within their dead white rings, its dark tongue quivering between gaping lips.

Yet again Lu tried to find her voice. All she could achieve was a wordless moan, no louder than a sigh.

"Did you call, sweetheart?" came Cannon's cheery response from his washing. "I'll be with you in a minute now; this thing is still hanging on like a poor relation!"

The reptilian jaw dropped suddenly, like the lid of a box turned upside down. Lu stared into the slate-gray cave that was the yawning mouth. Teeth, sharp teeth, gleamed there—not one row, but many.

Lu's hands lifted feebly in an effort at defense, then dropped wearily to her

sides. The monster crinkled its humid features in something like a triumphant grin. Then its blunt head shot forward with incredible swiftness, nuzzling Lu at the juncture of neck and shoulder.

For a moment she felt exquisite pain, as of many piercing needles. After that she neither felt, heard nor saw anything.

THE medical examiner was drawing a sheet over the still, agony-distorted body of the dead girl. The police sergeant, scribbling his final notes, addressed Cannon with official sternness.

"Sorry," he said, "but you haven't explained this business at all satisfactorily. You come down to headquarters with me."

Cannon glanced wanly up from his senseless wrestling with the ring that would not quit his wedding finger. "I didn't do it," he reiterated dully.

The medical examiner was also speaking, more to himself than anyone: "An autopsy might clear up some points. Those inflamed, suppurated wounds on the neck might have been made by a big water-snake. Or," he added, with a canny glance at the sergeant, "by a poisoned weapon constructed to simulate such a creature's bite."

Cannon's last vestige of control went. "I tell you," he snarled desperately, "that she and I were the only living things here tonight—the only living things." He broke off, becoming aware of movement in the aquarium. "Except, of course, that little frog in there."

The creature among the weeds, a tiny sliver of agile greenness, cavorted for a moment on the surface of the water as if in exultation, then, before any of the three watchers could get a fair look at it, dived deep into the heart of the floating mess.