

# That Receding Brow

by Max Brand, 1892-1944

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*Solve—if you dare—the grim enigma of the shaggy-browed monster from the dawn of Earth—who spoke with human tongue...*

THEY sat upon perches like birds in the dingy room with its faintly offensive odor. For the most part they were silent as owls, but occasionally one of the monkeys broke into a shrill chattering, and when this happened the others turned their heads sharply and regarded the noisemaker with manifest disgust. The purposeless solemnity of the animals contrasted uncannily with the curious who passed along through the monkey-house.

That slight and offensive odor as well as the sawdust on the floor made the room seem something like a circus menagerie, yet there was a difference. Other

animals, whether, a lion or a wolf, return the gaze of man with a look partly of awe and partly of fear, but the monkey stares back with a certain intimate curiosity which at the same time thrills and horrifies a human being.

There were a few who passed among the monkeys with a careful scrutiny, sometimes stopping for quite a time before one perch and walking around and around the chained exhibit; they were the purchasing agents for circuses and zoos.

The majority of the people in the room went about without purpose, laughing and talking with one another. Aside from the monkeys the only motionless figure there was an old white-bearded man, a patrician figure, who stood in a corner with one arm folded across his breast and his chin resting in the palm of his other hand. He seemed to observe nothing but to dream in philosophic meditation.

He started now into an attentive attitude, and as he did so moved from the shadow which had hitherto veiled his head, and the light fell upon a singularly ugly face which the venerable beard could not disguise. Under the beard the line of the jaw showed square and powerful; the nose squat and misshapen with stiffly distended nostrils, the eyes supernally bright under the frowning arch of great, bony brows, the forehead slanting steeply back to an unmanageable gray forelock; the lip pushed up to a sneer by a fanglike tooth rising from the lower jaw. And at that briefly receding brow, that strangely bright eye and the ominous sneer, an observer stared in terror. Afterward he could not fail to observe that the eye was bright not with malice but with understanding and he felt sympathy and respect for a figure so grotesque and yet so manly. If at first that face suggested an ape, in a moment it set one searching his memory for significantly ugly men, calling up the figures of Socrates and Aesop.

That which had roused the strange old man from his meditation was the sight of a dapper youth who was standing close to an immense orang-utan, which was shackled securely in an opposite corner. The big monkey squatted on his haunches braced with his long arms and was apparently asleep. His observer leaned over with one hand upon his knee and extended, his walking-stick to rouse the creature, which made a vague and sleepy motion with one hand and immediately resumed its somnolent attitude.

At this dreamlike and grotesque movement the young man laughed and, moving a little closer, passed the point of his cane across the top of the monkey's head, but this time failed to elicit any response whatever. Confident that the big ape was now asleep, and eager for amusement, he tapped it sharply across the shoulder. What happened was as astonishing as if a grotesque statue of Buddha had come to life to startle an unbeliever.

The orang-utan seized the point of the walking-stick and jerked it violently toward him, the force of the act throwing the man off his balance. Finding himself reeling toward the ape he shouted and strove to regain his poise, but the long arm of his victim darted out again and his hand closed upon the wrist of his inquisitor. The shout of the endangered man was heard and a score of people rushed toward the place, but it was obvious that no help could come in time. The struggles of the man infuriated the monkey, who drew him close and then shifted his grip. With one hand he clutched the throat of the fallen man and with the other seized him by the hair and jerked back his head, at the same time baring a set of yellow teeth

as dangerous as a tiger's fangs. The strength of a dozen men could not have torn the man from the orangutan's grip.

Suddenly the old man who had stepped from the shadow a moment before cried out in a loud voice. It was a singular sound, not a mere cry of fear or alarm, yet certainly not an exclamation in the tongue of any nation of civilized man. Nevertheless, the effect upon the orang-utan was remarkable. First he raised his head and surveyed with a wandering glance the crowd that encircled him; then he stood erect, dragging up the struggling man with him, but apparently no longer thinking of vengeance.

"Don't struggle!" shouted the voice of the director of the monkey-house.

A tall old man with Herculean shoulders, as he spoke he came running toward the scene carrying a pikestaff. He stopped in utter bewilderment for the white-bearded man had continued his approach fearlessly toward the ape. As he came he uttered another sound, unquestionably addressing the orang-utan. It lacked the shrillness of his first call. It was a harsh and guttural muttering prolonged for several seconds. The monkey dropped its victim heedlessly to the floor.

"Save the old man!" cried one of the nearest men, turning in appeal to the director, for the great ape was now almost in reach of the white-bearded interloper.

A general movement started toward the scene, and for a moment half a dozen men were crying out at once. It seemed as if they had gathered, courage from their numbers and were about to rush the orang-utan and bear him down with their united force. As they came nearer, however, the ape crouched lower to the floor, as if prepared to meet their attack. His eyes shone red with anger and he uttered a doglike snarl that stopped the would-be rescuers mid rush.

AGAIN the old man spoke to the orang-utan. The ape stood up like a man, intent to listen and forgetful of all else in the place. The fire died from his eye while he uttered a gibbering murmur strangely like the "sound which had come from the lips of the man. So singular, indeed, was the resemblance that a whisper of indrawn breath rose from the circle and all eyes shifted to the newcomer. He was turning hastily away from this scrutiny half in shame when a new disturbance drew him back. For the young man who had lately been in the hands of the ape had no sooner scrambled to safety on all fours than he arose and, rushing to the director, shook a clenched fist in his face.

"That orang-utan should be caged!" he demanded. "I tell you he's dangerous. If you won't do it the law will do it for you!"

"Keep your hand out of my face, young fellow," responded the director with a frown. "Of course the monkey's dangerous. Don't you see that sign over his corner?"

He pointed to a sign on the wall, "Dangerous. Keep away."

"There is a law to keep man-killers behind bars," raged the youth.

"There should be a similar law for fools," was the response. "Besides, you must have bothered him or he wouldn't have touched you."

"Never came near him," raged the other. "I'll have you jailed for negligence."

"Get the law when you want to," said the director scornfully, "but now I'll teach this damned monkey his lesson."

With that he turned his back on the crowd and approached the orang-utan with his club balanced in his hands. The monkey perceived his purpose at once and cowered back against the wall gibbering furiously.

"You are both the more unwise," said the old man whose voice had quieted the monkey before. "My young friend, your lies cannot rub out the fact that you annoyed the orang-utan. If a man jabbed you with sticks after other men had shackled you in a corner would you submit to the indignity? Not if you were worthy of the name of man. And you, sir, would you whip this monkey as if he were a tame dog which had done wrong? I tell you this orang-utan is a lord of the lawless forest. In his own land he is a king."

At this unexpected speech, delivered with such an emotionless and impersonal gravity, the youth fell silent, and somewhat agape, but the animal man felt that his dignity and professional importance had been questioned.

"Man and boy," said he, "I have hunted animals in every quarter of the globe these forty years and I've never yet asked advice on how to control them. Strength and fearlessness is all any man needs with them. That I learned from Professor Alexander Middleton."

The older man started.

"Did you know Alexander Middleton?" he asked, peering at the trainer.

"I read a pamphlet of his thirty years or more past. There was a lot of it couldn't fathom, and there was a lot which didn't require book-learning to understand. Add it all up and what you got was something like what I've just said. Strength and fearlessness will make a man master of any wild animal. I tell you I've tried it out half a lifetime and it has never led me wrong. Therefore, my old friend, though you may have some queer power over this ape, a power which I cannot understand, I say you shall not keep me from punishing him as he deserves. He must be kept familiar with the strength of his master's hand."

With this he turned his back resolutely on the other and faced the orang-utan, striking it sharply across the shoulders. The big monkey flung out with grasping hands the limit of his shackles, where he was brought up to a jangling halt and stood gibbering furiously, a spectacle of such fiendish rage that the spectators shrank back. The trainer stood his ground and the other old man stood with him, barely out of reach of the ape's stiff, extended fingers.

"Go back," said the keeper. "He might break his shackles."

"I have no fear of him. He will not harm me," said the gray stranger. "I know what Alexander Middleton and you have never known, that strength and fearlessness are equally unavailing without kindness."

The director stopped in amazement, lowering his club to the ground as he stared. Then a grin crossed his face.

"I see you're a Christian Scientist!" said he.

"I hardly know," said the other seriously, "but I do know that your strength and your fearlessness have only succeeded in maddening your captive. Look at him now! If you came within reach of his hands nothing could tear you from him. Is this the victory of your fearlessness? Is this the achievement of your strength? I say that both you and your master are fools; fools, fools! Cruelty is your shield and pain is your weapon, for otherwise what would your strength and courage avail

against this dumb beast—dumb to you at least? But see, there is no real harm in him!”

As he spoke he stepped directly toward the huge ape.

“Get back!” shouted the director. “Will you die to prove a theory?”

“No, I will live to prove it still better,” said the other, and advancing still farther he laid his hand on one shoulder of the ape—on the very spot, in fact, where the club of the monkey-dealer had fallen a moment before.

The ape winced like a stricken thing under the touch of the hand. With a lightning movement he prisoned the man’s arm with his great hand, a grip so violent that the whole body of the old man quivered perceptibly. At the same time the formidable yellow fangs were set about the stranger’s wrist. As men cry out when they witness an atrocity they are helpless to prevent, the others at the spot groaned. Only the director was capable of any action.

“Madman!” he cried, and leaped forward, with his staff raised to strike.

The teeth of the ape did not close on the helpless arm. The club of the director never fell. For once again the stranger spoke and at the effect of his voice the director stopped short and cursed softly. Those who had stood nearest thought they could distinguish words in the utterance of the old man, so calm and conversational was his tone. The orang-utan released the arm and raised his head. The eyes which a moment before were red-lighted by the bloodthirst now peered in wonder up to the man. He extended a black and hideous hand and passed it slowly over the face of the interloper. It was like the gesture of a blind man who recognized by touch the face of a friend. He raised the hand which still lay upon his shoulder and smelled it, then peered again with a monkey’s puckering frown of curiosity. He passed his long hand along the man’s body. He felt his clothes. Every touch was as soft as a caress.

His motions ceased. He stood regarding his companion with infinite friendliness.

“Look at them!” muttered Olaf Thorwalt, the animal-director. “The same buried eyes, the same savage teeth, the same receding brow! Except that one of them is dressed in a man’s clothes you would think them brothers, almost!”

“Aye,” said another man as the stranger turned away from the ape, “but for my part I think I had rather have trouble with the monkey than the man.”

“A queer fellow,” said Thorwalt, “but I fear nothing on earth and certainly not this old man. He shall speak to me.”

With this he went boldly up to the object of their comment.

“I have fought and captured monkeys from Cape Town to the Sahara,” he said, “but I have never seen them handled as you have handled this one, and before you go I want to hear the secret of the trick.”

“Trick?” said the other coldly, and then smiled. “At least it is a trick which you could never have learned from the pages of Alexander Middleton. If you will come to this address I will tell you something about it tonight.”

He passed Thorwalt a card and walked hurriedly away from the curiosity of the observers.

THAT evening Olaf Thorwalt, the animal man, stood at the door of one of the most gloomily exclusive dwellings in Boston’s most drably selected residence section. But neither the servant who opened the door to him, nor the richly

shimmering hardwood floor of the hall in which he stepped, nor the ponderous magnificence of two Barye bronzes which stood pedestaled in that hall served to overawe him.

He had been before the rich and the great many times. He had roamed the world searching for hard ventures and he had found his share and he had carried with him the doctrine of fearlessness and strength as other men carry a Bible, or as his own Viking ancestors had borne shield and sword a few brief centuries before. He had trapped in Canada, fished the Bearing Sea, fought head hunters in Borneo and the Solomon Islands, hunted tigers in India, and shot big game of a thousand sorts through the mysterious length and breadth of Africa.

Now he shook back his heavy shoulders and stepped through the second door through which the servant bowed him. He found himself in a long and high-ceiled room of Gothic stateliness and gloom. The tall and narrow window only deepened the gravity of the apartment. The light from the logs which flamed in a great open hearth was ineffectual to fight off the dimness, but set the room adrift with slipping shadows. From the farther end of this room his host advanced to meet him.

“I am Olaf Thorwalt,” said the trainer in his deep voice.

“And I am William Cory,” said the older man in his soft tone, as he took the hand of his visitor and led him to a chair near the hearth.

“Do you object to the dim light?” asked Cory.

Thorwalt noted that an open book lay face down on the arm of Cory’s chair and there was an unlighted reading-lamp on a round table near by. His host had been reading before he came, but it was not difficult to imagine why he preferred to talk with another in semidarkness, for a brighter flare of the fire fell at that moment on his face and threw into brief relief the ugliness of his features, almost ludicrously homely, like a grotesque Japanese mask.

“We can hear as well in the dark,” said Olaf Thorwalt.

“Very good,” said Cory, “and now tell me what you wish to know about the late Alexander Middleton.”

Thorwalt locked his big hands together and leaned earnestly forward toward his host.

“How did you know I wished to speak of him?” he asked at last. “But let that question go. It isn’t Middleton alone who brings me to you, Mr. Cory. I have hunted through Africa, sir, and like all true African hunters, I believe that a great monkey mystery exists. I saw you quiet that orang-utan today. What you did mystifies me. I thought you might care to tell me what you would not tell those who have not known the jungles. It is a secret?”

For some time Cory sat silent with his face half veiled by one hand, its conformation showing between his fingers.

“You are a frank man, Mr. Thorwalt,” he said, “and I will be equally frank with you—franker than I have ever been with mortal man, and for many reasons. First, because you knew of the man, Alexander Middleton, and have followed his teaching of strength and fearlessness—”

“Aye, followed it like a Bible all my life!” said Thorwalt.

It seemed as though a shudder passed through the body of Cory,

“And therefore it is my duty to show you the falsehood of that doctrine,” said he. “You have dealt with animals all your life and must know their powers intimately. And, above all, Olaf Thorwalt, you have been in the jungle; you have known the heartbreaking silences wherein all things are possible and wherein the laws which govern the rest of the world are void.”

The last phrase was half a question. Thorwalt stirred in his chair and nodded.

“Aye,” he said in a more subdued voice, “I was lost three days in the forest five hundred miles up the Congo. I was near mad before I found my way back to the river. After that I knew that Africa had a heaven and a hell of its own.”

Cory sighed deeply.

“Then I will tell you the tale which has been heavy in me these years!”

He drew himself suddenly rigid in the chair and clenched a hand above his head as if in imprecation.

“These unending years!” he said softly, and then: “Pardon me for this, Thorwalt. But now you shall hear. I have waited knowing that one day I must tell this thing or else in time go mad. I have waited for a strong and a brave and an open-minded man. And now you shall hear a story which will enter the secret places of your soul.”

“It shall never be repeated by my tongue,” said Olaf, deeply moved by Cory’s wild emotion.

The other man acknowledged the words with a gesture. He seemed already lost in the prodigious vision of his narrative.

“Look up there,” he said suddenly, and pointed to a head sculptured in pure white marble.

It stood on a tall pedestal at one side of the hearth and as it looked down on them in the changing lights of the fire it seemed smiling and alive. It was such a head as Phidias might have modeled for an Apollo, a majestic and open forehead, a strong nose, lips pressed somewhat together as if in resolve, and a forceful chin which lent power to the whole face.

“There is Alexander Middleton,” said Cory, “who passed from this world forever—thirty-two years ago!”

There was something in his manner of speaking, something of solemnity, grief, and horror mingled, that caused Thorwalt to rise as if to change his chair for one closer to the fire. In reality he desired to look more closely at the speaker.

“Aside from the one book which I read—and only understood a part of that, for I am not a learned man,” said he, “I know nothing of Middleton. And has the story to do with him?” There was a trace of disappointment in his tone, as of one who expected a tale of adventure and not a narrative in which figured a professor of anthropology.

“He was a god among men,” said Cory, oblivious of his listener. “Yes, looking back on him now I see that he was a man with purposes higher than those of most men and with strength and will to accomplish them.

“I think it was his own tremendous physical strength—he was heavily built and as—as tall as I—or you—it was this great bodily strength and also the logical powers of his mind which made him a materialist in his philosophy. And his materialism made him justify force for its own sake. He used to say that all men

can be weighed by their mental and physical energy and estimated as to value as one would estimate the horse-power of a machine.

“And when he went on in his studies of the physical powers of man and his mental development, the most fascinating of all subjects, anthropology, engrossed him. But he stayed at one point in a long period of debate. He believed in his heart that man was truly descended from a species of ape, but his material and logical mind needed a solid proof of the fact. Mere theory would not satisfy him.

“At twenty-five he had published three small essays upon his favorite subject. The first of these was evidently the one which found its way into your hands. Those tracts are forgotten now. But when they were published they were sensations. You would find them on the tables of all scientific men. The writings of Middleton were discussed at afternoon teas on the one hand and in college halls on the other.

“SO at twenty-five, at an age when most men are making their feeble beginnings at life, Middleton possessed not only scholastic repute but popular fame as well; a large fortune, a young and lovely wife, and a mind which, in my opinion, and I have known many brilliant men, was inferior to that of no scientist, young or old, in all Europe. Aye, if ever there was a darling of the gods it was young Alexander Middleton.

“But a little thing will divert the course of life, and it was a legend told to Middleton by an old Voodoo that changed the course of his, a tale of marvels and witchcraft and strange gods in the southwestern mountains of Abyssinia; gods, in fact, who lived upon the earth and were visible to the eyes of the priests who served them. They were larger than men, they were stronger than men, they were vastly wiser—and they dwelt in caves and in the trees!

“It was upon that last slender clue that Middleton pondered long and hard. It would seem incredible that so slight a fact—if, indeed, there were any facts at all in the story of the Voodoo, three-fourths of which was manifest nonsense—could take a man from England, take a man from the midst of a life such as I have outlined to you, and lure him across a thousand leagues and more into a wilderness.

“But that is what it did to Middleton. He left his home and all the safer hopes of happiness to climb this moonbeam ladder which he dreamed might lead to fame. For in the strange Abyssinian gods he saw that which is popularly termed the missing link—a species of creature half ape and half man and with the possibility of development in itself until it works out a higher destiny like that of man.

“Middleton went directly to Cairo. There he assembled a company of twenty-five picked men pledged to follow his orders without question, desperate fellows who loved excitement more than life, and all men who had been hardened to the climate of Africa. If there is a last reckoning, what account could Middleton make for the lives of twenty-five strong and brave men thrown away for a glimpse of a wild and horrible dream?

“Disaster dogged that expedition. Four men died of a virulent fever before they reached the upper portion of the Nile. Another was crippled by a fall shortly after leaving the river on the march for the mountains, and had to be abandoned in a friendly native village. Two more fell when a band of desert plunderers made a determined night-attack upon Middleton’s little caravan. But it was out of this



enemy that he captured the guide who was afterward to lead him to the land of his desire.

"It was a little, withered old man, perched on the top of a horse like a monkey and holding onto the mane with one hand while he screamed directions to his followers. Middleton shot his mount cleanly through the withers, and the nag dropped, carrying his rider with him in the fall. This put the followers of the old imp to flight, and Middleton's men carried him back to their tents for the night.

"A servant was found who could understand the speech of the old man. It turned out that he was a famous voodoo doctor, whose powers were respected far and wide throughout those regions. But great as were the powers of his magic arts, the power of a well-aimed bullet was far greater, and the Voodoo knew this perfectly. Moreover, he was well treated by the white men, and finally consented to accompany the expedition as a guide.

"It was on the third evening after the Voodoo joined the company that he stole a bottle of strong cordial and drained it. The result was a long delirium, in the first stages of which he proved extremely talkative, and it was at this time that Middleton, who had picked up a good many of the curious old man's phrases, heard him speak of the race of gods, stronger and wiser than men, who live in caves or—in the trees! Middleton had already noted that physically, and in his dialect, the old man was essentially different from the other natives of the party. He made up his mind now that the Voodoo had probably come from a great distance. Why not from the very land of the strange gods Middleton sought?

"The moment this thought entered his head it became a certainty. As soon as the Voodoo had sufficiently recovered from his sickness Middleton questioned him closely, but when the questions turned upon this subject the Voodoo refused to speak farther, and showed the most abject terror. Neither threats nor promises of reward could induce him to talk.

"Middleton became greatly excited, and held the Voodoo without bread or water for two days before the man would talk freely. By that time his spirit was broken, and he consented to do his white master's bidding, at the same time prophesying the most horrible disaster if they should attempt to penetrate to the dwelling places of these gods. He could not, or would not, tell the nature of this threatened disaster, but he spoke sometimes of a 'curse' and then fell silent; and there was none among them, not even Middleton himself, who could make him speak farther.

"Fear was on him and checked his speech, yet he submitted dumbly when Middleton informed him that he was to accompany the expedition to the places where the strange gods lived. Beyond a doubt he felt that he was traveling to the scene of his death. But that death was, at least, a distant probability, and the death at the hands of the white men if he refused to obey their orders was a grim and sudden fact.

"So he stuck solemnly to his task of guiding Middleton's party toward the *Imenani*.

"Note that this is pronounced with the three consonants almost mute. They represent hardly more than slurs between the vowels, such as might be the translation of the slow speech of a man of a cultured race. The Voodoo called the strange gods the *Imenani*. Eliminating the three consonants, one finds a word

made up entirely of vowels, *Ieai*. But you are not familiar with Greek, and therefore you will not see at once the possible significance of this spelling.

“THE natural barriers which protected the Imenani from the outside world were stupendous. It was difficult to see how a naked savage, such as the Voodoo, could have made his way from that far country, even in the whole course of a lifetime. For it seemed as if all the terrors of nature had been drawn upon to fortify the stronghold of the Imenani. First came a broad belt of desert, to the north and south of which the up-vaulting mountains cut off the coolness of the rain-bearing winds. From this veritable valley of death emerged the party of Middleton without loss. There were thirteen men, aside from the Voodoo and the leader himself, who came to the belt of the marshes.

“This lay at the southern side of the valley of the desert (the *Valley of White Fire*, as the Voodoo called it). Over it rolled perpetual clouds at a great height. The winds which crossed the Valley of the White Fire rolled their cargo of vapors against the higher and cooler slopes of the southern and western mountains, and consequently, as this moisture condensed suddenly, there was a great and steady precipitation along this entire face of the mountains, and dependent only upon the steadiness and violence of the wind above.

“The result was that the white desert changed suddenly into a series of pale-green marshes, a region of poisonous vapors with no dry land. This belt was comparatively narrow, and soon gave onto the healthy upper slopes of the mountains, but the long trip across the desert had weakened the entire party. There were eight natives employed as servants, and all of these contracted fevers, so that they had to be carried out by their white masters. Despite the use of preventives and their care in drinking only boiled water, the whites also began to be affected before they had spent the second night in the marshes.

“Four natives died in the miasmatic swamps, and when the weakened others, after abandoning half of their baggage, came out on the mountain slopes and pitched a camp to recuperate, the healthier of the white men, led on by Middleton, who seemed immune from all troubles of whatever nature, were forced to nurse their afflicted companions through a long and painful period. During this time the four remaining natives died, and an equal number of the whites were victims of the fevers.

“When these evils were finally conquered, the party held a consultation. Out of the original twenty whites there were now only nine alive, aside from Middleton. The only other addition to the group was the Voodoo, and it was doubtful whether he was more of an aid than a menace to the welfare of the rest. The total number of deaths, counting both natives and whites, was now nineteen. Out of twenty-nine, there now remained but ten.

“The majority held that they should turn back on their tracks and recross the marshes: It was pointed out that they were probably now immune to the marsh fevers, and that they had an excellent chance of breaking back across the marshes and the desert and coming again to the inhabited parts of Abyssinia, or by a more westerly route to the headwaters of the Nile. But if they kept on in their present direction they knew not what lay before them, and the objectors pointed grimly up to the white peaks which rose sheer above them.

“But all of these were overborne by Middleton. It was as if he were determined to take the responsibility for all these lives upon his own shoulders. He went among the men in the evening. He talked with them separately and broke down their resolve to return; and finally he rallied them when they were about to turn back, and had packed their equipment for that purpose. He declared that if they abandoned him, he would attempt the rest of the journey alone.

“They were, as I have said, picked men, and when they witnessed his resolution they determined to bear him out, though by this time he was the only one of the party who did not dread the result of this ill-omened expedition.

“In two days they had climbed to the laborious top of the range of mountains, and here they were caught in a belt of arctic cold before they could cross the peaks and descend to the warmer slopes on the southwestern side of the mountains. Two men perished from this exposure. The cold drove the others on. They could not stop to dig graves or to perform a decent ceremony, but left their two fellows lying stark among the mountain snows and pressed on for life.

“It was not far to go now from the danger of the cold. The mountain slopes gave down easily from the summit and led the party to a more gentle air, and then into a belt of pleasant evergreens. They made no pause to enjoy the change, but went on at a quick march down the hills, then up the less-aspiring rise of a second range; and on the evening of the fourth day, after passing the first range, they came out on the top of a peak of the second and lower range.”

Here Cory fell silent, looking fixedly at the fire while a vague smile stirred on his face. Thorwalt, after waiting a moment, leaned forward to speak, but as he did so a flare of the fire showed Cory’s face more clearly, and something in it made the other man sit back quietly in his chair and wait.

There was a pause of several minutes, and while it continued Thorwalt turned his eyes upon the head of young Middleton. The firelight made it almost alive with meaning: beautiful, strong, young, resolved, a man who might conquer the world. And he looked from the bust back to Cory with his animal ugliness, his white age. There was a reserve which disguised his strength and made it now seem even greater than that of the young Hercules of the marble bust, and instead of resolve there was the seal of meditation, but not the meditation of impotent age.

If the strength of Middleton suggested a power which might conquer the world, the silent thought of Cory suggested a power which had done with the world and its conquests and had turned to something beyond.

“THERE is power in quiet,” went on Cory—“power and a wonder in the majesty of still life, and because of the horrors they had passed through, perhaps, or because of their utter weariness and fatigue, this power of silence came over Middleton and his men with a species of awe. For they looked down upon a magnificent valley, from whose beauty the mountains stepped solemnly back upon all sides.

“The last crimson of the evening glowed still upon the ridges and the upper peaks, but in the hollow heart of the valley the unutterable peace of night had already come, and through the center a river drove a rapidly winding line of white.

“And they had come upon all this suddenly, as one upon a lonely road turns at a quick bend into the view of habitation; for all the days before they had walked

either in the flat desert or among the upthronging peaks, and here, as they rounded a mountain side, they came at a step upon the voiceless promise of content. Where they stood the side of the mountain shelved out into a shoulder, whose inner arm dropped precipitously.

“It was on the very point of this shoulder that the wizened Voodoo stepped. The others paid little attention to him, saving Middleton, who always kept an eye on the man. He walked out until he seemed to totter on the very verge of the precipice. It came to Middleton that the Voodoo was about to cast himself into the valley rather than enter the land of his gods living. He started forward to intercept him when he saw that the man had some other purpose.

“He raised his arms slowly above his head and lifted his face, a thin and pitiable figure against the obscure and monstrous outline of the peak across the valley, and as he stood he commenced to sing, swaying slightly from side to side in rhythm with his chant.

“It was hardly a song. There was variable tune. The changes were those of accent rather than musical notes, but as the chant ran on in a sharp drone, Middleton picked up the sense of the words, and they sent a chill through his blood. He looked to his companions. They could understand the speech of the Voodoo, at least to some degree, and there was such utter despair in the chant that Middleton could see his followers look to one another frowningly.

“Over and over the Voodoo repeated his chant. Translated freely into English rime, though the original defied both critical translation and rime, the chant might be rendered somewhat as follows:

*There are three barriers ye must pass  
Of water, snow, and fire,  
And one more grim than all the three  
Before ye rest eternally  
In the Land of Deep Desire.*

*“The strong may cross the watery bar,  
The brave defy the fire,  
The patient pass the cold at length,  
But what avails a threefold strength  
In the Land of Deep Desire?”*

“A strange anger came over Middleton as he listened, a great feeling of impotence. He suppressed with a flush of shame the first sullen desire to seize the Voodoo and hurl him into the valley, but he had other work than the venting of his malice. The second phase of open dissension had come over the men.

“Now I want you to mark the sort of men who were following Middleton.

“They were seven in all, after the deaths of the two, in the last snows of the mountains. They were seven men chosen from among twenty by the impartial hand of sickness and exposure. Every one of the original twenty had been a man inured to danger and labor in a hundred parts of the world. The seven who now remained, gaunt and sunken-eyed men, were by proof-positive the hardest and the strongest-spirited of the whole number.

“First, there was Tom Mulford, a Cockney Englishman, who had been a farmer, a sailor, and chiefly a purposeless adventurer since he left the East End.

“Herman Fiedler, a German, was big, blond, and gentle. He had picked up the American habit of chewing tobacco, and his favorite diversion was to sit by the fire at night with his chin resting on both his hands and spit with astonishing accuracy at various embers, the while he reminisced of Munich beer-gardens in a dull voice.

“Jim White filled the picture of the typical Yankee, with large hands and feet and a lean neck. He had never lost the twang of his New England fathers. A disagreeable fellow, forever sneering and arguing and finding the darkest side of every predicament.

“George Duval was probably a Frenchman, though no one could ever get him to talk about his native land. But he had a stock of legends as old as Marie de France and as surely Breton. He was little and wiry, and he carried a needle and thread in his pack with which he was always doing mending, either for himself or for one of his mates.

“Musab, the Arab, had little to do with the rest of the party. Possibly he felt that he had fallen below his station in life, for, from his manner and his reserve, he must have descended from the family of some desert chief. He was the oldest member of the party and the most self-sufficient. When it was possible he would retire apart and prepare his own mess in his own way rather than contaminate his stomach with Christian food. Only the high pay had tempted him to go on this expedition.

“Tony Baccigalupi was a rosy-cheeked Italian boy of not more than twenty-two or three years. He was forever laughing; and yet, despite his youth and his laughter, he had a criminal record behind him as long as that of the villain in a detective story.

“It is rare, indeed, to find a man as ugly as the Swede—John Erickson. He had lost one eye in a knife fight. A black patch of leather covered the place, but the white scar ran down the forehead and the cheek above and below the eye. A deep seam on either side of his mouth made him seem to smile perpetually, yet he was a mirthless man. And when he spoke his face was contorted and his mouth drew far to one side, for his cheek was drawn taut on the side of the scar, and made his speech a study in the grotesque.

“Make a note, Thorwalt, that every man was of a different nationality. If superstition had some influence upon them in the affairs which followed, it must have been some international legend. Or perhaps you will say that the terrific hardships which these men had passed had made them susceptible to imaginary evils. I will not say no to this. But I know that when Middleton looked around at his fellows, he knew that some force was working upon the Voodoo, and that the same force was operating upon those seven hard-headed, experienced adventurers.

“More than that, when he examined his own emotions he found a deep and inexplicable awe. He felt inwardly that he was now about to front a danger, compared with which the desert, the marsh, and the mountains had been nothing. He remembered the song of the Voodoo with forebodings. He was not surprised

when Musab stepped a little forward from his fellows. He was always composed. He spoke now with even more than his usual dignity.

“There is truth in the words of the stranger,’ he said, indicating the Voodoo with a gesture, ‘and there is truth in his song. Fear does not lie, and that man fears. So do we all. Fear has come and sat down among us as we look down into the valley; it is hotter than the sun in the desert and it is colder than the snows of the mountains.’

“Now I say that there is truth in the song of the stranger. For look back upon our journey. Were we not a score in strength at the beginning? Where have they gone? They are dead in the river, in the desert, and marshes, on the peak of the mountain. And we must pass again to our land by the way that we traveled to this. Therefore, I say, let us not enter the valley, for the stranger man has said that there dwells here that which is more terrible than fire, and flood, and cold! Let us be wise and consider. My voice is that we turn back from the unknown!’

“AS HE ceased he thrust his hands again into the loose sleeves, folded his arms, and stepped back within the group. But his words worked for him. Mulford argued heatedly that he would go no farther until a vote had been taken on the project. One after another they took the side of the Arab, all except Erickson, who stood in the background, seeming to mock the entire discussion with his habitual leer.

“Middleton stared, about at his companions with a hysterical desire to laugh. These men, who had faced a thousand trials with the leanness of tremendous labor upon them, were turning back now because of the song of a grotesque one; and his search for the *missing link*, which would prove that the only divinity in man was his own force, would be a failure when it had come so far to the very edge of what he felt to be success.

“And the worst of his emotion was that he felt within his own heart the same fear which was making his fellows look askance into the darkening hollow of the valley.

“But he laughed aside his fears; and the sound of his laughter gave him new assurance. He talked to his companions simply and gravely. He explained in detail and in words of one syllable all his purposes in coming to this land. He told them how he hoped that this race of monkey-gods would prove to be those men-monkeys, or monkey-men, which would supply the last gap between the ape and the human being. He went a step farther; explaining to them in a measure what this would mean to both science and religion. Carried away by his emotion as he talked, he reiterated his determination to proceed in his quest, with or without assistance. In the end they swung around to his opinion, all except the Arab.

“But when it came to entering the valley, which by this time was dim with night, they found that the Voodoo could not be persuaded to accompany them. He was in a panic, and when they started to drag him along the little man resisted furiously.

“You are a fool!’ said Middleton. ‘Are there not both rifles and strong men to protect you in the valley of your gods?’

“What is the strength of bullets or of men against them?’ moaned the miserable Voodoo. ‘The strength with which you crossed the—Are, the water, and the cold, do you think it will help you now?’

“No argument would budge him. At last Middleton pressed the muzzle of a rifle against the small of his back, and this persuasion induced him to rise and pass down the slope into the heart of the valley, but every step of the way Middleton heard him muttering charms and invocations.

“They camped that night by the bank of the river, and with the murmur of the broad stream beside them, the quiet of the stars overhead, and the cheer of the open fire, the spirits of the men rose again, and they jested in turn at the Voodoo. But even after the rest of the party had rolled up in their blankets and were fast asleep, no peace came to Middleton. For he was either on the verge of discovery which would rock the realm of man’s knowledge to the feet, or at the point of mocking failure. The moon rose late and floated coldly white over the mountain tops.

“Then Middleton threw aside his blankets and strode up the bank of the river, listening to the rush of the water and watching the moonpath on the stream, for his hopes and his doubts tortured him. Perhaps it was because he had no thought of discovery that he came upon the prodigy then.

“He had turned from the bank of the stream into an open space with great trees standing like spectators on the edges of the clearing, and the moon as clear as day in the center. When Middleton came to the middle of the place he stood a while with upward eyes because of the dark-columned majesty of this natural temple, with the purple mountains jutting against the far-away sky. It was at this moment that he saw between the roots of two forest giants a sitting figure. The moon, as I have said, was shining very clearly.

“He saw a shape of great size—” went on Cory.

“Sitting?” broke in Thorwalt incredulously.

“Sitting like a man with his legs crossed,” replied Cory placidly; “and his arms were folded like an image of a grotesque Buddha.”

Thorwalt shook his head.

“I believe you are an honest man, Mr. Cory,” he said, “but I have watched monkeys for a good many years and I have never seen an ape take the position you describe, or any position nearly as human.”

“Nevertheless,” answered Cory, somewhat impatiently, “the thing which Middleton saw sat in the posture I have described. He saw an ape which, at that distance, was more like a gorilla than any species he had ever heard of or seen, though even at that distance, and in the moonlight, he could perceive notable differences. The stomach, for instance, seemed less obtrusive. The arms were comparatively short.”

“Short?” asked Thorwalt.

“I said *short!*” said Cory in a louder voice—“shorter than my own arms!”

He stretched them wide. They seemed longer than human and infinitely more powerful through the swift gesture.

“Middleton stood breathless as a child when it comes before an unexpected turn of the road and sees the garden of its dreams. The ape turned its head, perceived him, and rose to its feet, still with its arms folded.”

There was a little crackling sound in the room. It was the stem of Thorwalt’s pipe which had snapped between his teeth.

“He rose to his feet,” continued Cory, “and then unfolding his arms, wonderful and incredible to behold! without fear this creature walked half a dozen paces toward him—with the stride of a poised man!”

Thorwalt sprang to his feet.

“Sir,” he said rapidly, “I swear I believe you are a truthful man, but no monkey since the beginning of time has *ever* stood erect and walked in the manner you have described!”

“Do I not know it?” exclaimed Cory excitedly. “Did not Middleton know it when he looked on the prodigy? Did he not know that no ape in human knowledge had ever risen and walked erect with a certainty and poise so human? Thorwalt, the creature he looked upon, was that thing which a thousand explorers of the tropics have dreamed of and searched for, but have never found. It was the *pithecanthropus erectus*! It was the erect ape!”

“The erect ape!” repeated Thorwalt softly.

CORY stopped a moment, breathing hard. Thorwalt resumed his chair, but sat leaning far forward and with his eyes fixed upon Cory’s as a bird stares at a snake.

“Middleton marked all this with the accuracy of a trained investigator,” went on the narrator. “There might have been doubt had an ordinary observer marked these things; but Middleton, as I have said, was a cold-minded lover of truth for the sake of truth. There before his eyes he saw the possibility of verifying all his theories. Would he allow any detail to miss his examination, hurried as it had to be?”

“The great ape was apparently five feet eight or nine inches in height. His legs were fleshier than those of the gorilla, and their curvature was hardly greater than that of a man. His lips were thicker and the teeth less protrusive; the forehead far higher.”

He paused again with closed eyes as if he were recalling the vision of the scene.

“Sir,” said Thorwalt, “I am trying desperately to doubt what you are saying, but on my honor I cannot help but believe!”

“There was an almost human definiteness of the outline of the nose,” went on Cory. “The hair on the face was thin. There was a patch of gray hair in the center of the head, perhaps the result of scalp wound. No ape since the beginning of time had ever resembled this creature. The surety made him half sick. What was the thing?”

“He reached for his revolver. Five minutes of surgical work would resolve his doubts forever. But what of the doubts of the world? Would scientists give credence to this written report of a monstrosity discovered in the center of darkest Africa? He relinquished his grip on the handle of the weapon.

“The better way would be to capture it, bring it back to civilization alive, and with this living specimen bridge the gap between man and the dumb brutes to prove his own theory that the only god in man is the god of cold intellect. Nothing more was needed. The mind of a child could understand this proof. He would establish at one stroke a place in the annals of the world’s significant men!”

“Greater than them all!” cried Thorwalt. “What is even the discoverer of a new world of land compared with the discovered truth of man’s origin?”



“At the thought,” went on Cory, “Middleton threw up his hands and cried aloud in exultation. The creature whirled and started back toward the trees which it had just quitted. The first few steps were a shambling but springy run, unmistakably like that of a man. Then it stumbled and rolled on the ground. Middleton whipped out his revolver and poised it, but as he drew the bead the strange thought came to him, that this might not be hunting, but actual murder.

“As he dropped the weapon to his side again the creature recovered from its fall and started once more toward the sheltering trees, but this time scrambling along on all fours for all the world like any other frightened and hurrying monkey. When it reached the trees it went up a trunk with an agility of which no human being could be capable. A moment later it disappeared in the upper branches.”

“And was lost?” exclaimed Thorwalt in a rueful voice.

“An army of searchers could not have followed it,” said Cory. “This thought occurred to Middleton. Perhaps he would never see the creature again. As he listened to the dying crackle of the twigs a great sense of failure suddenly came over him.

“After a moment the crackling ceased, and Middleton heard a voice in a far-away tree-top. Once again he thrilled and started, and for a very good reason. You have handled animals of a hundred species, Thorwalt, but you must know that beyond a few imitative creatures there is nothing in the world which is capable of syllabification, saving man.

“Do not misunderstand me. The voice which Middleton heard in the tree was not similar to that of any known species of man. Nevertheless, there was a remote relation. It was this faint similarity which held his careful attention.

“There were no pauses in the utterance of the animal. There were, indeed, no actual and distinct words which could be remembered and repeated, for the sounds blended; but they were more than a mere noisy expression of emotion. They were grouped and they had continuity.

“The human voice in narration is generally a monotone. This voice which came chattering down to Middleton was a monotone also, a continued and purposeful sound. Its significance was at once emphasized, for when the voice ceased there rose an answering burst of shrill animal cries, in comparison, utterly harsh and discordant.

“Then there was a stirring among the upper branches. He could see nothing, but he felt acutely that a thousand eyes were looking out upon him from the covert.

“THE FIRST voice began again. He knew it must be the voice of the ape which he had seen. Perhaps he could never prove this to the world, but he knew in his heart that the singular utterance he had heard from the tree-top came from none other than the *pithecanthropus erectus* which he had seen only a few moments before.

“But there was no purpose to be accomplished by remaining longer in the place. He turned and went slowly back toward the camp. That night he lay awake in his blankets and watched the camp-fire flicker up into the dark. He read his future clearly then.

“He bridged the arduous return through the snows and the desert and the marshes back to the headwaters of the Nile. He even planned how he would clothe the great ape so as to protect it from the weather. Once on the Nile, the remainder of the trip toward England was simple.

“Once in England—ah, once in England! They were all there, the fellows of his studies, the professors who had first guided him. There were audiences to listen to his lectures, to wonder and to believe.

“Still more—with this physical proof established, he should resume his writings. He would enunciate once more his former doctrines. He would elaborate them. They were susceptible of being expanded into an entire system of philosophy. His name would have in the eyes of the world a significance as great as those of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Kant. He laughed softly to himself.

“He was up before the rest in the morning, and he spent that entire day wandering in the forest in the vicinity of the place where he had seen the ape the night before. It occurred to Middleton that perhaps the tree-dweller had been alarmed by the sight of the man and had wandered with his tribe into a distant portion of the forest.

“The second day also gave him no clues, and he was on the point of giving up the search and moving to a more distant portion of the forest. But he determined to spend one more day in this vicinity. It was about an hour after the start that he came upon a stream, and crossing to the opposite bank, he found the print of a foot.

“At first he thought it must have been a trace of one of his party who had bathed in the pool, perhaps. But when he examined it more closely it seemed to him that the spread of the great toe away from the print of the other toes was larger than human, and the indentation of the end of the toes was pronounced, while the heel mark was barely perceptible.

“The details convinced him that he was upon the trail of one of the tree-dwellers, though whether that trail led into the trees or continued along the ground he could not tell.

“After a close examination of the neighboring trees he went on cautiously through the forest, and, discovering a continuous opening through the trees which wound back and forth like a path, he held to this trail and in time came upon the same footprints which he had found at the bank of the stream. By this time he was convinced that he had come on the desired trail, and he went forward now with the caution of an Indian trapper.

“His caution did not serve him. At least it was misdirected, for as he went along, watching the tree-tops before him with a painful scrutiny, stealing from trunk to trunk, his foot slipped on a root and he was flung to the ground. Had he struck the soft sod, he would have been uninjured, but his head fell on the butt of his own rifle and the contact rendered him unconscious.

“He recovered his senses with the coolness of water upon his face. He opened his eyes and looked up into the blue of the sky. A second later he was immersed again. He started to struggle, for he felt two strong arms about his body. As soon as he stirred he was drawn up to the air again with his wits entirely returned. He saw the gray-headed tree-dweller who bore him in his arms and had carried him thus from the spot where he fell back to the stream.”

“Cory,” said Thorwalt, “that is possible, and yet—”

“If you begin to doubt here, you will laugh at the remainder of this story, Thorwalt,” said Cory with the utmost gravity; “for the relation of wonders is just beginning. I do not think the rescue at the hands of the tree-dweller so impossible. He had felt the reviving effects of water. He had doubtless amused himself for some time watching the stealthy progress through the forest.

“He knew Middleton was hunting, for the actions of a trailer, whether man or beast, are unmistakable. He may even have guessed that he himself was the object of the hunt. But when he saw the hunter fall and heard his short cry of pain and surprise, he swung down from the tree and came to the rescue, though what was passing through his animal mind no man can say.

“Yet there was an irony about it. While Middleton was hunting him, gun in hand, the tree-dweller was apart, watching the hunter. The thing which Middleton could not capture by force came to him of its own free will.

“For when Middleton had recovered his senses he was sitting on the bank of the stream, and near him sat in a similar posture the great tree-dweller—for ape he cannot longer be called. Middleton sat within reaching distance of the link which bridged the space between man and beast.

“That he was a unique specimen Middleton was confident. In his searches through the forest he had seen scores of apes of large size, but all of them were unmistakably the beast. The gray-headed tree-dweller was alone. He was a *sport*.

“It is an old and established fact in science that the changes of species do not come gradually, but by sudden leaps which are called sports. For instance, for millions of years a species of tree may retain its peculiar characteristics, and then there will appear one which is a freak and which is different in some significant way from the rest of the species. Perhaps the navel orange developed in this manner from the seeded variety. But let that be as it may, it is certain that sports exist, and what is more probable than that the tree-dweller was a sport of the large species of apes which Middleton had found in its company?

“To him, at least, the matter was proved and closed. He allowed the monkey to examine him without stirring. At first he felt some fear. He knew that those great hands could crush out his life with a single movement. He feared that the strength which had been employed to carry him to the stream might by some brutish freak be diverted into anger. He noted the great yellow fangs, and saw how one of the lower canines pushed up the upper lip so that the creature seemed perpetually to sneer.

“But he was obviously bent on kindness only. Fear of man or hate had not yet entered into that forest. He fumbled at Middleton’s head with his great paw. He caressed his cheek and pinched it with such violence that Middleton almost cried out. But apparently the ape was not malicious, simply wondering at the softness of the skin.

“Middleton spoke to it. The effect of his words was remarkable. The big tree-dweller started and quivered. His eyes filled with wonder and interest. It was the first time it had heard the modulated sound of the human voice. He bent his head to one side and leaned a little closer, for all the world like a man listening to an interesting tale. Middleton reached out his hand and ventured to pat the wild fellow on his shoulder.

"In five minutes more they were fast friends. Ten minutes later they started back to the camp. Sometimes Middleton had difficulty in making the creature keep with him through the forest. He was continually breaking off to tear up some plant and examine the roots, apparently in search of edible varieties. Or he would swing up into a tree at a single leap and make a futile and half playful lunge toward a bird which went screaming off through the leaves.

"Finally Middleton caught him by the hand after one of these careless exploits. They came back into the camp in this manner, hand in hand like two children who had been playing until they were weary. A mighty moment, Thorwalt, when civilized man took the hand of the tree-dweller! Middleton felt as though he were walking with the spirit of some ancestor a thousand times removed, and back into the dimness of the lost centuries.

"THERE is no need of giving the next few days in detail or telling how the tree-dweller became acclimated to the camp. He had adventures with the fire the very first night. Afterward he came whining to Middleton and showed him his singed fingers as if he had been a child. Middleton bandaged the hand. He would not at first eat hot food, though the savory odor evidently tempted him greatly; but he soon learned.

"Toward the men he showed neither fear nor malice, only a great curiosity. And on their part, they at first gave him a sufficient distance. But familiarity bred the inevitable contempt.

"Jim White, the tall and lean American, played a practical joke on *Gray-Head*, as they called him. The tree-dweller responded by catching the man about the waist and hurling him ten feet away as if he had been a child.

"After this scene of violence he was at open war with the men of the camp, with the exception of Middleton. *Gray-Head* refused to have anything to do with the other men, but with Middleton he was perfectly passive and would receive his food from his hands only.

"Then commenced a period of experiment so vital that could a detailed record of it be submitted to the scientific world a hundred theories would be shattered.

"Before Middleton had been watching the tree-dweller for two days he decided beyond doubt that the strange creature had the power of speech, and he set himself to learn *Gray-Head's* vocabulary. At first he could make no progress, but after he achieved a starting-point Middleton learned rapidly. There were no verbs in that language. It was merely a series of names. But as nearly as he could discover, the language of the tree-dweller included quite a large number of sounds, each of which had a peculiar meaning.

"Moreover, these sounds could be uttered with intonations which, changed or qualified the meaning of the original. It was, of course, a highly consonantal and guttural utterance, but that this was the beginning of human speech there was no room for doubt.

"If there had been such a doubt it must have been destroyed by the second experiment of Middleton. This was teaching the tree-dweller to speak English. I do not mean that he was able to teach the strange animal to speak with the fluency or the accuracy of even a child of two years. The fact that the tree-dweller could speak at *all* was sufficient.

“What could have been done in time it is difficult to say. All of the experiments were limited to the space of one month, and during only the last three weeks of this time did Middleton attempt to teach Gray-Head to speak.

“The articulation of the tree-dweller was extremely indistinct, and he had peculiar difficulty with long vowels. For instance, he would say the word *go* with a distinct *g*, but with an *o* so shortened and guttural as to be almost unrecognizable. This word and twenty or thirty other words Gray-Head learned. Words of more than one syllable he absolutely failed to comprehend or imitate, but at least half a dozen words he could enunciate so that every one in the camp understood them, and the most significant thing was that he understood them himself and would repeat them without urging as a means of *self-expression!*

“I do not need to point out the importance of this. Some creatures have been able to mimic human utterance. A few others have learned to understand certain human expressions, particularly those of command and warning. But never in the history of the world has there been a creature other than man which was capable of both syllabification and the use of modulated sounds to express particular and exact shades of thought. Gray-Head was a *man*. And this was the opinion not only of Middleton, but of every other man in the camp. They were dubious at first. Before the month of Gray-Head’s captivity ended they were satisfied.

“His ability to speak was the most convincing evidence. There were other evidences of a physical nature. These could not be properly determined until one of Gray-Head’s species had passed under the dissecting knife. But his species consisted of himself alone. To subject Gray-Head to the knife would be murder, of which the world would acquit Middleton, but his own conscience would mercilessly judge. He determined, therefore, to be satisfied with this live specimen which was now in his hands.

“He knew that the trip back to civilization would be arduous, particularly since they would be burdened with the care of Gray-Head. But they were now familiar with the dangers of the journey, inured to the peculiar hardships, and stood an excellent chance of returning to Europe with the link which shattered the religious dogmas of the western world and connected man with the great brotherhood of the dumb beasts.

“This determination Middleton finally imparted to his companions. They were well enough pleased to leave the wilderness for the long trip back to the headwaters of the Nile, and while Musab and Fiedler objected to burdening the party with the care of Gray-Head, they were voted down by the rest, who were now taken with a scientific fervor.

“It was two nights before the date they had set for their departure. Gray-Head had by this time grown quite accustomed to his new life—ate the food that was given him, and acted in all ways as well as could be expected. But on this night there rose a strange wailing from the forest near the camp.

“It began while they were seated about the fire eating supper—a shrill, complaining sound like the lament of a catamount, a broken cry more human than the call of the mountain lion. It startled the men about the fire to silence.

“THE WAIL was repeated, grew, and died out. It was followed by a great clamor within one of the tents out of which Gray-Head immediately appeared and stood looking about the forest and apparently waiting for the repetition of the call.

“Middleton felt at once that one of Gray-Head’s companions was calling to him. He determined to make sure of his prize that night, and secured a set of strong shackles on the tree-dweller. Gray-Head submitted to the shackling restlessly, for he was still listening, it seemed, for a repetition of that wail within the forest. Then Middleton set out to explore the mystery.

“At the edge of the circling trees he found another of the tree-dwellers, smaller than Gray-Head, and slighter in proportions. As Middleton approached, the animal swung itself hastily into the tree, but from the branches it raised again the shrill and melancholy wail. From the camp came the deeper roar of Gray-Head in answer.

“It was plain to Middleton then that this was the mate of the tree-dweller, come to call for the captive. He stood a while, hesitating, for his heart smote him. The generous and the human part was to set Gray-Head at liberty, but to give him freedom was to cast away a certain chance of enduring fame.

“Middleton turned back to his camp with his mind determined. To lose Gray-Head meant the throwing away of all the labors of this arduous journey, which had already cost the lives of so many men. If a king should ask him he would not give up the old tree-dweller now.

“When he returned to the fire he told the men what he had discovered, and then went back to examine the fastenings which held Gray-Head. It was a shackle connected with a steel chain to a strong peg driven deep into the ground. It seemed impossible that the big fellow could break loose. He was sitting on the ground now, wearied from his long efforts to break away, but he roused himself at the near approach of Middleton and snarled like an animal without opening his eyes.

“The wailing from the forest broke out again as Middleton came back to the fire. It was black night now, and the sorrow of the cry beset the camp with loneliness so that the men attempted to fight away the feeling by waxing talkative and repeating tales and jests—all except the withered Voodoo, who crouched in the shadow and glanced fearfully at the fire, and all the while soundless words formed at his lips.

“Middleton ordered a watch to be kept on Gray-Head that night, but he told the guard that in case anything unusual happened, such as the approach of another of the tree-dwellers toward the camp, or a furious outbreak of Gray-Head, under no circumstances should a rifle be fired without his direct authorization.

“His forebodings of trouble proved prophetic. A sudden clamor and a series of shouts in the middle of the night roused him. He sat up from his blankets, and in the bright moonlight he heard the jangle of chains and saw Gray-Head struggling furiously with his shackle.

“The sound of a complaining wail was dying off in the forest. The others of the party had awakened at the same time at the call of the sentry, George Duval, but before any one could come near the captive he had wrested the stake from the ground and was hurrying off toward the forest on all fours.

“Duval threw himself upon the runaway, but the tree-dweller reared quickly on his hind legs and flung the Frenchman a dozen feet away, where he lay stunned by the fall. The others set out after the fugitive, but he was already half-way toward the forest.

Illustration:

He flung the Frenchman a dozen feet away

“Middleton had picked up a rifle as he ran in pursuit. But there was no hope of overtaking Gray-Head. The safety of the trees was not a hundred yards away from him, and the pursuit of Middleton and his comrades was an equal distance behind, and at the edge of the forest stood the other tree-dweller whose lamentations had called Gray-Head back to his own.

“Middleton dropped to one knee and covered Gray-Head with his weapon. Dead or alive, it seemed that he *must* reclaim the fugitive. Fame and reputation fled away from him in the clumsy form of the tree-dweller. But as his sights fell in line with the form of Gray-Head he knew that he could never shoot. In the eyes of the world it would have been hunting; in his own eyes it was murder.

“Another thought came to him. He would remove the cause of Gray-Head’s flight. At that he turned his aim on the second tree-dweller. There was no time for the second thought which might have kept Middleton’s finger from the trigger. The two grotesque forms were turning side by side and fleeing toward the gray shelter of the forest shadows.

“Middleton fired.”

CORY stopped for a moment and struck the back of his hand across his forehead. The heavy breathing of Thorwalt was grimly audible through the room.

“She screamed terribly, like a woman,” went on the narrator. “She turned and reached out her arms toward Gray-Head for help, and pitched forward at his feet. At the horror of it Middleton’s companions stopped in the midst of their pursuit. Gray-Head had stooped and now raised the dead figure in his arms.

“Suddenly he turned and faced the whole group, still holding the limp form against his breast with one arm. The other arm he brandished above his head in wrath and roared out some gibbering words.

“Then Gray-Head turned and without hurry strode into the black night with his dead.

“Every man stood where he had stopped in the pursuit, and in Middleton’s heart was a feeling of utter horror and loss. But now a rapid and gibbering sound rose behind them. Middleton turned and saw the Voodoo kneeling on the ground, his withered arms tossed in the air and showing black and shiny in the moonlight, and as he kneeled he chanted:

*There are three barriers ye must pass  
Of water, snow, and fire,  
And one more grim than all the three  
Before ye rest eternally  
In the Land of Deep Desire.*

*“The strong may cross the watery bar,  
The brave defy the fire,  
The patient pass the cold at length,  
But what avails a threefold strength  
In the Land of Deep Desire?”*

“Not a man there but read a new and bitter meaning in the chant. They had heard it before on the edge of the great valley. Fiedler cursed, and dragged the Voodoo to his feet with a single strong jerk and ordered him to stop his yelling.

“The Voodoo stood with his arms folded. There was a certain melancholy dignity in his voice as he spoke: ‘It makes no difference what we say to one another. We are all lost. He spoke from the forest yonder.’ (He pointed to the place where Gray-Head had disappeared into the woods.) ‘He threw the curse upon us. There is not one of us with magic strong enough to resist him. Our hearts shall be drier than the desert, our blood shall be weaker than water, the stars shall see our bones whiter than the snows of the mountain, for the curse is upon us—the curse is upon us.’

“He spoke, of course, in his native dialect, and the rendering I give is not an exact translation, but as in all savage languages there was a certain grave poetry which fascinated his listeners. Fiedler cursed again, but he stepped back and gave the old Voodoo an opportunity to continue.

“‘You have come a long way to learn the thing that is hidden. What is it you would learn? It will not give you meat to eat nor water to drink nor clothes to keep you from the sun. It is a shadow you seek, and to find it you have taken blood on your hands and the curse of the gods on your heads, and on the heads of all of us.’

“‘What curse, fool?’ said Middleton, but he was strangely moved.

“‘All of us shall die, but one of us shall live in death,’ said the Voodoo.

“‘This is mummery!’ exclaimed Middleton. ‘If there is anything you know, old sleight-of-hand, out with it. for a sovereign—real gold, my friend!’

“He held the shining bit of money between thumb and forefinger. It glittered in the moonlight, and the same glitter came in the eyes of the Voodoo, but then he shook his head.

“‘I have said too much,’ he answered. ‘You cannot whip words from me now. Chieftain, men who are in the valley of death speak truth. This is that valley—the valley of the gods!’

“As he spoke he gestured sweepingly around him to the swart mountain slopes. They could get nothing further from him. So they went back to camp, and with them they carried George Duval, for his shoulder had been broken in his fall. The next morning he was delirious. The Voodoo grinned hideously and gestured to the waiting mountains.

“The next day they started again to beat the forest in search of the lost, but even Middleton was down-hearted, and the words of the Voodoo stayed in his ears. They found no trace of the tree-dwellers that day, and they returned to find that George Duval had developed a high fever from his, shattered shoulder.

“And when they returned from another day of fruitless searching Duval was plainly in a serious condition. His trouble had started from a badly fractured



shoulder which they could not properly treat. It was Middleton's opinion that the bone had torn the flesh and that gangrene had set in, but he did not say so. If it were the case there was no help for the suffering man.

"Yet he began to fear for the ultimate effects. If Duval died it would mean to Middleton that they had simply had no means of aiding properly a seriously injured man. In the eyes of his companions it would mean that the curse was beginning to work. And even in Middleton's practical and serious mind there rose a doubt like a shadow when, after another session of purposeless search through the forest, he came back to find Duval with a black and swollen arm, very near to death, while close to him lay Jim White, the tall and slangy American. He had shot himself with his own rifle, and with every breath a stain of bloody froth came to his lips.

"He died an hour after sunset. Duval passed out in his delirium before morning. He had not spoken a single word for two days.

"They buried both bodies the next day. It was done silently. The men worked grimly at the soft sod. John Erickson mumbled a brief and half-improvised ceremony over the graves, and then they came back to their camp. On the way Tony Baccigalupi stumbled against the Voodoo and then turned and knocked him down with a muttered word about *bringing the curse*. That day the men pleaded illnesses and excuses of one sort and another. Middleton was left to search the forest by himself.

"HE CAME back that evening with a heavy heart and a sense of coming failure. It was the greater part of a week since the loss of Gray-Head, and as yet he had not sighted or seen one of the tree-dwellers. He was confronted in the camp with open revolt—and one more calamity. Tony Baccigalupi had been taken with a sudden fever and was then babbling of green Italy. The rest of the men told Middleton with one voice that they were through with the entire work. They would wait until Tony recovered, but after that they would beat back for civilization with or without him—and they would take no 'damned monkeys' along with them.

"He tried arguments, but they met his appeals with shrugged shoulders. They had lost all enthusiasm for the great cause of science. The one thought which occupied their minds was the fear of the *curse*."

"Easy to explain," said Thorwalt. It was a mere matter of coincidence. Those fellows had been pretty hardly tried by their recent adventures. Then came the spectacular incident of the death of the female tree-dweller, and following on this the death of two of their comrades. It was this matter of coincidence which broke their spirits."

"Perhaps," said Cory, "I do not say that it was not mere coincidence. But I know that those hard fellows, gathered from half a dozen widely separated districts of the world and strong from a hundred encounters with death, were now frightened by the passing of a shadow, and they looked upon the old Voodoo with dread.

"But let me be still more open. It was not his followers alone who were weakening. Middleton himself began to feel the first of many fears which he would hardly confess to himself—a deep and vague unrest which ate into his mind, so that even when he pleaded with them to stay with him in his search, only half his

heart was in his pleading, the other half harbored the new and indeterminate fear. 'We shall all die,' the old Voodoo had said, 'but one of us shall live in death!'

"They had not long to wait for Tony Baccigalupi. His gay Italian spirit held him up for a day or so. Then he sank rapidly. One afternoon while the rest of the party sat about smoking their pipes in silence, for all the world like hooded vultures waiting for a death in the desert, Tony broke out into a Neapolitan boat-song. Erickson went over to ask how he felt. He broke off his singing to curse the Swede, and died with the curse on his lips.

"They waited only till his body was cold. There was no argument. They did not even delay to bury the body, and Middleton himself spoke no word on the subject. Each man was busy bundling up the necessities of the camp, chiefly food and ammunition.

They started at evening.

"Strangely enough the Voodoo seemed unanxious to leave. He said that it made no difference now whether they fled or remained there. The curse had come upon them. But they needed his guidance still to a certain extent, and to leave him in the forest would be to abandon him to certain death from exposure and ultimately starvation. So they dragged the little man to his feet and started him on the journey.

"There were six in all, now, Erickson, the one-eyed Swede; Musab, the Arab; Herman Fiedler, the blond German; Tom Mulford, the talkative Englishman; the Voodoo, and Middleton."

"And one by one they died?" asked Thorwalt in an awed voice.

"For two days it was well enough," said Cory, as if he had not heard the comment. "But when they reached the snows the Voodoo disappeared in a storm. They delayed for a short time to search for him, and then a strange panic came on them. The snow was driven in swift circles by the howling wind, and some one cried out that the crying of the storm was like the wail of the tree-dweller. And some one else added that the curse was still on them. And the whole party, Middleton among the rest, fled like blind cattle through the storm. They even threw away some of their packs to lighten themselves.

"When the tempest died down after a few hours, their courage returned and they held shamefacedly on their way, but they were only five now and Middleton could see his companions one by one numbering the group of comrades and silently guessing which would die first. For they traveled now without hope, but with the grimness of men drowning in an open sea who struggle till the last against a certain death.

"On the edge of the marshes they paused a while to gather their strength, and a day of rest raised their spirits. Moreover they were far from the valley of the tree-dwellers, and far from the source of the curse. On the second night they fell into a card game and Musab, infuriated by ill luck or by some actual cheating on the part of Fiedler, drew a knife and stabbed the German below the shoulder, a mortal wound. As he lay on the ground Fiedler gathered strength to pull his revolver and shot the Arab through the heart while Middleton and Erickson held the latter to keep him from further mischief.

"So they broke up that last camp hastily and entered the marshes, and once more they made no effort to bury the dead men. The trip through the marshes was

more horrible than before, and though Erickson and Middleton came through safely they were worn to a shadow and poisoned with foul water and fever; behind them they left Mulford dying; before them stretched the white, hot desert.

“Neither Erickson nor Middleton expected to cross the desert. Erickson fell out the second day. He stepped on a small stone and sprained his ankle hopelessly. He sat on the ground, squatting like a monkey, and passed his water bag to Middleton without a word, and Middleton accepted it in silence.

“This will seem strange to you. It seems incredible to me sitting here, but these men had seen so many deaths that even their own fate did not matter. The Swede could not hold out long. He could not travel a step, and the water would not keep him alive for three days. It might tide Middleton through. So Middleton gripped his friend’s hand silently and went on through the sands.

“I suppose nine men out of ten would have died on that trip, but Middleton was one man out of a hundred, and through his brain went the phrase of the Voodoo like a chant: *All of us shall die, but one of us shall live in death.* A terrible promise, and yet it was a promise of life.

“MIDDLETON lived. He was without water, delirious at times, and haunted by the coldly white tops of the mountain ranges on either side of the desert when a caravan picked him up. They were Arabs from the headwaters of the Nile, and they carried him with them to their destination, hoping for a reward later. The trip took eight days, but Middleton was unconscious most of the time.

“When they reached the village he was desperately sick with a fever for ten days. When he recovered a little he induced an Arab to go down the river to the nearest large town and send a message to England. He scribbled it painfully himself. It was to his wife, and told her where he was, that he would not be able to travel for a month and to send on money. Then he relapsed into the delirium.

“He recovered from the worst of the fever, and found himself in a new world of dim quiet. As he glanced down the bed he was surprised to see a tawny and lean hand covered with a strong and sparse growth of hair. He raised his hand to his forehead. The hand which responded to his will was the hand which lay upon the bed.

“Middleton laughed sickly and lay a long while with his eyes closed, thinking hard. The old words of the Voodoo came to him again, with new meaning: ‘One shall live in death!’

“He alone was left for that. He opened his eyes again and began passing, a hand across his face with a fearful and slow interest. What he found made him sick at heart, but not sure. He was only conscious of a great change.

“He called to the natives and bade them bring him a mirror, but when they took down the little bright circle from the wall his heart suddenly weakened. He crossed a forearm over his face and bade them take the mirror away. Afterward he lay shivering, afraid of he knew not what.

“He lay there for some weeks before the sickness ended in fact, and he was able to walk about. Even then he was in no hurry to leave the room. He feared something in his heart, but he dared not name it even to himself. And he feared the eyes of other men. He turned to the wall when another came into the room. He

gave himself until the time when the money should come from England before he should rise and face the world and himself.

“But instead of the money, the wife herself came. Middleton as he lay in his bed heard her voice speaking to the natives and asking for him. He shouted out to them to let no one come in.

“She recognized his voice. She called to him, and the clear music of the sound tortured him. He shrieked to the natives to keep her out.

“‘He is ill,’ she said outside the door. ‘He is delirious and knows not what he says. But I am his wife. I shall care for him.’

“‘Dearest!’ cried Alexander Middleton, ‘for God’s sake do not come near me now. I am changed. I cannot let you see me now. Not now; tomorrow! Give me one hour to prepare myself. I forbid you to come!’”

“‘Dear,’ she answered, ‘it is the fever in you that speaks and not yourself. My friends, open that door!’

“Middleton threw himself against the door and strove to hold it closed. He was weak from his sickness. The door flew open and she stood before him, but the light of the day which entered with her half blinded him and he threw up his hand across his eyes to shield them from the glare. She had cried out with a voice of horror and he heard her step retreat.

“‘I wished to see my husband, Alexander Middleton,’ she said, ‘and why have you brought me to this—beast?’

“Then Middleton started and threw his hands out toward her. She was marvelously lovely with the keen white sun upon her.

“‘Dearest,’ he said, ‘it is I!’

“She stood a moment watching him with an utter loathing in her face which grew into terror, and then with a little moan she turned and ran down the path and out of his life forever. Middleton turned and stepped back into his room, half dazed, and it chanced that he stopped before a little round cracked mirror on the wall.

“He thought at first that he was seeing some horribly realistic picture painted there, but when he raised a hand to his face a hand appeared by the face in the mirror.

“Middleton sat down and the chair creaked sharply under his weight. He strove for a long while to order his thoughts. Then he rose and went to the mirror again and still he could not believe what he saw. Look!”

Cory pointed to the bust of young Middleton by the fire.

“The head of Middleton before he had gone into the desert to prove that the only God is the real God of force, was that of a young pagan god. But the face which scowled at him from the mirror was that of a beast; a blunt and wide-nostriled nose; a shock of disordered gray hair streaming down across his forehead; heavy sagging jowls, bright and sunken eyes under a thick brow; and his lip was lifted into a continual venomous sneer by a great tooth of the lower jaw. It was a horror to dream upon, not to see.

“Middleton moaned in anguish and terror. The face in the mirror snarled back at him like an angered ape. Once more he remembered the Voodoo’s words: *All of us shall die, but one of us shall live in death!* He tore the mirror from the wall and shattered it to a thousand fragments on the floor.

“But afterward a morbid and terrible curiosity came over him. It was impossible of belief, this horrid phenomenon which his eyes had seen. He called for another glass. It was brought to him, and after that he stayed for hours before the mirror studying the strange visage which leered and frowned back to him.

“He strove to explain it. The apparent slant of the forehead was caused by the deep pucker of the brows from continual and anguished frowning. The cheeks had fallen and pouched from the devastating illness. The nostrils, perhaps, were distended by the labored breathing. The eyes were sunken from the fever, and for the same reason abnormally bright. It was no uncommon occurrence for hair to turn suddenly gray.

“But still he could not wholly reason the grim mask away. He knew his head as it had been. He had studied it not only with some vanity but with the precision of a scientist. He knew now that beyond a doubt a change had occurred *in the bony structure itself!* No anguish of soul or body could have affected that change!

“In his utter bewilderment, now, Middleton, the great apostle of strength, that cruel and self-sufficient doctrine, knelt on the floor and remembered a prayer out of his boyhood with stammering lips, but into his mind came the picture of the huge tree-dweller with his dead in his arms and a hand of imprecation in the air. The Voodoo had been right. All of them had died, but one of them would live in death.

“He had gone out stronger than the strongest. He had gone out to drag down the god of the simple-minded and put up one of his own desire. He came back, afraid even of death, and knowing that the veriest child in the street could teach him out of a greater strength than his own. Teach him that Reason and Ambition can never find a god that shall endure; teach him that the one faith which unites man with man and with dumb beasts is the faith of kindness and love. There is no strength like that of kindness, Thorwalt. It was no power of mine which enabled me to save that man in your house this day. I had no fear of him because I had no scorn of him, my friend.”

“But Middleton!” cried Thorwalt, rising. “Is he still alive? Can I meet him!”

The firelight flickered on the face of Cory, on the buried eyes, the receding forehead, the perpetual sneer of the lifted lip. Thorwalt stepped a pace back and caught his breath.

“Middleton is dead,” said Cory quietly, “and I am the only man in the world with the strength to believe his story.”

