

Fantastic Novels

Vol. I

September, 1940

No. 2

Complete Book-Length Novel

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A Complete Novel

A RED STAR Magazine

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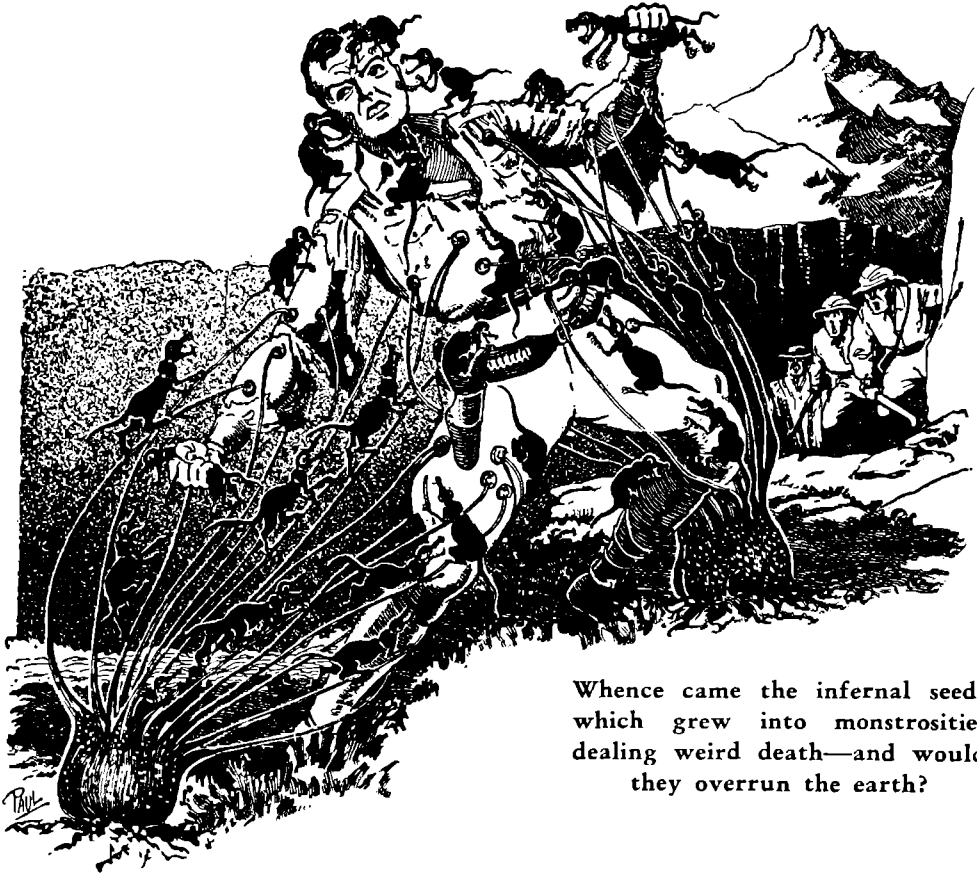
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Whence came the infernal seeds
which grew into monstrosities
dealing weird death—and would
they overrun the earth?

Spawn of Infinitude

By EDWARD S. PILSWORTH

“FOR the love of Lucy, look at that star!” cried Dick from the edge of the precipice. “Bradley! Towers! Haggerty! It’s growing bigger! Why, it’s growing!”

I rolled slowly over on my back, so that I could look upward, while Towers sat up with a sharp cry, his face full of wonder, and the light of the campfire, touching it for a moment, made it glow as though with blood. Haggerty sprang to his feet and stood looming over us, while rustlings came from the Indians. The camp was aroused.

Away up in the zenith a star shone with a weird radiance, and even as we looked the light grew stronger and things around began to cast a shadow. Larger and closer it grew, until it shone in the darkness of the night like a sun, and the snow-capped Andes glistened white against the black sky, while our eyes burned with the glare.

“Good Lord!” shrieked Towers, starting to his feet. “It’s a comet, and coming straight for us!”

The earth grew bright in an unholy way, and all nature fell to trembling.

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The mules and burros snorted, running wildly about the little platform; the natives gazed in awe, or fell groveling to the earth. Meantime, the fearsome thing grew with a wild speed, then a vision of the infernal regions seemed to shoot before my eyes.

A whirl of wind sucked me nearly to the chasm's edge; another rush swept me backward; tossed me up, and flirited with me as if I were a feather. Then came a crash like the rending of the universe; my senses floated from me and I seemed to die.

I do not know how long the coma lasted, though I think I must have lain for a time in a kind of half trance, wondering why I should have slept in the open. Then the memory of the comet flashed upon me, and with a cry I sprang, trembling, to my feet.

To one side lay a dead donkey, and strewn round were great masses of rock, huge boulders, and an infinity of broken stones and gravel. Here and there lay trees, some of them on their sides, and one or two with their leaves on the ground and the roots sticking stark into the air.

Many were broken, severed, like twigs snapped by a surly boy. Of the tents I could see nothing, and then of a sudden I felt that the air was full of acrid gases. I heaved with nausea, and my whole body throbbled with a furious nervousness.

For a time I think I went crazy, and rambled round the plateau waving my arms and shouting at the top of my voice. There is even a faint memory of my sitting on a rock and hurling stones at the dead donkey; but the next distinct act that I recall is digging furiously at a heap of rubbish and dragging Dick from beneath it.

The work of awakening him brought my senses back to me, and soon the two of us were hunting round for the rest of the party. Haggerty was the next dug up; and then, one after the other, the rest of the white men.

While most of us were more or less bruised, the only one badly hurt was Martin, who died the same afternoon.

The Indians were not so lucky; two were killed outright, and a number gravely

wounded. A panic-stricken lot they were, and as soon as their dead were buried the living forsook us.

Pedro, the guide, a tough old sinner, laughed and stayed on.

"*Quien sabe?*" he replied to Dick. "When my time is come I go. Meantime, Señor Ricardo, I stay."

"You old fatalist!" returned Dick, well pleased to see him show so stout a spirit. Then to me: "I wonder what it all means?"

I shook my head, and we started to get the camp in order. The place was in such shape—tents overthrown, food spilled, and animals strayed—that a week or so slipped by before we had a minute to ourselves.

THE next day we went hunting, for meat was getting scarce, leaving Towers behind as cook and caretaker of the camp. Pedro led us a merry chase that day, and we were a weary lot as we straggled back, for any exertion in that thin air was most tiring.

I remember that I sighed with relief as I put my foot upon the plateau, and thought with approval of the supper that Towers would have ready for us. The thought was all we got of it, for there was no sign of him at the camp; the fire was out, and the place looked cold and vacant. With much strong language, mostly directed at the absent one, we turned to and got supper for ourselves.

He did not return the next day, or the next, and the mystery of his disappearance shook us greatly.

"Bradley," Dick called to me a day or so later, handing me his field-glasses, "take these and see what you make of the farther end of the valley."

I focused the glasses on the spot he pointed out and gasped with surprise, for, if the meteor had played havoc at our end, it was chaos supreme up there. Piles of rock and shale and all the dirt that a dozen avalanches might have brought were pitched and jumbled together in one vast confusion. The sides of the mountain were deeply seamed at one spot, as though hit by some gigantic hammer; and it came to

me all at once that the meteor had struck here.

"Look at the way in which the snow is hanging up there," Dick broke in presently. "There is another avalanche due soon, and one that will fill the valley a hundred feet deep."

The snow, as he said, hung in a curious manner.

The edges of it over on the far side of the valley were hanging over as though all support had been taken away, and it was evident that it was only holding together of its own weight and adhesiveness. I could see many spots where there was not a thing below to hold it in place, and, as my friend said, we were due to have another avalanche that would fill the valley with a hundred feet of snow, and ice.

As this thought filtered through me I turned and looked anxiously at the heights above our camp, and it did me a world of good to see that we were protected. I turned again to the valley, and Dick directed my notice to another spot.

"See what you make of that big rock in the center."

A most singular rock it was, nearly as large as a city block, and bored with holes and passages like a piece of pumice. A strange thing—if one might imagine a gigantic piece of close-grained sponge, solid and petrified, there might be something of a likeness.

All around this rock the ground was speckled with red—a dirty, brownish red—the color of dried and hardened blood; and once or twice as I looked there seemed to come a kind of shiver over it, much as the wind might shake a field of grain.

The sight was so strange, after the virulent-looking green we had been used to seeing, that I thought it might be dust, or a patch of earth from the cliffs round, but I could perceive nothing of the sort on any of the hills.

"Well," questioned Dick, as I handed back the glass, "what do you make of it?"

"That snow will surely topple over very soon," I replied.

"And the rock?" I shook my head. "It is the meteor," he said. "It struck the wall on the far side of the valley, at the spot where you see that terrible scar, and bounded back to the place where it now lies. I feel sure that I am right. Let's go down tomorrow so we can get a closer look at it."

"And be caught in the midst of all that snow when it drops?"

"Nonsense, man! The snow may stay in that shape for years. It will take some strong concussion to shake it loose, though when it does get started it will play the devil. Be a sport and come along."

I finally gave in, though that hanging snow seemed mighty unsafe; and in the meantime Dick jollied or bribed Pedro, so that when we were ready for the start the grim old sinner went ahead of us down the hill. At the last moment Haggerty, a careless, rollicking Irishman, joined us.

The climb down was a weary business, and the heat grew terrific. The path was rough and difficult even on the easiest slope, and my gun grew into a heavy burden long before we reached the bottom.

"Thank the Lord, the descent is over—but gee, this heat is fierce!" grumbled Dick, as he sat down on a handy rock and mopped his forehead. The rest of us followed suit, but were hardly down before the lad sprang to his feet again.

"I'm going to see if I can't find some water round here," he said. "There ought to be plenty coming down from the snow off those hills."

Turning, he wandered away among the boulders and crevices.

"That's queer-looking stuff over there," began Haggerty presently, pointing toward the blotches of red below us, "and if it wasn't that I know better I would say it was some kind of vegetation.

"I wonder if it—" he began again after a pause, then stopped as a cry from Dick rose on the air.

"Bradley! Haggerty! Pedro!" he called. "Come here! Get a move on, quick!" We all sprang to our feet and started toward the sound, Pedro well ahead.

IT WAS a rocky spot we traversed, full of great boulders and smaller stones and loose gravel that slipped from beneath our feet and made the climbing difficult. Presently the sound of falling water reached us, and we turned a corner of the cliff to where a sparkling stream came tumbling over the rocks into a basin. On the edge of this Dick was struggling with another man.

As we turned the corner we saw Pedro bound forward, throw his weight upon the stranger, and, while Dick held him down, bind his hands together with his belt. Something familiar in the figure struck us as we dashed up, and then we saw that it was Towers.

Dick was standing with hands thrust deep into his pockets, looking down with a puzzled face.

"I believe the poor fellow's gone dippy," he said. "He was babbling round here in the fountain when I came up and put my hand on his shoulder, then he jumped me. Now, I guess he's fainted."

"Want of food," broke in Pedro, who was kneeling, and drawing a flask from his pocket. He pried open Towers' teeth and let some spirit fall into his mouth.

"We don't want him to come to with his hands bound," growled Haggerty, stepping forward and untying the belt. "Four of us to a poor, half-starved devil like he is ought to be enough." Then, as a shudder went through Towers and he opened his eyes: "How are you, old fellow? You look as though you'd had a hard time down here."

The other quivered, buried his face in his hands for a moment, lifted his head once more, and grabbed greedily at the food that Haggerty was handing him. And as he ate it we looked him over more closely.

A pitiful object he was, battered and worn, a great gash on his shoulder, thin, wan cheeks, and a wild look in his eye.

His clothes were torn to rags, and the rents in them showed his flesh covered with great red blotches, a maze of scratches, and myriads of little, red, angry-looking

swellings about the size of a pea. He finished the food and looked ravenously for more, but Pedro placed his hand on Haggerty's and held it back.

"Not yet, señor," he said. "The man is hunger-mad. Some water in your flask-top, with some spirit in it, then a little more food will be better. We must go slow."

The draft of spirit did Towers good, then we fed him and talked to him, soothing his shattered nerves, for he was all in a tremble with fear, and now and again would start to his feet and whip around as though he feared what was behind.

"What the deuce is the matter with you?" broke out Haggerty. "There's nobody here but us, old man. What's biting you?"

Then we got the first flash of sense out of him, though it did not sound to us much like sense at the time.

"It's the red devils, Bradley," he said in a low voice, grabbing me by the arm. "It's the red devils! I tell you, they're everywhere!"

"Devils, Towers?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Hush, señor," said Pedro; "it is the famine madness. I have seen men like this before. Sleep is what he needs—sleep and rest and a little more food."

I nodded and we spread our blankets on the shelf around the water, and bedded him down so that presently he fell asleep, while we sat and talked about him. His sleep was full of nightmares which red devils, twining ropes, and creeping suckers seemed to fill.

"We can't leave him like this," said Dick presently. "We might just as well camp here for the night. We'll have to take turns and watch all night to see that no harm comes to him, and put off our journey till tomorrow."

The lad spoke sense, and we built a fire, not that we needed it for warmth, for the air was full of a humid heat, but to keep away the beasts, of which the valley was full. I took the first watch, keeping my rifle handy and rousing Pedro when his watch had come, wondering that I heard

none of the howlings or caterwaulings that used to be so common in the lower levels.

WHEN I woke the next morning Towers was sitting up, drinking something warm from a tin bowl, and the light of reason was back in his eyes again. The others were cooking breakfast, and he nodded at me as I went toward him.

"Guess you fellows just came in time," he said with a weak, nervous laugh. "Another day would have about finished me."

"How the mischief did you get in this mess?" queried Dick when we were all sitting round. "What made you leave the camp and lose yourself, anyhow?"

Towers shuddered, and his eyes wandered over in the direction of the valley, from which, however, we were shut out by the wall of the chasm.

"I wanted to do some exploring," he said at last.

"But what happened to you?" persisted Dick.

Towers looked from one to the other of us with shifty eyes, then stared at the walls round, and played on the edge of the cup with his knife. Lifting his eyes at last, he looked the boy straight in the face.

"It was the red devils," he whispered.

We all stared at him, lost in wonder; Pedro tapped at his own forehead with a finger-tip.

"The red devils?" queried Dick at last.

"Yes," whispered the other—"full of them; they threw ropes over me and bit me and chewed me."

"But what—" started the boy.

"Oh, shut up, you young fool!" growled Haggerty. "Don't you see the man's wandering? Stop your talk and let him eat his food in peace."

"But I just wanted—"

"I don't care what you wanted; he's had a hard time and he looks it. Now, leave him be." Then, as the lad subsided: "Who's going to stay with him while the rest of us go on our tramp?"

We looked at one another, for while we all wished to do what Towers needed done, yet none wanted to be left behind.

"I guess we'll have to toss for it," I said presently.

"No need, señor; no need for anybody to stay with the gentleman. Señor Towers will sleep after this meal—sleep for hours, maybe days. I have been through it. I have starved on the pampas, and I know."

We were all glad to hear the old guide speak as he did; and he was right in this case, as in most others, for presently Towers began to yawn, and a little later moved over to the blankets and lay down.

While the rest of us were getting ready I took some food and water and placed it at his side.

"If we're not back by the time you're hungry again," I said, "help yourself, but we probably sha'n't be gone more than an hour or so."

He nodded; then, as I turned away, he reached up his hand, caught me, and drew my head down toward him.

"Bradley," he whispered, "stay away from the valley. It's full of red devils, old man—fierce, ravening, little, red devils!"

"All right," I said to humor him; and then, as he lay back on the blankets once more, I turned away, joined the others, and we made the best of our road down the chasm toward the valley.

SEEN from this place farther down, the floor of the valley looked different, and, instead of one mass of reddish brown, we could see that it was divided into various patches. We stopped but a few seconds, however, for Pedro went ahead along a path that he had found in a sort of tunnel, where the view of the valley was shut out from us.

It might have been a quarter of a mile that we went, going down all the time, with the sky showing over us now and again where there was no roof. Haggerty and I were discussing the probability of it being the old waterway from the fall, when Pedro suddenly turned into the open, and Dick followed him.

The two were some little distance ahead, and the lad turned toward us and waved his hand.

"Get a move on!" he cried. "Come here, quick, and take a good look at what we have found!"

I looked—to find we were nearly on a level with the valley floor, and the plain and slope were covered with thousands of forms—bushes I must call them, for want of a better name.

Not that they were bushes, or anything else that I ever saw, for the shape was most curious, and their color was a dull, deep red, something like crocus-powder, only a trifle redder, or, as they had struck me when viewed from above, dried blood. They seemed to be built up on a central stalk, the thickness of a man's thigh, and at six or eight inches from the ground there branched out the leaves, or sepals, or whatever they may be called.

They struck me at the time as like so many ropes, flowing outward to the height of four or five feet, and then folding over on themselves, making a shape something like a huge wineglass, but with proportionately a much shorter stem.

Stretching along the ground from one trunk to another was a long, ropy-looking connection that formed the whole grove into one large mass. We found out later that many little twigs and suckers shot up from these connecting ropes, and we also found to our sorrow the meaning for them.

Inside the bowl formed by the leaves was hidden some sort of a bright, crimson flower; for, though we could not make out its shape, the little dabs of color kept moving up and down, and I remember Haggerty saying that it was a queer motion for a flower to make.

None of us had ever seen or heard of anything of the kind before; neither had Pedro, and, though we had visited the valley at one time or another, we were all of one mind that nothing of the sort had been there at any previous visit. Whatever the shape of the flowers might be, the flash of their vermilion in the sun had a most gruesome look, and for some reason or other I had no wish to go farther.

Dick, however, would listen to nothing, and Haggerty, reckless Irishman, began to

sing. It gave me a weird attack of creeps to hear the rollicking strains of "Garry-owen" go pealing up that mysterious Andean valley.

"Señors," broke in Pedro suddenly. "I do not understand all this. Where came those things from so quickly? And where are all the animals and snakes?"

I had not thought of that earlier; but where was all that teeming life we had seen here before? Not a sign of it, save some birds flying high in the air. Not a thing in the valley, so far as we could see, but those weird forms of reddish brown.

"Those red flowers have surely sprung up fast," replied Dick, musingly. "But as to the animal life, why, a lot of it must have been killed when that rock and the avalanche dropped, and the rest probably didn't like the looks of things and pulled out for the other end of the valley. Here goes for finding out, anyway," he finished, pulling off his coat. "You're never going to funk it, Bradley?"

Of course I was not, though I would mighty well have liked to; so, when Haggerty made an Irish dash for the plain, with Dick a close second, I followed along. And Pedro brought up the rear, muttering to himself in Spanish and shaking his wise old head in a way I did not like.

We closed up a little as we got on even ground, and Haggerty was but a dozen yards ahead of Dick when he reached the bushes. He made for the space between a couple of the shrubs, directly toward the meteorite, while I turned to the nearest of these new flowers, curious to examine them closer and more in detail.

This part of our adventure I can never look back upon without a shudder, and, despite the time that has since gone by, a poignant thrill of horror.

The cries of the man and the bestial shrieks of the things I can give no notion of, nor would I if I were able; for the sounds, I verily believe, were worse even than the fetid ichor that dribbled from their misbegotten bodies. It all-burst so suddenly on us that this of itself added to the terror.

The little twigs and branches that struck upward from the horizontal ropes were, I believe, but so many alarms to the center fiend, and as Haggerty walked through them the plant I was looking at shot loose into an amazing whirl of long, sinister-looking cords. The wind-cup shape vanished on the second, and a multitude of waving tentacles took its place.

At the end of each was a strange, flexible, and working disk, that I think was a sucker; for we found later that wherever they fastened, our skin would stretch, and, if the hold was left too long, break into a myriad of little, blood-oozing holes.

Guided by some strange means, the waving arms sprang out to where the hapless Irishman was walking, fastening to and wrapping him round. Then from the open space, where the cup had been, and from out the hollow of the stalk, poured a dozen or more of crimson devils.

Shrieking and raving, they shot, with the quick motion of so many lizards, along the rosy tendrils and fastened to his body. What they were, even what they looked like, I cannot say, except that they favored nothing that the sun shines down upon. A foot or two in size, and with a something for a face, all else was lost in the gleaming redness of their bodies.

The three of us—Dick, Pedro, and myself—shrank back, for there was something daunting in the devilish things, and in that one second poor Haggerty died.

From all the plants around, the long, greedy arms had caught him, pulling, tugging, and straining at his screaming body; jerking and rending till he fell to bits; when each of the devilish things pulled home its bloody portion.

All the time the scarlet things were snarling and ravening at his pieces, raging like drunken furies, and tearing them to smaller bits before our eyes.

I THINK the three of us went mad, for I remember dancing round on the earth, cursing and weeping. Most curious of all, I laughed—long, ringing, mechanical laughter. Then Dick dashed forward, raving in-

sanely, and, pulling myself together, I followed.

By some instinct we drew our machetes, and Dick struck at the devilish things before him with maniacal fierceness. Out came the devil-fish's arms, with the scarlet fiends running along them; but he cut most of the ropes to bits, and I severed those that fastened to him.

All the time we chopped at the tentacles, and stabbed at the crimson things, we laughed and screamed at the top of our voices.

The infernal things scratched and bit and raved with fury, howled and snarled and filled the air with hellish sounds. There was no substance to them, a kind of tough leather shell, filled with a dirty yellow jelly and some ravelings of sinew and gristle.

Those we cracked the others fell upon, pulling the scarlet corpses to little bits and devouring them with hideous sounds and gestures.

So we cut and hacked and slashed, chopping away arm after arm and killing the things, till the plant had neither tentacles nor evil ones to send to us. Then Pedro grabbed me sharply from behind.

"Look!" he cried, pointing over the plain, and there the whole weird community was waving its gruesome arms and sending its scarlet fiends to us by the thousands. The sight sobered us, our madness fell away, and we turned and fled.

I remember crawling up the slope and climbing some of the paths; then, as I recognized the place where we four had stood a short while back, I pitched over on the grass and fell asleep.

It looks a foolish thing as I write it; and perhaps it may not have been so much sleep as stupor, but down I dropped.

When my senses came back Dick was lying naked on the ground, and Pedro was dressing his wounds. I staggered over and sat down by his side, and I do not think that there was a patch on his body the size of my hand that was not bitten, or scratched, or punctured in some way. He turned his head as I threw me down, and his face was thin and haggard.

"What, in Heaven's name, does it mean?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"*Caramba!*" broke in Pedro. "It is very simple. They are devils. My people have a saying, 'You pick not pears from elm-trees.' What did you expect would come on that piece of hell the other night?"

Dick and I shot a glance at each other, and the same thought filled our minds.

"Think that was it?" he asked.

"It seems a silly idea to think they came through space in that rock."

"Silly—it's crazy! But then the whole affair is, Lord"—he shuddered—"an inferno! Poor Haggerty!"

"That is what happened to Towers," I hazarded, "but he had the strength and luck to pull himself loose."

"Don't I know it? The whole rotten brood is seething in my brain. That is where every animal in the valley went." Then, with a sudden shift of thought: "But, man, how has it come so?"

"The torrid heat of the valley must be the reason," I answered.

At that I fell at laughing again, nervous gigglings, till Pedro looked over at me with curiosity, then passed a flask.

The drink brought my manhood back, and I grew ashamed and weary of my weakness. But it was all so new, so weird, and had burst upon us so suddenly that it is no wonder we were nearly crazed. I sat with my face averted from the plain till Dick was attended to, and then we started on the upward climb.

WHEN we reached the camp it was late, for we were weak and moved by easy stages. And there we found Towers standing and waiting for us. He had made an effort to fix his rags, and did not look so much like a scarecrow as the night before; neither did he look so wan and worn. His cheeks were a little fuller, and the wild light had left his eyes. He watched closely as we crawled into view and flung ourselves on the ground, then scanned our faces carefully and turned to me.

"I suppose it isn't any use asking what's

become of Haggerty?" he questioned in a husky voice.

I waved my hand.

"I suppose they got him," he went on, and I nodded.

He took a seat on the ground likewise.

"Are they plants or animals, Bradley?" Dick finally asked.

"Heaven knows!" I replied. "But if ever hell spawned a brood, that is it."

"And you think they came on the aero-lite?"

"Where else could they come from?"

"I don't know. It may be that some germ was lodged in those rocky pores. Do you think that the heat of the valley nursed them back to life?"

I nodded, and he rose and walked away, his hands clasped behind, as his manner was when thinking. Several times he paced the plateau, then bidding me good night, lay down.

Terrific rolls of thunder woke me next morning, and I thrust my head into a deluge of rain outside. Flash after flash of lightning and peal after peal of thunder came close on each other's heels.

The mountain shook and quivered, and the rain on our tent sounded like a bombardment of musketry. Yet in the midst of it all I fell asleep again, nor woke till the voice of Dick, excitedly calling me, burst in upon my unconsciousness.

The storm was over, and when I got outside the sun was shining on the snowy peaks, as though the world was only peace and quietness.

The rest of them had moved to the edge of the chasm, from which they could view the valley, and I went and stood beside them.

"Look!" cried Dick, pointing below.

The avalanche had come—the concussion of the storm had loosed the snow—and the valley lay buried under seventy or eighty feet of ice and snow.

"Bradley," said Dick, "we are avenged, for if heat spawned them, cold should kill."

"Amen!" replied Towers with a shudder, and, turning on his heel, moved away.