

The Moon Pool

by

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Chapter 1. The Thing On The Moon Path

FOR two months I had been on the d'Entrecasteaux Islands gathering data for the concluding chapters of my book upon the flora of the volcanic islands of the South Pacific. The day before I had reached Port Moresby and had seen my specimens safely stored on board the Southern Queen. As I sat on the upper deck I thought, with homesick mind, of the long leagues between me and Melbourne, and the longer ones between Melbourne and New York.

It was one of Papua's yellow mornings when she shows herself in her sombrest, most baleful mood. The sky was smouldering ochre. Over the island brooded a spirit sullen, alien, implacable, filled with the threat of latent, malefic forces waiting to be unleashed. It seemed an emanation out of the untamed, sinister heart of Papua herself--sinister even when she smiles. And now and then, on the wind, came a breath from virgin jungles, laden with unfamiliar odours, mysterious and menacing.

It is on such mornings that Papua whispers to you of her immemorial ancientness and of her power. And, as every white man must, I fought against her spell. While I struggled I saw a tall figure striding down the pier; a Kapa-Kapa boy followed swinging a new valise. There was something familiar about the tall man. As he reached the gangplank he looked up straight into my eyes, stared for a moment, then waved his hand.

And now I knew him. It was Dr. David Throckmartin--"Throck" he was to me always, one of my oldest friends and, as well, a mind of the first water whose power and achievements were for me a constant inspiration as they were, I know, for scores other.

Coincidentally with my recognition came a shock of surprise, definitely--unpleasant. It was Throckmartin--but about him was something disturbingly unlike the man I had known long so well and to whom and to whose little party I had bidden farewell less than a month before I myself had sailed for these seas. He had married only a few weeks before, Edith, the daughter of Professor William Frazier, younger by at least a decade than he but at one with him in his ideals and as much in love, if it were possible, as Throckmartin. By virtue of her father's training a wonderful assistant, by virtue of her own sweet, sound heart a--I use the word in its olden sense--lover. With his equally youthful associate Dr. Charles Stanton and a Swedish woman, Thora Halversen, who had been Edith Throckmartin's nurse from babyhood, they had set forth for the Nan-Matal, that extraordinary group of island ruins clustered along the eastern shore of Ponape in the Carolines.

I knew that he had planned to spend at least a year among these ruins, not only of Ponape but of Lele--twin centres of a colossal riddle of humanity, a weird flower of civilization that blossomed ages before the seeds of Egypt were sown; of whose arts we know little enough and of whose science nothing. He had carried with him unusually complete

equipment for the work he had expected to do and which, he hoped, would be his monument.

What then had brought Throckmartin to Port Moresby, and what was that change I had sensed in him?

Hurrying down to the lower deck I found him with the purser. As I spoke he turned, thrust out to me an eager hand--and then I saw what was that difference that had so moved me. He knew, of course by my silence and involuntary shrinking the shock my closer look had given me. His eyes filled; he turned brusquely from the purser, hesitated --then hurried off to his stateroom.

"E looks rather queer--eh?" said the purser. "Know 'im well, sir? Seems to 'ave given you quite a start."

I made some reply and went slowly up to my chair. There I sat, composed my mind and tried to define what it was that had shaken me so. Now it came to me. The old Throckmartin was on the eve of his venture just turned forty, lithe, erect, muscular; his controlling expression one of enthusiasm, of intellectual keenness, of--what shall I say --expectant search. His always questioning brain had stamped its vigor upon his face.

But the Throckmartin I had seen below was one who had borne some scaring shock of mingled rapture and horror; some soul cataclysm that in its climax had remoulded, deep from within, his face, setting on it seal of wedded ecstasy and despair; as though indeed these two had come to him hand in hand, taken possession of him and departing left behind, ineradicably, their linked shadows!

Yes--it was that which appalled. For how could rapture and horror, Heaven and Hell mix, clasp hands--kiss?

Yet these were what in closest embrace lay on Throckmartin's face!

Deep in thought, subconsciously with relief, I watched the shore line sink behind; welcomed the touch of the wind of the free seas. I had hoped, and within the hope was an inexplicable shrinking that I would meet Throckmartin at lunch. He did not come down, and I was sensible of deliverance within my disappointment. All that afternoon I lounged about uneasily but still he kept to his cabin--and within me was no strength to summon him. Nor did he appear at dinner.

Dusk and night fell swiftly. I was warm and went back to my deck-chair. The Southern Queen was rolling to a disquieting swell and I had the place to myself.

Over the heavens was a canopy of cloud, glowing faintly and testifying to the moon riding behind it. There was much phosphorescence. Fitfully before the ship and at her sides arose those stranger little swirls of mist that swirl up from the Southern Ocean like breath of sea monsters, whirl for an instant and disappear.

Suddenly the deck door opened and through it came Throckmartin. He paused uncertainly, looked up at the sky with a curiously eager, intent gaze, hesitated, then closed the door behind him.

"Throck," I called. "Come! It's Goodwin."

He made his way to me.

"Throck," I said, wasting no time in preliminaries. "What's wrong? Can I help you?"

I felt his body grow tense.

"I'm going to Melbourne, Goodwin," he answered. "I need a few things--need them urgently. And more men--white men--"

He stopped abruptly; rose from his chair, gazed intently toward the north. I followed his gaze. Far, far away the moon had broken through the clouds. Almost on the horizon, you could see the faint luminescence of it upon the smooth sea. The distant patch of light quivered and shook. The clouds thickened again and it was gone. The ship raced on southward, swiftly.

Throckmartin dropped into his chair. He lighted a cigarette with a hand that trembled; then turned to me with abrupt resolution.

"Goodwin," he said. "I do need help. If ever man needed it, I do. Goodwin--can you imagine yourself in another world, alien, unfamiliar, a world of terror, whose unknown joy is its greatest terror of all; you all alone there, a stranger! As such a man would need help, so I need--"

He paused abruptly and arose; the cigarette dropped from his fingers. The moon had again broken through the clouds, and this time much nearer. Not a mile away was the patch of light that it threw upon the waves. Back of it, to the rim of the sea was a lane of moonlight; a gigantic gleaming serpent racing over the edge of the world straight and surely toward the ship.

Throckmartin stiffened to it as a pointer does to a hidden covey. To me from him pulsed a thrill of horror--but horror tinged with an unfamiliar, an infernal joy. It came to me and passed away--leaving me trembling with its shock of bitter sweet.

He bent forward, all his soul in his eyes. The moon path swept closer, closer still. It was now less than half a mile away. From it the ship fled--almost as though pursued. Down upon it, swift and straight, a radiant torrent cleaving the waves, raced the moon stream.

"Good God!" breathed Throckmartin, and if ever the words were a prayer and an invocation they were.

And then, for the first time--I saw--IT!

The moon path stretched to the horizon and was bordered by darkness. It was as though the clouds above had been parted to form a lane--drawn aside like curtains or as the waters of the Red Sea were held back to let the hosts of Israel through. On each side of the stream was the black shadow cast by the folds of the high canopies And straight as a road between the opaque walls gleamed, shimmered, and danced the shining, racing, rapids of the moonlight

Far, it seemed immeasurably far, along this stream of silver fire I sensed, rather than saw, something coming. It drew first into sight as a deeper glow within the light. On and on it swept toward us--an opalescent mistiness that sped with the suggestion of some winged creature in arrowed flight. Dimly there crept into my mind memory of the Dyak legend of the winged messenger of Buddha--the Akla bird whose feathers are woven of the moon rays, whose heart is a living opal, whose wings in flight echo the crystal clear music of the white stars--but whose beak is of frozen flame and shreds the souls of unbelievers.

Closer it drew and now there came to me sweet, insistent tinklings--like pizzicati on violins of glass; crystal clear; diamonds melting into sounds!

Now the Thing was close to the end of the white path; close up to the barrier of darkness still between the ship and the sparkling head of the moon stream. Now it beat up against that barrier as a bird against the bars of its cage. It whirled with shimmering plumes, with swirls of lacy light, with spirals of living vapour. It held within it odd, unfamiliar gleams as of shifting mother-of-pearl. Coruscations and glittering atoms drifted through it as though it drew them from the rays that bathed it.

Nearer and nearer it came, borne on the sparkling waves, and ever thinner shrank the protecting wall of shadow between it and us. Within the mistiness was a core, a nucleus of intenser light--veined, opaline, effulgent, intensely alive. And above it, tangled in the plumes and spirals that throbbed and whirled were seven glowing lights.

Through all the incessant but strangely ordered movement of the--THING--these lights held firm and steady. They were seven--like seven little moons. One was of a pearly pink, one of a delicate nacreous blue, one of lambent saffron, one of the emerald you see in the shallow waters of tropic isles; a deathly white; a ghostly amethyst; and one of the silver that is seen only when the flying fish leap beneath the moon.

The tinkling music was louder still. It pierced the ears with a shower of tiny lances; it made the heart beat jubilantly--and checked it dolorously. It closed the throat with a throb of rapture and gripped it tight with the hand of infinite sorrow!

Came to me now a murmuring cry, stilling the crystal notes. It was articulate--but as though from something utterly foreign to this world. The ear took the cry and translated with conscious labour into the sounds of earth. And even as it compassed, the brain

shrank from it irresistibly, and simultaneously it seemed reached toward it with irresistible eagerness.

Throckmartin strode toward the front of the deck, straight toward the vision, now but a few yards away from the stern. His face had lost all human semblance. Utter agony and utter ecstasy--there they were side by side, not resisting each other; unholy inhuman companions blending into a look that none of God's creatures should wear--and deep, deep as his soul! A devil and a God dwelling harmoniously side by side! So must Satan, newly fallen, still divine, seeing heaven and contemplating hell, have appeared.

And then--swiftly the moon path faded! The clouds swept over the sky as though a hand had drawn them together. Up from the south came a roaring squall. As the moon vanished what I had seen vanished with it--blotted out as an image on a magic lantern; the tinkling ceased abruptly--leaving a silence like that which follows an abrupt thunder clap. There was nothing about us but silence and blackness!

Through me passed a trembling as one who has stood on the very verge of the gulf wherein the men of the Louisades says lurks the fisher of the souls of men, and has been plucked back by sheerest chance.

Throckmartin passed an arm around me.

"It is as I thought," he said. In his voice was a new note; the calm certainty that has swept aside a waiting terror of the unknown. "Now I know! Come with me to my cabin, old friend. For now that you too have seen I can tell you"--he hesitated--"what it was you saw," he ended.

As we passed through the door we met the ship's first officer. Throckmartin composed his face into at least a semblance of normality.

"Going to have much of a storm?" he asked.

"Yes," said the mate. "Probably all the way to Melbourne."

Throckmartin straightened as though with a new thought. He gripped the officer's sleeve eagerly.

"You mean at least cloudy weather--for"--he hesitated --"for the next three nights, say?"

"And for three more," replied the mate.

"Thank God!" cried Throckmartin, and I think I never heard such relief and hope as was in his voice.

The sailor stood amazed. "Thank God?" he repeated. "Thank--what d'ye mean?"

But Throckmartin was moving onward to his cabin. I started to follow. The first officer stopped me.

"Your friend," he said, "is he ill?"

"The sea!" I answered hurriedly. "He's not used to it. I am going to look after him."

Doubt and disbelief were plain in the seaman's eyes but I hurried on. For I knew now that Throckmartin was ill indeed--but with a sickness the ship's doctor nor any other could heal.

Chapter 2. "Dead! All Dead!"

HE WAS SITTING, face in hands, on the side of his berth as I entered. He had taken off his coat.

"Throck," I cried. "What was it? What are you flying from, man? Where is your wife--and Stanton?"

"Dead!" he replied monotonously. "Dead! All dead!" Then as I recoiled from him--"All dead. Edith, Stanton, Thora--dead--or worse. And Edith in the Moon Pool--with them--drawn by what you saw on the moon path--that has put its brand upon me--and follows me!"

He ripped open his shirt.

"Look at this," he said. Around his chest, above his heart, the skin was white as pearl. This whiteness was sharply defined against the healthy tint of the body. It circled him with an even cincture about two inches wide.

"Burn it!" he said, and offered me his cigarette. I drew back. He gestured--peremptorily. I pressed the glowing end of the cigarette into the ribbon of white flesh. He did not flinch nor was there odour of burning nor, as I drew the little cylinder away, any mark upon the whiteness.

"Feel it!" he commanded again. I placed my fingers upon the band. It was cold--like frozen marble.

He drew his shirt around him.

"Two things you have seen," he said. "IT--and its mark. Seeing, you must believe my story. Goodwin, I tell you again that my wife is dead--or worse--I do not know; the prey of--what you saw; so, too, is Stanton; so Thora. How--"

Tears rolled down the seared face.

"Why did God let it conquer us? Why did He let it take my Edith?" he cried in utter bitterness. "Are there things stronger than God, do you think, Walter?"

I hesitated.

"Are there? Are there?" His wild eyes searched me.

"I do not know just how you define God," I managed at last through my astonishment to make answer. "If you mean the will to know, working through science--"

He waved me aside impatiently.

"Science," he said. "What is our science against--that? Or against the science of whatever devils that made it--or made the way for it to enter this world of ours?"

With an effort he regained control.

"Goodwin," he said, "do you know at all of the ruins on the Carolines; the cyclopean, megalithic cities and harbours of Ponape and Lele, of Kusaie, of Ruk and Hogolu, and a score of other islets there? Particularly, do you know of the Nan-Matal and the Metalanim?"

"Of the Metalanim I have heard and seen photographs," I said. "They call it, don't they, the Lost Venice of the Pacific?"

"Look at this map," said Throckmartin. "That," he went on, "is Christian's chart of Metalanim harbour and the NanMatal. Do you see the rectangles marked Nan-Tauach?"

"Yes," I said.

"There," he said, "under those walls is the Moon Pool and the seven gleaming lights that raise the Dweller in the Pool, and the altar and shrine of the Dweller. And there in the Moon Pool with it lie Edith and Stanton and Thora."

"The Dweller in the Moon Pool?" I repeated halfincredulously.

"The Thing you saw," said Throckmartin solemnly.

A solid sheet of rain swept the ports, and the Southern Queen began to roll on the rising swells. Throckmartin drew another deep breath of relief, and drawing aside a curtain peered out into the night. Its blackness seemed to reassure him. At any rate, when he sat again he was entirely calm.

"There are no more wonderful ruins in the world," he began almost casually. "They take in some fifty islets and cover with their intersecting canals and lagoons about twelve square miles. Who built them? None knows. When were they built? Ages before the memory of present man, that is sure. Ten thousand, twenty thousand, a hundred thousand years ago--the last more likely.

"All these islets, Walter, are squared, and their shores are frowning seawalls of gigantic basalt blocks hewn and put in place by the hands of ancient man. Each inner water-front is faced with a terrace of those basalt blocks which stand out six feet above the shallow canals that meander between them. On the islets behind these walls are time-shattered fortresses, palaces, terraces, pyramids; immense courtyards strewn with ruins--and all so old that they seem to wither the eyes of those who look on them.

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