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Contents for November, 1931

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| Cover Design | C. C. Senf |
| <i>Illustrating a scene in "Placide's Wife"</i> | |
| The Eyrie | 436 |
| <i>A chat with the readers</i> | |
| Placide's Wife | Kirk Mashburn 440 |
| <i>A shuddery story of the Louisiana Cajuns, of corpses that screamed in their graves, and a woman who would not stay dead</i> | |
| The Second-Hand Limousine | Harold Markham 454 |
| <i>A most peculiar story of a limousine that was destined to meet with a tragic accident</i> | |
| On Hallows' E'en | Alfred I. Tooke 463 |
| <i>Verse; decoration by C. C. Senf</i> | |

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

- Subterranea** ----- **W. Elwyn Backus** 464
A remarkable novelette concerning a strange country lying several miles beneath the pyramids of Egypt
- The Tale of Satampra Zeiros** ----- **Clark Ashton Smith** 491
Concerning the weird and most unpleasant fate that befell two marauders who dared disturb ancient gods
- The Black Stone** ----- **Robert E. Howard** 500
What happened when a man discovered a horrible creature from the Elder World that made its home in Hungary
- The Ghost That Never Died** ----- **Elizabeth Sheldon** 512
A most unusual story concerning a man and woman who were killed by the ghost of a living person
- The Empty House** ----- **Cristel Hastings** 521
Verse
- Tam, Son of the Tiger (Part 5)** ----- **Otis Adelbert Kline** 522
This breath-taking serial of Asian gods and weird creatures discloses some hair-raising adventures
- Jungle Feud** ----- **Alice I'Anson** 541
Verse
- Doom Around the Corner** ----- **Wilfred Branch Talman** 542
A charming, whimsical story of a man who never outgrew his belief in fairies and of the fate he met
- Return** ----- **Leona May Ames** 545
Verse
- The Boiling Photograph** ----- **Paul Ernst** 546
A strange story of Northern Africa and the astral double of an American — a tale of King Tut's tomb
- Weird Story Reprint:**
The Wolf-Leader (Part 4) ----- **Alexandre Dumas** 552
An exciting werewolf novel, which does not appear in the published collections in English of Dumas' works

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"A fear which we had never experienced even in dreams deprived us of the faculty of speech."

THE TALE OF SATAMPRA ZEIROS

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A goose-flesh story of the horror that was consummated in the dark temple of the god Tsathoggua

I SATAMPRA ZEIROS of Uzuldaroum, shall write with my left hand, since I have no longer any other, the tale of everything that befell Tirouv Ompallios and myself in the shrine of the god Tsathoggua, which lies neglected by the worship of man in the jungle-taken suburbs of Commorion, that long-deserted capital of the Hyper-

borean rulers. I shall write it with the violet juice of the suvana-palm, which turns to a blood-red rubric with the passage of years, on a strong vellum that is made from the skin of the mastodon, as a warning to all good thieves and adventurers who may hear some lying legend of the lost treasures of Commorion and be tempted thereby.

Now Tirouv Ompallios was my life-long friend and my trustworthy companion in all such enterprises as require deft fingers and a habit of mind both agile and adroit. I can say without flattering myself, or Tirouv Ompallios either, that we carried to an incomparable success more than one undertaking from which fellow-craftsmen of a much wider renown than ourselves might well have recoiled in dismay. To be more explicit, I refer to the theft of the jewels of Queen Cumbria, which were kept in a room where two-score venomous reptiles wandered at will; and the breaking of the adamantine box of Acromi, in which were all the medallions of an early dynasty of Hyperborean kings. It is true that these medallions were difficult and perilous to dispose of, and that we sold them at a dire sacrifice to the captain of a barbarian vessel from remote Lemuria: but nevertheless, the breaking of that box was a glorious feat, for it had to be done in absolute silence on account of the proximity of a dozen guards who were all armed with tridents. We made use of a rare and mordant acid. . . . But I must not linger too long and too garrulously by the way, however great the temptation to ramble on amid heroic memories and the high glamor of valiant or sleightful deeds.

In our occupation, as in all others, the vicissitudes of fortune are oftentimes to be reckoned with; and the goddess Chance is not always prodigal of her favors. So it was that Tirouv Ompallios and I, at the time of which I write, had found ourselves in a condition of pecuniary depletion, which, though temporary, was nevertheless extreme and was quite inconvenient and annoying, coming as it did on the heel of more prosperous days, of more profitable midnights. People had become accursedly chary of their jewels and other valuables, windows and

doors were double-barred, new and perplexing locks were in use, guards had grown more vigilant or less somnolent—in short, all the natural difficulties of our profession had multiplied themselves. At one time we were reduced to the stealing of more bulky and less precious merchandise than that in which we customarily dealt; and even this had its dangers. Even now, it humiliates me to remember the night when we were nearly caught with a sack of red yarns; and I mention all this that I may not seem in anywise vain-glorious.

One evening, in an alley of the more humble quarter of Uzuldaroum, we stopped to count our available resources, and found that we had between us exactly three pazoors—enough to buy a large bottle of pomegranate wine or two loaves of bread. We debated the problem of expenditure.

"The bread," contended Tirouv Ompallios, "will nurture our bodies, will lend a new and more expeditious force to our spent limbs, our toil-worn fingers."

"The pomegranate wine," said I, "will ennoble our thoughts, will inspire and illuminate our minds, and perchance will reveal to us a mode of escape from our difficulties."

Tirouv Ompallios yielded without undue argument to my superior reasoning, and we sought the doors of an adjacent tavern. The wine was not of the best, in regard to flavor, but the quantity and strength were all that could be desired. We sat in the crowded tavern and sipped it at leisure, till all the fire of the bright red liquor had transferred itself to our brains. The darkness and dubiety of our future ways became illumined as by the light of rosy cressets, and the harsh aspect of the world was marvelously softened. Anon, there came to me an inspiration.

"Tirouv Ompallios," I said, "is there any reason why you and I, who are brave

men and nowise subject to the fears and superstitions of the multitude, should not avail ourselves of the kingly treasures of Commoriom? A day's journey from this tiresome town, a pleasant sojourn in the country, an afternoon or forenoon of archaeological research — and who knows what we should find?"

"You speak wisely and valiantly, my dear friend," rejoined Tirouv Ompallios. "Indeed, there is no reason why we should not replenish our deflated finances at the expense of a few dead kings or gods."

Now Commoriom, as all the world knows, was deserted many hundred years ago because of the prophecy of the white sybil of Polarion, who foretold an undescribed and abominable doom for all mortal beings who should dare to tarry within its environs. Some say that this doom was a pestilence that would have come from the northern waste by the paths of the jungle-tribes; others, that it was a form of madness: at any rate, no one, neither king nor priest nor merchant nor laborer nor thief, remained in Commoriom to abide its arrival, but all departed in a single migration to found at the distance of a day's journey the new capital, Uzuldaroum. And strange tales are told, of horrors and terrors not to be faced or overcome by man, that haunt forevermore the mausoleums and shrines and palaces of Commoriom. And still it stands, a luster of marble, a magnificence of granite, all a-throng with spires and cupolas and obelisks that the mighty trees of the jungle have not yet overtowered, in a fertile inland valley of Hyperborea. And men say that in its unbroken vaults there lies entire and undespoiled as of yore the rich treasure of olden monarchs; that the high-built tombs retain the gems and electrum that were buried with their mummies; that the fanes have still their golden altar-vessels

and furnishings, the idols their precious stones in ear and mouth and nostrils and navel.

I THINK we should have set out that very night, if we had only had the encouragement and inspiration of a second bottle of pomegranate wine. As it was, we decided to start at early dawn: the fact that we had no funds for our journey was of small moment, for unless our former dexterity had altogether failed us, we could levy a modicum of involuntary tribute from the guileless folk of the countryside. In the meanwhile, we repaired to our lodgings, where the landlord met us with a grudging welcome and a most ungracious demand for his money. But the golden promise of the morrow had armed us against all such trivial annoyances, and we waved the fellow aside with a disdain that appeared to astonish if not to subdue him.

We slept late; and the sun had ascended far upon the azure acclivity of the heavens when we left the gates of Uzuldaroum and took the northern road that runs toward Commoriom. We breakfasted well on some amber melons, and a stolen fowl that we cooked in the woods, and then resumed our wayfaring. In spite of a fatigue that increased upon us toward the end of the day, our trip was a pleasurable one, and we found much to divert us in the varying landscapes through which we passed, and in their people. Some of these people, I am sure, must still remember us with regret, for we did not deny ourselves anything procurable that tempted our fancy or our appetites.

It was an agreeable country, full of farms and orchards and running waters and green, flowery woods. At last, some-while in the course of the afternoon, we came to the ancient road, long disused and well-nigh overgrown, which runs

from the highway through the elder jungle to Commoriom.

No one saw us enter this road, and thenceforward we met no one. At a single step we passed from all human ken; and it seemed that the silence of the forest around us had lain unstirred by mortal footfall ever since the departure of the legendary king and his people so many centuries before. The trees were vaster than any we had ever seen; they were interwoven by the endless labyrinthine volumes, the eternal web-like convolutions of creepers almost as old as they themselves. The flowers were unwholesomely large, their perfumes were overpoweringly sweet or fetid, and their petals bore a lethal pallor or a sanguinary crimson. The fruits along our way were of great size, with purple and orange and russet colors, but somehow we did not dare to eat them.

The woods grew thicker and more rampant as we went on, and the roads, though paved with granite slabs, was more and more overgrown, for trees had rooted themselves in the interstices, often forcing the wide blocks apart. Though the sun had not yet neared the horizon, the shades that were cast upon us from gigantic boles and branches became ever denser, and we moved in a dark-green twilight fraught with oppressive odors of lush growth and of vegetable corruption. There were no birds nor animals, such as one would think to find in any wholesome forest; but at rare intervals a stealthy viper with pale and heavy coils glided away from our feet among the rank leaves of the roadside, or some enormous moth with baroque and evil-colored mottlings flew before us and disappeared in the dimness of the jungle. Abroad already in the half-light, huge purpleal bats with eyes like tiny rubies arose at our approach from the poisonous-looking fruits on which they feasted, and watched us with

malign attention as they hovered noiselessly in the air above. And we felt, somehow, that we were being watched by other and invisible presences; and a sort of awe fell upon us, and a vague fear of the monstrous jungle; and we no longer spoke aloud, or frequently, but only in rare whispers.

Among other things, we had contrived to procure along our way a large leathern bottle full of palm-spirit. A few sips of the ardent liquor had already served to lighten more than once the tedium of our journey; and now it was to stand us in good stead. Each of us drank a liberal draft, and presently the jungle became less awesome; and we wondered why we had allowed the silence and the gloom, the watchful bats and the brooding immensity, to weigh upon our spirits even for a brief while; and I think that after a second draft we began to sing.

WHEN twilight came, and a waxing moon shone high in the heavens after the hidden daystar had gone down, we were so imbued with the fervor of adventure that we decided to push on and reach Commoriom that very night. We supped on food that we had levied from the country-people, and the leathern bottle passed between us several times. Then, considerably fortified, and replete with hardihood and the valor of a lofty enterprise, we resumed our journeying.

Indeed, we had not much farther to go. Even as we were debating between ourselves, with an ardor that made us oblivious of our long wayfaring, what costly loot we would first choose from among all the mythical treasures of Commoriom, we saw in the moonlight the gleam of marble cupolas above the treetops, and then between the boughs and boles the wan pillars of shadowy porticoes. A few more steps, and we trod upon paven streets that ran transversely

from the highroad we were following, into the tall, luxuriant woods on either side, where the fronds of mammoth palm-ferns overtopped the roofs of ancient houses.

We paused, and again the silence of an elder desolation claimed our lips. For the houses were white and still as sepulchers, and the deep shadows that lay around and upon them were chill and sinister and mysterious as the shadow of death. It seemed that the sun could not have shone for ages in this place—that nothing warmer than the spectral beams of the cadaverous moon had touched the marble and granite ever since that universal migration prompted by the prophecy of the white sybil of Polarion.

"I wish it were daylight," murmured Tirouv Ompallios. His low tones were oddly sibilant, were unnaturally audible in the dead stillness.

"Tirouv Ompallios," I rejoined, "I trust that you are not growing superstitious. I should be loth to think that you are succumbing to the infantile fancies of the multitude. Howbeit, let us have another drink."

We lightened the leathern bottle appreciably by the demand we now made upon its contents, and were marvelously cheered thereby—so much so, indeed, that we forthwith started to explore a left-hand avenue, which, though it had been laid out with mathematical directness, vanished at no great distance among the fronded trees. Here, somewhat apart from the other buildings, in a sort of square that the jungle had not yet wholly usurped, we found a small temple of antique architecture which gave the impression of being far older even than the adjoining edifices. It also differed from these in its material, for it was builded of a dark basaltic stone heavily encrusted with lichens that seemed of a cœval antiquity. It was square in form, and had

no domes nor spires, no façade of pillars, and only a few narrow windows high above the ground. Such temples are rare in Hyperborea nowadays; but we knew it for a shrine of Tsathoggua, one of the elder gods, who receives no longer any worship from men, but before whose ash-*en* altars, people say, the furtive and ferocious beasts of the jungle, the ape, the giant sloth and the long-toothed tiger, have sometimes been seen to make obeisance and have been heard to howl or whine their inarticulate prayers.

The temple, like the other buildings, was in a state of well-nigh perfect preservation: the only signs of decay were in the carven lintel of the door, which had crumbled and splintered away in several places. The door itself, wrought of a swarthy bronze all overgreened by time, stood slightly ajar. Knowing that there should be a jewelled idol within, not to mention the various altar-pieces of valuable metals, we felt the urge of temptation.

Surmising that strength might be required to force open the verdigris-covered door, we drank deeply and then applied ourselves to the task. Of course, the hinges were rusted; and only by dint of mighty and muscular heavings did the door at last begin to move. As we renewed our efforts, it swung slowly inward with a hideous grating and grinding that mounted to an almost vocal screech, in which we seemed to hear the tones of some unhuman entity. The black interior of the temple yawned before us, and from it there surged an odor of long-imprisoned mustiness combined with a queer and unfamiliar fetidity. To this, however, we gave little heed in the natural excitement of the moment.

With my usual foresight, I had provided myself with a piece of resinous wood earlier in the day, thinking that it might serve as a torch in case of any noc-

turnal explorations of Commorion. I lit this torch, and we entered the shrine.

THE place was paven with immense quinquangular flags of the same material from which its walls were built. It was quite bare, except for the image of the god enthroned at the farther end, the two-tiered altar of obscenely figured metal before the image, and a large and curious-looking basin of bronze supported on three legs, which occupied the middle of the floor. Giving this basin hardly a glance, we ran forward, and I thrust my torch into the face of the idol.

I had never seen an image of Tsathog-gua before, but I recognized him without difficulty from the descriptions I had heard. He was very squat and pot-bellied, his head was more like that of a monstrous toad than a deity, and his whole body was covered with an imitation of short fur, giving somehow a vague suggestion of both the bat and the sloth. His sleepy lids were half-lowered over his globular eyes; and the tip of a queer tongue issued from his fat mouth. In truth, he was not a comely or personable sort of god, and I did not wonder at the cessation of his worship, which could only have appealed to very brutal and aboriginal men at any time.

Tirouv Ompallios and I began to swear simultaneously by the names of more urbane and civilized deities, when we saw that not even the commonest of semi-precious gems was visible anywhere, either upon or within any feature or member of this execrable image. With a niggardliness beyond parallel, even the eyes had been carven from the same dull stone as the rest of the abominable thing; and mouth, nose, ears and all other orifices were unadorned. We could only wonder at the poverty or avarice of the beings who had wrought this unique bestiality.

Now that our minds were no longer

enthralled by the hope of immediate riches, we became more keenly aware of our surroundings in general; and in particular we noticed the unfamiliar feter I have spoken of previously, which had now increased uncomfortably in strength. We found that it issued from the bronze basin, which we proceeded to examine, though without any idea that the examination would be profitable or even pleasant.

The basin, I have said, was very large; indeed, it was no less than six feet in diameter by three in depth, and its brim was the height of a tall man's shoulder from the floor. The three legs that bore it were curved and massive, and terminated in the likeness of feline paws displaying their talons. When we approached and peered over the brim, we saw that the bowl was filled with a sort of viscous and semi-liquescient substance, quite opaque and of a sooty color. It was from this that the odor came—an odor which, though unsurpassably foul, was nevertheless not an odor of putrefaction, but resembled rather the smell of some vile and unclean creature of the marshes. The odor was almost beyond endurance, and we were about to turn away when we perceived a slight ebullition of the surface, as if the sooty liquid were agitated from within by some submerged animal or other entity. This ebullition increased rapidly, the center swelled as if with the action of a powerful yeast, and we watched in utter horror while an uncouth amorphous head with dull and bulging eyes arose gradually on an ever-lengthening neck, and stared us in the face with primordial malignity. Then two arms—if one could call them arms—likewise arose inch by inch, and we saw that the thing was not, as we had thought, a creature immersed in the liquid, but that the liquid itself had put forth this hideous neck and head, and

was now forming these damnable arms, that groped toward us with tentacle-like appendages in lieu of claws or hands!

A fear which we had never experienced even in dreams, of which we had found no hint in our most perilous nocturnal excursions, deprived us of the faculty of speech but not of movement. We recoiled a few paces from the bowl, and coincidentally with our steps, the horrible neck and arms continued to lengthen. Then the whole mass of the dark fluid began to rise, and far more quickly than the *suvana-juice* runs from my pen, it poured over the rim of the basin like a torrent of black quicksilver, taking as it reached the floor an undulant ophidian form which immediately developed more than a dozen short legs.

What unimaginable horror of proto-plastic life, what loathly spawn of the primordial slime had come forth to confront us, we did not pause to consider or conjecture. The monstrosity was too awful to permit of even a brief contemplation; also, its intentions were too plainly hostile, and it gave evidence of anthropophagic inclinations, for it slithered toward us with an unbelievable speed and celerity of motion, opening as it came a toothless mouth of amazing capacity. As it gaped upon us, revealing a tongue that uncoiled like a long serpent, its jaws widened with the same extreme elasticity that accompanied all its other movements. We saw that our departure from the fane of Tsathoggua had become most imperative, and turning our backs to all the abominations of that unhallowed shrine, we crossed the sill with a single leap and ran headlong in the moonlight through the suburbs of Commorion. We rounded every convenient corner, we doubled upon our tracks behind the palaces of time-forgotten nobles and the warehouses of unrecorded merchants, we chose preferably the places where the incursive jungle-

trees were highest and thickest; and at last, on a by-road where the outlying houses were no longer visible, we paused and dared to look back.

Our lungs were intolerably strained, were ready to burst with this heroic effort, and the various fatigues of the day had told upon us all too grievously: but when we saw at our heels the black monster, following us with a serpentine and undulating ease, like a torrent that descends a long declivity, our flagging limbs were miraculously reanimated, and we plunged from the betraying light of the road into the pathless jungle, hoping to evade our pursuer in the labyrinth of boles and vines and gigantic leaves. We stumbled over roots and fallen trees, we tore our raiment and lacerated our skins on the savage brambles, we collided in the gloom with huge trunks and limber saplings that bent before us, we heard the hissing of tree-snakes that spat their venom at us from the boughs above, and the grunting or howling of unseen animals when we trod upon them in our precipitate flight. But we no longer dared to stop or look behind.

WE MUST have continued our headlong peregrinations for hours. The moon, which had given us little light at best through the heavy leafage, fell lower and lower among the enormous-fronded palms and intricate creepers. But its final rays, when it sank, were all that saved us from a noisome marsh with mounds and hassocks of bog-concealing grass, amid whose perilous environs and along whose mephitic rim we were compelled to run without pause or hesitation or time to choose our footing, with our damnable pursuer dogging every step.

Now, when the moon had gone down, our flight became wilder and more hazardous—a veritable delirium of terror, exhaustion, confusion, and desperate diffi-

cult progression among obstacles to which we gave no longer any distinct heed or comprehension, through a night that clung to us and clogged us like an evil load, like the dragging toils of a monstrous web. It would seem that the creature behind us, with its abnormal facilities of motion and self-elongation, could have overtaken us at any time; but apparently it desired to prolong the game. And so, in a semi-eternal protraction of inconclusive horrors, the night wore on. But we never dared to stop or look back.

Far off and wan, a glimmering twilight grew among the trees—a foreomening of the hidden morn. Wearier than the dead, and longing for any repose, any security, even that of some indescribable tomb, we ran toward the light and stumbled forth from the jungle upon a paven street among buildings of granite and marble. Dimly, dully, beneath the crushing of our fatigue, we realized that we had wandered in a circle and had come back to the suburbs of Commorion. Before us, no farther away than the toss of a javelin, was the dark temple of Tsathoggua.

Again we ventured to look back, and saw the elastic monster, whose legs had now lengthened till it towered above us, and whose maw had widened till it could have swallowed us both at a mouthful. It followed us with an effortless glide, with a surety of motion and intention too horrible, too cynical to be borne. We ran into the temple of Tsathoggua, whose door was still open just as we had left it, and closing the door behind us with a fearful immediacy, we contrived, in the superhuman strength of our desperation, to shoot one of the rusty bolts.

Now, while the chill dreariness of the dawn fell down in narrow shafts through the windows high in the wall, we tried with a truly heroic resignation to compose ourselves, and waited for whatever our

destiny should bring. And while we waited, the god Tsathoggua peered upon us with an even more imbecile squatness and wiliness and bestiality than he had shown in the torch-light.

I think I have said that the lintel of the door had crumbled and splintered away in several places. In fact, the beginning process of ruin had made three apertures, through which the daylight now filtered, and which were large enough to have permitted the passage of small animals or sizable serpents. For some reason, our eyes were drawn to these apertures.

We had not gazed long, when the light was suddenly intercepted in all three openings, and then a black material began to pour through them, and ran down the door in a triple stream to the flagstones, where it re-united and resumed the form of the thing that had followed us.

"Farewell, Tirouv Ompallios," I cried, with such remaining breath as I could summon. Then I ran and concealed myself behind the image of Tsathoggua, which was large enough to screen me from view, but, unfortunately, was too small to serve this purpose for more than one person. Tirouv Ompallios would have preceded me, with the same laudable idea of self-preservation, but I was the quicker. And seeing that there was not room for both of us to the rearward of Tsathoggua, he returned my valediction and climbed into the great bronze basin, which alone could now afford a moment's concealment in the bareness of the fane.

Peering from behind that execrable god, whose one merit was the width of his abdomen and his haunches, I observed the actions of the monster. No sooner had Tirouv Ompallios crouched down from view in the three-legged bowl, when the nameless enormity reared itself up

like a sooty pillar and approached the basin. The head had now changed in form and position, till it was no more than a vague imprint of dissolving features on the middle of a body without arms, legs or neck. The thing loomed above the basin for an instant, gathering all its bulk in an imminent mass on a sort of tapering tail, and then like a lapsing wave it fell into the bowl upon Tirouv Ompallios. Its whole body seemed to open and form an immense mouth as it sank down from sight.

Hardly able to breathe in my horror, I waited, but no sound and no movement came from the basin—not even a groan from Tirouv Ompallios. Finally, with infinite trepidation and caution, I ventured to emerge from behind Tsathoggua, and passing the bowl on tiptoe, I managed to reach the door.

Now, in order to win my freedom, it would be necessary to draw back the bolt and open the door. And this I greatly feared to do because of the inevitable noise. I felt that it would be highly injudicious to disturb the entity in the bowl while it was digesting Tirouv Ompallios;

but there seemed to be no other way if I was ever to leave that abominable fane.

Even as I shot back the bolt, a single tentacle sprang out with infernal rapidity from the basin, and, elongating itself across the whole room, it ertircled my right wrist in a lethal clutch. It was unlike anything I have ever touched, it was indescribably viscid and slimy and cold, it was loathsomely soft like the foul mire of a bog, and mordantly sharp as an edged metal, with an agonizing suction and constriction that made me scream aloud as the thing tightened upon my flesh, cutting into me like a vise of knife-blades. In my struggles to free myself, I drew the door open and fell forward on the sill. A moment of awful pain, and then I became aware that I had broken away from my captor. But looking down, I saw that my hand was gone, leaving a strangely withered stump from which little blood issued. Then, gazing behind me into the shrine, I saw the tentacle recoil and shorten till it passed from view behind the rim of the basin, bearing my lost hand to join whatever now remained of Tirouv Ompallios.

