



Library podcast

Virtual Thrilling Tales: The Lizard God by Charles J. Finger

Hello, and welcome to Thrilling Tales, Seattle Public Library's Storytime for Grownups. I'm your librarian reader, David Wright. This week we head into the deepest jungles of equatorial South America in – The Lizard God, by Charles J. Finger – which first appeared in the December 1920 issue of *All's Well* magazine, republished in the Best Short Stories of 1921.

And now, THE LIZARD GOD, by CHARLES J. FINGER

It is not pleasant to have one's convictions disturbed, and that is why I wish I had never seen that man Rounds. He seems to have crossed my path only to shake my self-confidence. The little conversation we had has left me dissatisfied. I look upon my collection with less interest than I did. I am not as pleased with the result of my investigations as they appear in my monograph on "The Saurian Family of Equatorial America." Doubtless the mood that now possesses me will pass away, and I shall recover my equanimity. His story would have upset most men. Worse still was his unpleasant habit of interjecting strange opinions. Judge for yourself.

It was when passing through the Reptile room on my way to the study that I first saw him. I took him to be a mere common working man passing away an idle hour; one of the ordinary Museum visitors. Two hours later, I noticed that he was closely examining the lizard cases. Then later, he seemed interested in my collection of prints illustrating the living world of the ante-diluvian period. It was then that I approached him, and, finding him apparently intelligent, with, as it seemed, a bent towards lizards, and further, discovering that he had traveled in Peru and Colombia, took him to the study. The man had some unusual habits. He was absolutely lacking in that sense of respect, as I may term it, usually accorded to one in my position. One who is a professor and curator becomes accustomed to a certain amount of, well, diffidence in laymen. The attitude is entirely natural. It is a tribute. But Rounds was not that way. He was perfectly at ease. He had an air of quiet self-possession. He refused the chair I indicated, the chair set for visitors and students, and instead, walked to the window and threw up the lower sash, taking a seat on the sill, with one foot resting on the floor and the other swinging. Thus, he looked as though he were prepared to leap, or to jump or run. He gave me the impression of being on the alert. Without asking permission, he filled and lit his pipe, taking his tobacco from a queerly made pouch, and using but one hand in the process.

"What I was looking for," he said, "is a kind of lizard. Yet it is not a lizard. It is too hard and thin in the

body to be that. It runs on its hind legs. It is white. Its bite is poisonous. It lives in the equatorial districts of Colombia."

"Have you seen one?" I asked.

"No," was the reply. Then after a moment he asked, "Why?"

"Because there is no such living creature," I said.

"How do you know?" he said abruptly.

"The lizard group is thoroughly classified," I said. "There is nothing answering to that description. In the first place—"

"Does that make it non-existent? Your classification of what you know?" he interrupted.

"I have made a study of the Saurians," I said.

"No you haven't," he said. "You have read what other men have written and that is not the same thing."

"Really," I began, but he broke in.

"I mean to say that you have never been in any new equatorial country," he said. "Your manner shows that. You are too quiet. Too easy. Too sedentary. You would have been killed because of your lack of vigilance."

That is, as nearly as I can repeat and remember, the opening of the conversation. There was an air of challenge about the man that I found unpleasant. Of course I admitted the fact that I was not an explorer myself, and that mine was the humbler if more tedious task of collecting and arranging data. At that he said that in his opinion, organized expeditions were little more than pleasure jaunts taken at the public expense. His viewpoint was most extraordinary.

"Such an expedition," he said, "must fail in its main purpose because its very unwieldiness destroys or disperses the very things it was organized to study. It cannot penetrate the wilds; it cannot get into the dry lands. The very needs of the men and horses and dogs prevent that. It must keep to beaten tracks and in touch with the edge of civilization. The members of such an expedition are mere killers on a large scale, and to kill or to hunt a thing is to not know it at all. Further, the men in such expeditions are not hunters even. They are destroyers who destroy while keeping themselves in safety. They have their beaters. Their paid natives. Humbug! That's the only word to describe that kind of thing. Staged effects they have. Then they come back here to pose as heroes before a crowd of gaping city clerks."

I mentioned the remarkable results obtained by the Peary and Roosevelt expeditions and pointed to the fact that the specimens brought back and properly set up by efficient taxidermists, did, in fact, give the common people some notion of the wonders of animal life.

"Nothing of the kind," he said. "Look at that boa-constrictor you have out there. It is stuffed and in a glass case. Don't you know that in its natural surroundings you yourself would come mighty near stepping on one without seeing it? You would. If you had that thing set up as it should be, these museum visitors of yours would pass the case believing it was a mere collection of foliage. They wouldn't see the snake itself. See what I mean? Set up as they are in real life they'd come near being invisible."

The man walked up and down the study floor for half a minute or so, then paused at the desk and said:

"Don't let us get to entertaining one another though. But remember this, you only get knowledge at a cost. I mean to say that the man that would know something, can only get the knowledge at first hand. The people who wander around this junk shop that you call a museum, go out as empty headed as they came in. Consider. Say a Fiji islander came here and took back with him from the United States an electric light bulb, a stuffed possum, an old hat, a stalactite from the Mammoth cave, a sackful of pecan nuts, a pair of handcuffs, half a dozen photographs and a dozen packing cases full of things gathered from here and there, and then set the whole junk pile up under a roof in the Fiji Islands, what would his fellow Fijians know from that of the social life of this country. Eh? Tell me that?"

"You exaggerate," I protested. "You take an extreme point of view."

"I don't," he said.

His contradictions would have made me angry, perhaps, were they not made in such a quiet tone of voice.

"Take anything from its natural surroundings," he went on, "and it is meaningless. The dull-eyed men and women that wander through this Museum of yours are just killing time. There's no education in that kind of thing. Besides, what they see are dead things, anyway, and you can't study human nature in a morgue."

He resumed his seat on the window sill, then took from an inner pocket a leather wallet, and drew from that a photograph which he tossed across so that it fell on the desk before me. I examined it carefully. It had been badly developed and badly printed, and what was worse, roughly handled. But still, one could distinguish certain features.

It pictured the interior of a building. It was roofless, and above the rear wall was what I recognized as tropical vegetation, mainly by its wild luxuriance. In the center of the rear wall was what seemed to be

a giant stone lizard, standing on its hind legs. The one foreleg that showed was disproportionately short. The body, too, was more attenuated than that of any lizard. The thing was headless and the statue, idol or whatever it was, stood on a pedestal, and before that again, seemed to be a slab of stone. Then my attention was caught by the head of the thing, which was to be seen in a corner. It was shaped roughly triangular. The jaws were broad at the base and the thing had, even in the photograph, something of the same repulsive appearance as the head of a vampire bat.

"It is the result of the imagination of some Indian," I said. "No post-diluvian Saurian ever existed of that size."

"Good God, man, you jump to conclusions," he said. "This is only a representation of the thing itself. Made in heroic size, so to say. But see here!"

He leaned over my shoulder and pointed to a kind of border that ran along the base of the pedestal. Examining closely, I made out a series of lizards running on their hind legs.

"They," he explained, "are cut into the stone. It is a sort of red sandstone. They are a little bigger than the thing itself as it is living. But look at this."

The particular spot to which he pointed was blurred and dirty, as though many fingers had pointed to it and I took the magnifying glass for closer inspection. Even then I only saw dimly as something that bore a resemblance to the carved figures.

"That," he said, "is as near as ever I came to seeing one of the little devils. I think it was one of them though I am not sure. I caught sight of it flashing across like a swiftly blown leaf. We took the picture by flashlight you see, so I'm not sure. Somerfield, of course, was too busy attending to his camera. He saw nothing."

"We might have another picture made," I said. "It would be interesting."

"D'ye think I'd be able to carry plunder around traveling as I was then?" he asked. "You see, I went down there for the Company I'm working for. I was looking out for rubber and hard woods. I'd worked from Buenaventura. From Buenaventura down to the Rio Caqueta and then followed that stream up to the water head, and then down the Codajaz. If you look at the map, you'll see it's no easy trip. No chance to pack much. All I wanted to carry was information. And there was only Somerfield along."

"But Somerfield—he, as I take it, was the photographer, was he not? Did he not take care of the negatives? It would not have been much for him to take care of."

"Well you see, he did take care of his negatives. But circumstances were different at the time. He had laid them away somewhere. After I killed him, I just brought away the camera and that was all." Positively, I gasped at the audacity of the man. He said the words "I killed him," so quietly, in so matter of fact a way, that for the moment I was breathless. Like most other men, I had never sat face

to face with one who had taken the life of another. Even soldiers, though they, we suppose, kill men, do it in a machine-like way. The killing is impersonal. The soldier handles the machine and it is the machine that kills. The individual soldier does not know whether he kills or not. That is why we are able to make much of the soldier, perhaps, I have thought since, though it never appeared to me in that light before I met Rounds. Actually, we are repelled at the thought of a man who kills another deliberately. If it were not so, as Rounds pointed out, we would make a hero of the public executioner. He should be as heroic a figure as a general. But as I tell you, at the moment, when Rounds said, "when I killed him," I was shocked. I had never before realized how violence was a thing apart from my life. I had looked at the representation of murder on the stage. I had read novels with murder as the mainspring. I had seen shootings and stabbings in moving pictures. Yet, not until that moment had I any suspicion that violence was so rare a thing and that most of our lives are far, far removed from it. Actually, I have never struck a man, nor has any man ever lifted his hand against me in anger. It was, therefore, a startling thing to hear Rounds confess to having killed a fellow man. It was awesome. And yet, let me say, that at once I was possessed of a great desire to learn all about it, and down in my heart I feared that he would decide he had said something that he should not have said, and would either deny his statement or modify it in some way. I wanted to hear all the details. I was hugely interested. Was it morbidity? Then I came to myself after what was a shock, and awoke to the fact that he was talking in his quiet, even way.

"But those Tlingas held the belief, and that was all there was to it," he was saying. I came to attention and said, "Of course. It is natural," for I feared to have him know that I was inattentive even for that short space, and waited for elucidations.

"It seems," he went on, "that the tribe was dying out. Helm, who first told me something of it at Buenaventura, was one of those scientists who have to invent a new theory for every new thing they were told of. He said it was either because of eating too much meat, or not enough. I forget which. There had been a falling off in the birth rate. The Tocalinian who had lived with them, and who joined us at the headwaters of the Codajaz, (codazhais) maintained that there had been too much inbreeding. So there was some arrangement by means of which they invited immigrants, as it were. Men from other neighboring tribes were encouraged to join the Tlingas. And they did. The Tlingas had a fat land and welcomed the immigrants. The immigrants on their part expected to have an easy time."

"That would make for racial improvement," I hazarded.

"Why?" he asked.

"The best from other lands would tend to improve their race. That was my idea when I spoke," I said. He laughed quietly. "Something of the same idea that you foster here," he said. "I've laughed at that many's the time. America is this, that and the other; its people are inventive, intelligent, original, free, independent and all the rest of it because it is a result of the best blood of other lands. Eh? Lord, man, how you fool yourself! Can't you see that you would have a far better case if you deplored the fact that we are a result of the worse? All the fugitives, the poor, the ill-educated, the unfortunate, the

ne'er-do-wells have been swarming here from Europe for two centuries. Can't you see that no man who could fight successfully against odds in his own country would emigrate? Can't you see that? If you said that we are the result of generations of poor-spirited fugitives who couldn't fight for their personal freedom, you would be nearer the mark."

His argument of course was absurd, and at the moment I had no answer ready, though since I have thought of the thing I should have said. As Rounds talked, he grew quieter in his tone. He moved from his place on the window sill and sat on the corner of my desk. I had forgotten my uneasiness at being in the presence of one who had taken his fellow's life. He went on:

"When there's a falling birth rate, things change. There are manners and customs evolved that would seem strange to you. There come laws and religions, all made to match current requirements. Celibacy and sterility become a crime. Virginity becomes a disgrace, a something to be ridiculed."

"It seems impossible," I said.

"No," he said. "You have that in part. You ridicule what you call old maids, don't you?" Again I was too slow with my reply. If I ever meet him again, I shall show him the fallacy of many of his arguments.

"Men with most children had the most to say. The childless were penalized, were punished. The sterile were put to death. There grew up a religion and a priesthood, ceremonials, sacrifices and rituals. And they had their god, in the shape of this lizard thing. Of course, like most other gods, it was more of a malevolent creature than anything else. Gods generally are if you will consider a little. I don't care what creed or religion gets the upper hand, it's Fear that becomes the power. Look around and see if I'm not right.

"Well, Somerfield and I walked into that kind of thing. Now like me, he had worked for the Exploration Company a good few years and had been to all kinds of places prospecting. Torres Straits, the Gold Coast, Madagascar, Patagonia. We prospectors have to get around in queer corners and the life's a dull one. All monotony. But Somerfield had queer notions. He worked at the job because he could make more money than at anything else and that gave him a chance to keep his family in Ohio in comfort. He was mighty fond of his family. Besides, the job gave him more time with the wife and kids than the average man gets. When he was at home, he was at home three months on end at times. That's better than the ordinary man. A man in a city, for example, leaves home early and gets home late, and then he's too grouchy what with the close air and one thing and another to find the children anything but an infernal nuisance. Now a man away from his home for a long spell on end really enjoys the company when he does get home, and they enjoy his company, too. Then, too, he does not get to messing into the affairs of the family. He's not the Lord Almighty and Supreme Court Judge all the time. Besides that, the wife and children get a kind of independence.

"Now this being so, Somerfield was what he was. He had ideas about religion. He was full of the notion that things are arranged so that if you live up to a certain code, you'll get a reward. 'Do right,

and you'll come out right,' was one of his sayings. 'The wages of sin is death,' was another. Point out to him that virtue got paid in the same coin, and he'd argue. No use. In a way he was like a man who wouldn't walk under a ladder or spill salt. You know.

"Naturally, for him things were awkward at the Tlinga village. We stayed there quite a while, I should say. He lived in his own shack, cooking for himself and all that. He was full of ideas of duty to his wife and so on. I fell in with the local customs and took up with a sweetheart, and handled things so well that there was one of their ceremonials pretty soon in which I was central figure. Ista, it seems, made a public announcement. That would be natural enough with a tribe so concerned about the family birth rate. But it made me sorter mad to hear the natives everlastingly accusing Somerfield of being an undesirable. But they never let up trying to educate him and make him a Tlinga citizen. They were patient and persistent enough. On the other hand, I was looked on as a model young man, and received into the best society.

"About the time we were ready to strike west, Ista, that was my girl, told me that there would have to be a new ceremonial. She took my going in good part, for there was nothing more I could do. They were sensible enough to know that man was only an instrument in the great game as they understood it. Ista had led me out to a quiet place to put me next. I remember that vividly because of a little thing that happened that doesn't mean anything. I often wonder why resultless things sometimes stick in the mind. We were sitting at the base of a tall tree and there was a certain bush close by with bright red berries when they were unripe. They look good to eat. But when they ripened, they grew fat and juicy, the size of a grape, and of a liverish color. I thought that one of them had fallen on my left forearm and went to flick it off. Instead of being that, the thing burst into a blood splotch as soon as I hit it. That was the first time I had been bitten by one of those bugs. They are about the size of a sheep tick when empty, but they get on you and suck and suck, till they are full of your blood and size of a grape. Queer things, but ugly. Ista laughed as you would laugh if you saw a foreigner afraid of a harmless snake. It's queer that it should be considered a joke when one fears something that another does not.

"But that has nothing to do with the story. What has, is that Ista wanted to tell me about the ceremonial. She did not believe in it at all. Privately, she was a kind of atheist among her people, but kept her opinions to herself. You must not think that because you see, hear or read of savage rites, that all the so-called savages believe in those things. No sir. There is as much disbelief amongst them as with us. Perhaps more. They think things out. I might say that in a way they think more than the average civilized man. You see, a civilized child thinks for itself up until it is six or seven or so, and then the schools get hold of it, and from then on, it's tradition and believing what it's told to believe. That goes on through school life. Then at work, the man who would dare to vary on his own account is not wanted. So independent thought is not possible there. Work finished, it's the evening paper and editorial opinions. So really, man does not get much of a chance to think straight at any time. I guess if he did, the whole scheme would fall to pieces. That's why I say civilized man does not only not think, but perhaps can't think. His brains are not trained to it. Give the average man something with real, straight, original, first-hand thought in it, and he's simply unable to tackle it. His brain has not been cultivated. He wilts mentally. It's like putting the work of a man on a boy. Catch

what I mean? Now a savage gets more of a chance. It was that way with Ista. She had thought out things for herself and had her own beliefs, but they were not the beliefs the Tlingas were supposed to hold. But after all she did not tell me much besides her own disbeliefs. When you think of it, no one can tell another much. What you know you have to discover alone. All she told me was what was going to be done, and that was about as disappointing as the information you might get about what would take place in initiation in a secret society. Some was lost in transmission.

"Well, at last the ceremonial started up with a great banging of drums and all that. It was a great scene, let me tell you, with the tumbled vegetation, glaringly colored as if a scene painter had gone crazy. There were the flashing birds—blood-colored and orange scarlet and yellow, gold and green. Butterflies, too,—great gaudy things that looked like moving flowers. And the noise and chatterings and whistlings in the trees of birds and insects. There were flowers and fruits, and eatings and speech-makings. As far as I could gather, the chief speakers were congratulating the hearers upon their luck in belonging to the Tlingas, which was the greatest tribe on earth and the favorite of Naol, the lizard god. We capered round the tribal pole, I capering with the rest of them of course.

Somerfield took a picture of it. Then there was a procession of prospective mothers with Ista among them. Rotten, I thought it. Don't imagine female beauty, by the way, as some of the writers on savage life would have you imagine it. Nothing of the kind. I never saw a stark woman that looked beautiful yet. That's all bunk. Muscular and strong, yes. That's a kind of beauty in its way. True as God, I believe that one of the causes of unhappy marriages among white folk is that the lads are fed upon false notions about womanly beauty, and when they get the reality they think that they've captured a lemon.

"Presently the crowd quieted down and the men were set around in a semicircle with me and Somerfield at the end. Then a red-eyed old hag tottered out and began cursing Somerfield. She spat in his face and called him all outrageous names that came to her vindictive tongue. Luckily it was that he had been forewarned by me, and so was able to grin and bear it. But Lord, how she did tongue-lash him. Then she took a flat piece of wood, shaped like a laurel leaf, which was fastened to a thin strip of hide, and showed him that. It was a kind of charm, and on it was cut one of the running lizards. She wanted him to rub it on his forehead. Of course with his notions of religion he wouldn't do it. That's natural. When she passed it to me, I did what she wanted done. I never was particular that way. Symbols mean nothing anyway and if fools are in the majority, it's no use stirring up trouble. It's playing a lie of course, but then that's the part of wisdom it seems to me, sometimes. It's in a line with protective coloring. You remember what I said about the proper mounting of your specimens don't you? Well, it's like that. That's why persecutions have never stamped out opinions nor prohibitions appetites. The wisest keep their counsel and go on as usual. The martyrs are the weak fools. But let's see. Where was I? Oh, yes. The old woman and the piece of wood.

"She began running from this one to that, kind of working herself up into a frenzy. Then she started to chant some old nonsense. There was a rhythm to it. She sang:

'Nao calls for the useless.'

"Then the rest of them would shout

'Nao calls. Nao calls.'

"There was a terrible lot of it. The main purport was that this Nao was the ruling devil or god of the place. It called for the sacrifice of the useless. Many men were needed so that the one should be born who would lead the Tlingas to victory. That was the tone of it, and at the end of every line she sang, the crowd joined in with the refrain.

'Nao calls. Nao calls.'

"Of course they became worked up. She handled them pretty much the same as a skillful speaker does things at a political meeting or an evangelist at a revival. The same spirit was there. Instead of a flag, there was the tribal pole. There was the old gag of their nation or tribe being the chosen one. I don't care where you go, there is always the same thing. Every tribe and nation is cock-sure that theirs is the best. They have the bravest and the wisest men and the best women. But I kept nudging Somerfield. It was hard on him. He was the Judas and the traitor and all that. 'Damn-fool superstition,' he muttered to me time and again. But of course he was a bit nervous, and so was I. Being in the minority is awkward. The human brain simply isn't strong enough to encounter organized opposition. It wears. You spend too much energy being on the defensive.

"After a time, when the song was done, the old hag seemed pretty well played out. Then she passed the piece of wood I told you of to a big fello, and he started to whirling it round and round. He was a skillful chap at the trick, and in a little had it whirling and screaming. Then presently some of the birds fell to noise making just as you will hear canaries sing when some one whistles, or women talk when a piano commences to play. I saw something of the same down in Torres Straits. They call it the Twanyirika there. In the Malay Peninsula they use something of the kind to scare the elephants out of the plantations. They've got it on the Gold Coast as well. It's called the Oro there. Really it's all over the world. I've seen Scotch herd boys use something like it to scare the cattle, and Mexican sheep herders in Texas to make the sheep run together when they scatter too far. Of course there's really nothing to be scared of, but when it comes near you, you feel inclined to duck. To me, it was the feeling that the flat piece of wood would fly off and hit me. You always duck when you hear a whizzing. Still, the priests or medicine men trade on the head-ducking tendency. So, somehow, in the course of time, it gets so that those that listen have to bow down. Oh, yes! You say it's ridiculous and fanciful and all that sort of thing. I know. I have heard others say the same. It's only a noise and nothing to be scared of. But then, when you come to think of it, most men are scared of noise. They're like animals in that respect. What is a curse but a noise? Yet most men are secretly afraid of curses. They're uneasy under them. Yet they know it's only noise. Then look at thunderings from the pulpit. Look at excommunications. Look at denunciations. All noises to be sure. But there's the threat of force behind some of them. The blow may come and again it may not.

"As I said, every one bowed down and of course so did I, on general principles. Somerfield didn't and the old fellow whirled that bull-roarer over him ever so long, and the red-eyed hag cursed and spat at

him, but he never budged. That sort of conduct is damned foolishness according to my notion. But then, you see, in a kind of a way he was backing his prejudices against theirs and prejudices are pretty solid things when you consider. Still, he took a hell of a chance.

"On the trail next day, for we left the following morning, I argued with him about that, but he couldn't be budged. He said he stood for truth and all that kind of thing. I put it to him that he would expect any foreigner to conform to his national customs. He'd expect a Turk to give up his polygamy, I said, no matter what heart-breakings it cost some of the family. But he had a kink in his thinking, holding that his people had the whole, solid, unchanging truth. Of course, the argument came down with a crash then, for it worked around to a question of what is truth. There you are. There was the limit. So we quit. As I tell you, the human brain is not constituted to do much thinking. It's been crippled by lack of use. We are mentally stunted in growth. I remember that I began to say something about the possibility of there being several gods, meaning that some time or other men with imagination had deified some natural thing, but it came to me that I was talking nonsense, so I quit. Yet I know right well that many tribes have made gods of things of which they were afraid. But it's small profit to theorize.

"It was near sundown when we came to that building shown in that photograph. The vegetation was so thick thereabouts that the temple, for I suppose it was that, appeared before us suddenly. One moment we were crawling like insects between the trunks of great jungle trees that shot upwards seventy feet or more without a branch, as if they were racing for dear life skyward, and then everything fell away and there was the old building. It startled the both of us. We got the sensation that you get when you see a really good play. You forget your bodily presence and you are only a bundle of nerves. You walk or sit or stand, but without any effort or knowledge that you are doing it. We had been talking, and the sight of that building, so unexpected, startled us into silence. It would any one. Believe me, your imperturbable man with perfect, cool, self-possession does not exist. Man's a jumpy thing, given to nerves. You may deny it and talk about the unexcitability of the American citizen and all that bunk, but let me tell you that your journalists and moving picture producers and preachers and politicians have caught on to the fact that man is jumpy, and they trade on their discovery, believe me. They've got man on the hop every which way and keep him going.

"There had been a gateway there once, but for some reason or other it had become blocked with a rank vegetation. The old gap was chocked full with a thorny, flower-bearing bush so thick that a cat could not have passed through. Somerfield switched on one of his theories as soon as he got over his first surprise. Worshipers, he held, had brought flowers there and the seeds that had dropped had sprouted. It looked reasonable.

"Above the lintel was carved one of those running lizards. That you noticed early. You can't see that in the picture because we took that from the edge of a broken wall. You see, all the walls stood except that to the left of this doorway and that had partly fallen and what was left was chin high. We saw at a glance that the people who had built that temple were handy with tools. The stones of the wall were quite big—two feet or more square, and fitted closely. There was no mortar to hold them

but the ends had been made with alternate grooves and projections that fitted well. The stone was a kind of red sandstone. But I told you that before.

"When we looked over the broken wall and saw that stone lizard, we had another shock. I don't care how you school yourself, there's a scare in every man. That's what annoys me, to see men posing and letting themselves be written up and speechified over as fearless. Fearless General this and Admiral that. Our fearless boys in the trenches. It sickens me. Why the whole race has been fed up on fear for ages. Fearlessness is impossible. Hell-fire, boogymen, devils, witches, the wrath of God—it's all been fear. Things that we know nothing of and have no proof of have been added to things that we do know of that will hurt, and, on top of that there has been the everlasting 'cuidado' lest you say a word that will run foul of current opinion—so what wonder that man is scary? It's a wonder that he's sane.

"After we took that picture we debated for the first time where we should camp that night. A new scare possessed us. In the end, we decided to camp inside the temple because of the greater security afforded by the walls. The truth is that some half fear of a giant lizard had gotten hold of us. So, as it was the lizard that scared us, we decided to stay in the lizard temple. Man's built that way. He likes to keep close to the thing that he fears. I heard a man who was a banker once say that he always mistrusted the man who would not take a vacation. As I take it, his idea was that the man who knew some danger was nigh, wanted to be around where he could catch the first intimation of a crash. But then, too, besides that, there is a sense of comfort in being within walls, especially with a floor paved as this one was. Besides, it was a change from the trees with their wild-tangled vines and their snake-like lianas. So we decided on the temple.

"That night I was a long time getting to sleep. The memory of the old hag and the bull-roarer was in my mind. I kept thinking of Ista, too. It was a warmer night than usual, and, after the moon dropped, pitchy dark. I slept stripped as I generally do, with a light blanket across my legs so that I could find it if needed without waking up.

"I awoke presently, feeling something run lightly and swiftly across my face. I thought it was a spider. It seemed to run in a zig-zag. Then feeling nothing more I set it down to fancy and dropped off to sleep again, face turned towards that idol. Later, I felt the same kind of thing run across my neck. I knew it was no fancy then, and my scare vanished because here was something to do. So I waited with my right hand poised to grab. I waited a long time, too, but I have lots of patience. Presently it ran down my body starting at my left shoulder and I brought down my hand at a venture, claw fashion, and caught the thing on the blanket. I felt the blanket raise and then fall again, just a little, of course, as I lifted my hand with the thing in it, and by that knew that it had claws. Yet bet I held tight. It seemed to be hard and smooth. It was a wiry, wriggling thing, somewhat like a lizard. But it was much more vigorous than any lizard. I tried to crush it, but could not. As to thickness, it seemed to be about the diameter of one of those lead pencils. It was like this I had it."

Rounds picked up a couple of lead pencils from the desk and took my hand in his. He told me to close my fist and then placed one pencil lengthwise so that an end of it was between my first and

second finger and the rubber-tipped end lay across my wrist. The other pencil he thrust crosswise so that the pointed end stuck out between the second and third finger and the blunt end between the index finger and thumb.

"There you have it," he said. "That's how I held the little devil. Now grip hard and try to crush the pencils and you'll have something of the same sensation as I had. Holding it thus, I could feel its head jerking this way and that, violently, and its tail, long and lithe, lashing at my wrist. The little claws were trying to tear, but they were evidently softish. I could hear, or thought I could, the snap of its little jaws. It was about the nastiest sensation that I ever experienced. I don't know why I thought that it was venomous, but I did. I tried to smash the thing in my hand—tried again and again, and I have a good grip—but might just as well have tried to crush a piece of wire. There was no give to it. It tried to wriggle backwards but I had it under its jaws. So there we were: it wriggling, writhing and lashing and me laying there holding it at arms length. I felt the sweat start on me and the hair at the nape of my neck raise up, and I did some quick and complicated thinking. Of course, I dared not throw it away, but I got to my feet and as I did so, tried to bend its head backwards against the stone floor. But the head slipped sideways. I called on Somerfield for a light then, and he struck one hurriedly and it went out immediately. All that I saw was that the thing was white and had a triangular shaped head.

"Somehow I ran against Somerfield before he got another match struck and he swore at me, saying that I had cut him. I knew that I had touched him with my outstretched hand that held the beast. I drew back my hand a little and remembered afterwards that I then felt a slight, elastic resistance as if the thing that I held had caught on to something, as it had before to my blanket. Afterwards I found that the thing had gotten Somerfield's neck. As he struck another match, I saw the low place in the wall and flung the thing away with a quick jerk. You know the kind of a motion you'd make getting rid of some unseen noxious thing like that. That's how I never really saw the beast and can only conjecture what it was like from the feel of it.

"On Somerfield's neck, just below the angle of the jaw, was a clean-cut little oval place about half an inch in length. It did not bleed much, but it seemed to pain him a lot. He maintained that the thing was some kind of rodent. Anyway we put a little chewed tobacco on the place and, after awhile, tried to sleep again. We didn't do much good at it, neither of us. He was tossing and grumbling like a man with the toothache.

"Next morning the bitten place had swollen up to the size of an apple and was a greenish yellow color. He was feeling sick and a bit feverish, so I made him comfortable after looking around to see whether there was anything to harm him in the courtyard, and went to hunt water. I remember that I gave the head of the idol a kick with the flat of my foot for spite, as I passed it. Like a kid, that was, wasn't it? Now I was running back and forth all the morning with the canteen, for he drank a terrible quantity. His eyes grew bright, too, and his skin flushed. Towards noon, he began to talk wild, imagining that he was at home. Then I judged it best to let him stay there in the temple where he was, so to speak, corraled. Coming back shortly after from one water-hunting trip, I heard singing, and, looking over the wall, saw him sitting on the slab in front of the idol. He must have fancied that he had

his kids before him for he was beating time with his hands and snapping his fingers and thumbs and singing:

'London bridge is fallen down, fallen down, fallen...'

"It was rotten to hear that out there, but I was halfway glad to see him that way, knowing that he wasn't miserable. After a little, he quit babbling and took more water; emptied the canteen, in fact, so back I had to start for more.

"Returning, I found things changed. He was going around, crouched like a hunting Indian, peering here and there, behind the idol then across to the head as if seeking some one. He had a dagger in his hand. 'Rounds stabbed me,' he was saying. 'It was Rounds, damn him, that killed me.' Over and over again he said that. He was talking to invisible people, creatures of his mad brain. One would have thought, if one had not seen, that the temple court was crowded with spectators. Then he rose to his feet and, with the knife held close to his breast, began walking round and round as if seeking an outlet. He passed me once, he on one side of the wall and I on the other, and he looked me square in the eye, but never saw me. So round and round he went with long strides, knees bent and heels never touching the ground. His eyes were fixed and staring and his teeth clenched. Now and then he made long, slashing stabs in the air with the dagger.

"Suddenly he saw me, and there was a change. The blood lust was in his eyes. He was standing on the slab in front of the idol, then made a great leap and started for the broken wall where I was. I saw then that the lump on his neck had swollen to the size of a big goitre. His whole body was a-quiver. There was an animal-like celerity in his movements that made me shudder. Then I knew that I dared not let him get on the same side of the wall as me. But he leaped at the gap from a distance that I would have thought no human could compass, and hung on to the wall with one arm over. He snarled like an animal. Then I smashed him over the head with the canteen, gripping the strap with my right hand. He fell back with the force of the blow, but immediately came at the gap again, then changed his mind and went to tearing around the chamber with great leaps. He was a panther newly caged.

He sprang on to the head of the idol and from that to the pedestal, and then to the slab in front of it. Then he went across and across the floor, sometimes screaming and yelling, and then again moaning and groaning. One side of his face was all bloody where I had smashed it with the canteen. Seeing him so, a thing not human, but with all the furtive quickness of an animal and its strength, too, I felt sorry no more. I hated him with a wild hate. He was dangerous to me and I had to conquer him. That's fundamental. So I stood, gripping the strap of the canteen, watching, waiting. He came at me again, striding and leaping. That time he got one leg over with both hands gripping the top stones. The dagger he dropped on my side of the wall, but I had no time to stoop for it just then. There were other things to do. He was getting over. It took some frantic beating with the canteen and he seemed to recover from the blows quicker than I could get the swing to strike again. But I beat him down at last, though I saw that he had lots more life in him than I, with that devil of madness filling him. So, when I saw him stumble, then recover and begin that running again, I picked up the knife and leaped

over the wall to settle the matter once and for all. It was an ugly thing to do, but it had to be done and done quickly. At the root of things it's life against life."

Rounds ceased and fell to filling his pipe. I waited for him to recommence, but he made as if to leave, but paused a moment at my desk to pick up and examine a piece of malachite. I felt it incumbent upon me to say something to relieve the tension that I felt.

"I understand," said I. "It was a horrible necessity. It is a terrible thing to have to kill a fellow creature."

"That wasn't a fellow creature," he said. "What I killed was not the partner I knew. Don't you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," I replied. Then I asked, "Did you bury him?"

"Bury him? What for? How?" Rounds seemed indignant. "How could I bury him in a stone-paved court? How could I lift a dead man over a wall chin high?"

"Of course. Of course," I said. "I had forgotten that. But to us who lead quiet lives, it seems terrible to leave a dead man unburied."

"Do you feel that way about that mummy you have out there?" he asked, indicating the museum with his thumb. "If not, why not? But if you want the story to the bitter end, I dragged him to the only clean spot in the place, which was that slab in front of the idol. There I left him, or it. But things take odd turns. By the time I got back to the Tlinga village, they knew all about it and the priests used the affair to their own advantage. Mine was incidental. Yet I did reap some benefit. According to the priests, I had accepted the whole blessed lizard theory, or religion or whatever it was, and had sacrificed the unbeliever to the lizard god. Ista helped things along, I suspect, for with me as a former mate, there was some fame for her. Anyway, they met and hailed me as a hero and brought tribute to me. Gold dust. I wanted them to quit their damned foolishness and tried to explain, but it was no use. You can't teach a mob to have sense. Well, adios. But remember this: Don't be too cocksure."

The End. Thanks for listening. Join us next week, for another thrilling tale.