

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

The Ponderer



BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

THE GREAT, tree-topped cliff towered hugely in the sunlight and cast its broad, deep shadow across the flat strip of land which lay between it and the jungle. At the center of the cliff, running its full height from base to crest.

*What is the greatest question of the ages? For only that
would save him from the Ponderer*

jutted an immense outcrop of solid gray rock fantastically molded into semblance of a ruminating giant. Though craggy and rugged, old and worn, so startlingly did it look like a gargantuan statue of someone dreaming of ages long forgotten that ever since the days of the vanished Chiapans it had been named The Ponderer—and mightily feared.

Overhead, the coppery sky of Ciapas poured heat into the rocks, the flat strip and the jungle. To the south lay Palenque with its creeper-covered ruins of a civilization absorbed into the mists of antiquity. There too, in Palenque, was the nearest *finca* where a humble peon could slake his thirst and at the same time rid himself of the eerie feeling induced by this eternally brooding colossus.

C LUMSILY turning his mule at the end of the strip and edging his primitive stick-plow around behind it, Jose Felipe Eguerola paused to mop his lean, nutbrown face, lick his cracked lips and wave away a horde of mosquitoes. Deep within the jungle to one side of him unseen things yapped and squealed and howled derisively. To his other side soared the cliff and its part-embedded monster of stone. The shadow of The Ponderer's tremendous head slanted far across the lines of new, thin furrows, so high in the sky was it poised.

Jose Felipe Eguerola scrupulously avoided looking directly at the dour shape of The Ponderer. He never gave it eye for eye, never. To do so would be bad. He'd not the remotest notion of why it might be bad, but he was taking no chances. Already he was taking chances enough, in the opinions of some.

Fra Benedictus with his holy water and a few crazy Yanquis with cameras had been the only ones to practice the precept that a cat may look at a king. Nothing terrible had happened to any of them as far as he knew. But he, Jose Felipe Eguerola, had never owned a pair of rawhide sandals, never fascinated a plump *senorita*, never gained a peso in the State lottery. All that he possessed were a grass hut pleasingly adjacent to the *finca*, seven acres of perilous dirt, the stick-plow, the mule, one pair of torn pants, the sputum of the gods and

the will to live despite it. His chief aim in life was to keep what little he'd got.

So for the twentieth time that day he shifted his quid of raw latex from one cheek to the other, turned the end of a furrow, beat off the mosquitoes, glanced hastily and leerily at The Ponderer from out the corners of his black and liquid eyes. In spite of the intense heat the usual shiver raced up his spine. So big, so grandly contemplative, so imperially indifferent to the scrabblings of lesser things around its mountainous feet!

Tilting his hand-woven straw sombrero the better to shield his eyes, Jose Felipe whacked the tough, drab buttocks in front of him and set up an urgent call of, "*Mula, Mula, Mula, Echa, mula!*" Obediently the animal lurched forward. Leaning his weight on the plow he followed bare-footed, splay-toed.

High above, The Ponderer meditated in utter disregard of the tiny, buglike figures, two and four-footed, as they crawled dustily toward the shadow he was casting. He had posed there so long and eroded so much that none could tell for certain whether he had been carved by oldtime hands of wondrous cunning, or whether he was no more than a freakish product of the elements.

I N AWFUL truth, he was neither. The few who had viewed him and theorized about him had erred by rejecting the self-evident in favor of the obscure. He was precisely what he appeared to be, namely, The Ponderer. In that respect if in no other, the wary Jose Felipe's sixth sense was more reliable than the erudition of his betters.

Hesitantly, man and beast toiled through the potent shadow, emerged into the light. Jose Felipe coughed with dust and relief. Invariably he was relieved to escape that darker patch. At any other time, in any other place, he had the true peon's love of the shade; it provided a break from the burning sun, something in which to laze luxuriously, something in which to lie flat on one's back with one's half-naked legs stretched right out. One could then listen idly to the wit of the fat, inactive *Senor Don Antonio Miguel Gautisolo-y-Lazares* who could both read and write. "Let the Yanquis work—they are more advanced."

even the hungry jungle had dared not push.

Reaching the farther end, he turned mule and plow again, mopped, whoosed the mosquitoes, retilted the sombrero, cautiously eyed the cliff. "*Ho, mula. Mula. Echa, mula!*" The cry wailed and hooted along the rocky ramparts, bounding and rebounding from crevices and corners. "*Mula . . . Echa, mula!*" Parrots screamed in the impenetrable thickness of the green hell, a distant branch snapped and something thrashed heavily amid the growths. "*Echa, mula!*"

The Ponderer awoke.

With slow, titanic deliberation awful to watch, The Ponderer shifted the columnar arm which had propped his head, and removed his massive elbow from his hillock of a knee. His entire tremendous torso edged the merest fraction with this his first movement; the ramparts shuddered along their length and two thousand tons of rock roared down from the cliff's face a mile away. Its sound was like the simultaneous sundering of earth and sky. The jungle yelled its own dumbfoundment with a multitude of hidden voices.

The mule had stopped in its tracks, ears twitching uneasily. Jose Felipe stood paralyzed behind it, not looking up, but down—down to the furrows where the shadow of the elbow had left the shadow of the knee and still was moving. The handles of the plow were wet in his failing grip. Sluggishly, unwillingly, he turned.

His heart at once became a river eel striving to snap at the hawk-moth fluttering within his stomach. Tiny streams of sweat crept down the bridge of his nose, the backs of his ears, the insides of his knees. The muscles of his jaws, thighs and abdomen felt strangely weak. His head was dizzy as if he had stooped too long beneath the merciless sun. He could not move, not one muscle, not one inch. He remained there glued to the earth, as fixed for all time as had seemed the thing he was watching.

Gradually, laboriously, with many harsh sounds as of stone grinding upon stone, The Ponderer came unstuck from the cliff. An avalanche of rock, pebbles and dirt cascaded on either side of him, its dust clouding his feet. Great boulders hopped and hurried

But not here. Not in that particular shadow. Not in that low-slung silhouette of a countenance which kept away Indians and peons alike, preserving the plot from all but the supremely courageous such as he, Jose Felipe Eguerola. Frequently he regretted that his courage was so supreme. Back in Palenque he was much admired for his hardihood and there had been some talk of it even in far-off Villahermosa. It was gratifying to be admired providing that one was gratified in Palenque, preferably in the *finca*. On this shadow-haunted plot he was called upon to pay the devil for the praise—and the price got upped a bit every day. There were no admirers upon the scene of action; there was only himself and the mule and the monstrous monolith to whose feet

across the flat, some missing the transfixed onlooker by mere yards. With groaning joints The Ponderer straightened, became rigidly erect, at which point his shadow reached the jungle and hushed its agitated crying. The brazen sky glared down while even the birds were silent. The world was awed.

The Ponderer sighed. It was a sibilant sound like that of a verturesome wind lost amid unfamiliar mountains. Then without warning, and with many rasping noises, he bent and grabbed the mule. Its plow-cords broke as he snatched it three hundred feet into the air. Holding it upside-down, its legs kicking furiously, he studied it with mild interest and a touch of contempt. Just as decisively he put it back on the ground, where it lay on its side and panted heavily, tongue out, eyes rolling. Still Jose Felipe remained helplessly rooted to the fateful spot.

As the great hand came for him, Jose called pitifully upon his legs, and called in vain. They refused to respond. The hand closed about him, huge and harsh and hard, a rocky enormity. Opening his mouth, he shrieked on a note so high in pitch that his own ears could not hear it. At terrifying speed he went upward within the hand, his mouth still wide open and emitting the sound which was not a sound.

Nightmarishly he swung close to that immense face, that craggy, lined, corroded travesty of a face. It stared at him, examining him with two granite bulges sculpturally suggestive of eyes and somehow he knew that it could really see—or exercise some queer sense equivalent to sight.

"*Santa Maria!*" Jose Felipe's dangling legs jerked spasmodically.

"Be still!" The Ponderer had no visible mouth, no more than a deeply carved indication of lips, yet he spoke as clearly and surely as the talking Memnon had spoken, and the other could understand his words.

"Be still, little thing who mocks my own shape and form." He turned his captive around, the better to inspect him. His grip was crushing. Jose Felipe screamed again with the sheer agony of it. The fingers loosened slightly.

"So," decided The Ponderer, "this crea-

ture has mastery of the other one. This one *thinks*. Well, well!" He chuckled in amused surprise. "You really do think, little one—that is something indeed! I, too, think. What else can one do that is worthwhile? What greater ecstasy can there be than that of sustained and involved thought?"

"*Maria!*" repeated Jose Felipe fervently. His eyes were turned away from that great face and gazing in dread at the drop beneath the hand. From his altitude the mule resembled a mouse. The sight brought on vertigo. He tried to keep well within the cup of the hand, clinging to the fingers. His tattered, sweat-soaked pants had molded themselves to his legs.

"Only in thought may one avoid the torment of endless years," The Ponderer went on. "The long thought, the complicated thought—that is the fundamental pleasure." He crooked a finger which rasped as it bent, used it to nudge his victim. "Isn't it?"

"No!" shouted Jose Felipe hardly knowing what he was hearing or saying. "*Si! Si!*" He strove to keep his eyes away from both the fall and the face.

"Alas, I have arrived at the end of a beautiful problem," The Ponderer continued morbidly. "The problem of nine bodies circling a binary, the sixth being retrograde. It has kept me petrified with the pleasure of thought for seventy thousand years." He paused a moment, added, "Or was it seven thousand? I don't know. It is of no consequence and not worth investigating—the solution is too swift and easy." He juggled his huge hand. "But I would guess, little one, that even so simple a puzzle would be too much for your kind, eh?"

THE jiggling jerked his tongue free, and Jose Felipe promptly used it to shout, "Put me down! Put me down and I will leave your feet in peace! I swear it by—"

"Be silent!" The hand wobbled again. "Now I am sorely in need of another thought. I yearn to be numbed by a new problem. How unhappy is the silicoid without a problem!" His tremendous thumb caught the victim on the point of sliding helplessly into space, poked him back into the palm. "You, little thing, have a frag-

mentary life which does not extend from one of my gravitic pulses to the next, and probably any puzzle you could concoct would be equally as short and futile. Yet I need a long one, I need one enjoyable for eons."

"By my father and my mother, I shall never again tread upon your shade or come within sight of here if but—"

"Quiet! Let me consider how I might convert you into a suitable problem." The rocky head came a little closer, staring, staring blindly. "Suppose that I squeeze you? Ah, yes, you will die! Sooner or later others of your kind will come seeking you. I shall squeeze them also. The mystery will grow with the mound of corpses. The tales of it will spread like ripples when a stone has been cast into a pond. Eventually other little things with minds superior to yours will come here to investigate the matter. If I persist, if I go far enough, someone will solve the mystery and employ whatever is available to shatter me to dust."

"I do not wish to die," yelled Jose Felipe. "I do not deserve to die." The jungle came back to life and its parrots screamed in sympathy.

"Now possibly *there* is a problem," mused The Ponderer completely ignoring his captive's protests. "Somewhat on the short side, but spiced with danger. Can I cast the stone and accurately estimate the speed, distance and amplitude of those ripples? Can I start the chain of circumstance, petrify myself in thought, and awake in good time with the solution of how to avoid my own destruction?" His chuckle sounded again. "This is something decidedly novel; a puzzle loaded with death, my own death. It entices me, yes, it entices me." His fingers began to curl and close in.

"Have pity!" gasped the victim, barely finding breath under the awful compression.

The fingers relaxed. "Pity? What a weird concept! Has it an inherent problem?" The Ponderer was silent awhile. "No, I cannot conceive one." More silence, then, "However, I understand what you mean. If I grant you some of this pity it may complicate matters pleasingly. I will therefore grant it by playing a little game with you."

"Put me down. Let me go."

"Not yet. Not just yet—if at all! The

game first." The granite eyes were fixed upon him, but blank, blank. "This is the game: I shall release you unhurt if your wits prove the equal of mine. If you can petrify me you will have earned your freedom. So think, little one, *think*. It is you versus a silicoid!"

"Petrify you?" Jose Felipe's mind refused to make sense of the words. His fear was still a potent thing, but anger was outgrowing it.

"With a problem. And not some petty puzzle which can be solved within the space of a gravitic pulse, but one worthy of my time, a long, long, time." He tilted the hand slightly. "Come on, petrify me with thought—that you may live!"

JOSE FELIPE clung desperately to a rocky finger, slid, hung on, slid a bit more. He fought to discipline his scattered wits. He was no intellectual and none knew it better than he. Perhaps of bravery supreme—in given circumstances—but far, far from a genius. Offhand, he could remember nobody who'd ever given him credit for an original thought. Even the mild and inoffensive Fra Benedictus had once pronounced him too stupid to live. Evidently the worthy father had been only too right—for his end was near.

Fra Benedictus!

Had called him stupid!

Why?

Fra—

"Be swift!" The hand slanted alarmingly. "Only the witless are slow!"

Sliding to the verge, Jose Felipe struggled madly to keep his grip while his legs swung in mid-air. Below, the mouse! He could see it in his mind's eye, miles and miles down, a crushed form besides it—the bait, the first link in the hellish chain of circumstance. He tore his nails in frantic effort to stay put.

"Quick!"

More tilt.

A sudden surge of appalling fury filled his being, overwhelming his fear, lending him the strength of desperation. Arcing his body he swung himself onto a great finger, stood upon it erect, at full height, one hand braced against the other's tilted palm. His black, volatile eyes blazing with anger, he

shook an absurd little fist at the enormous face, for the first time defying it eye to eye. His voice was shrill, vibrant with emotion as he challenged The Ponderer.

"To whom did God say, 'Let there be light!'"

"Eh?"

Without caring whether it were true or false, the monster accepted the premise for the sake of where it led. His great hand levelled slowly, trembled, began to sink. It went down, gradually down, shivering queerly as it moved. Jose Felipe fell off it when within six feet of earth, landed heavily on his knees, got up and raced twenty paces before he fainted. Dimly and faraway in the instant before his sense left him he heard a grinding, rasping voice high up in the sky.

"To whom?"

The vault of Chiapas was still brazen and hot when his senses returned and he staggered to his feet. Likewise upright and apparently unharmed, the mule was nearby surveying him dolefully. He leaned against the animal, absorbing the comfort of its presence. He tried not to look over its back, but his eyes were drawn as if by a magnet and insisted on seeing. The panorama appeared normal. The mighty ramparts frowned down just as always they had done, and the queer, fantastic outcrop was solidly a part of them as always it had been. The outcrop bore strange resemblance to a brooding giant, a colossus plunged in eternal thought.

Looking longer and with less reluctance, Jose Felipe berated himself. Obviously the supreme courage which was spoken of even in Villahermosa was but the courage of drunken dreams. He sat too often and too long in the *finca*, too stupid to know whether the *tequila* was good or bad—almost too stupid to live. What little there was of his brains had been pickled in a potent jug so that next day he fell even behind the plow and battled the mountains in his stupor.

Moodily he felt for the plow-cords, found them broken. His eyes sought the torn ends. They popped, roamed around, perceived the great fall a mile to the north, the boulders scattered over the flat, the new rubble at

either side of the outcrop. His sombrero lay at the outcrop's base. Even as he looked a loosened crag beyond the distant fall gave way and dropped thunderously into a ravine. Its noise echoed and re-echoed, reaching him like a great, booming voice.

"To whom? To *whom?*"

"*Madre de Dios!*" Madly scrambling onto the mule's back and urging its head round to face the Palenque trail, Jose Felipe Eguerola sweated and forgot the mosquitoes while he hammered his mount with his heels until it broke into a steady jog-trot. "*Mula. Mula. Echa, mula!*"
