

The Dream Snake

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE night was strangely still. As we sat upon the wide veranda, gazing out over the broad, shadowy lawns, the silence of the hour entered our spirits and for a long while no one spoke.

Then far across the dim mountains that fringed the eastern skyline, a faint haze began to glow, and presently a great golden moon came up, making a ghostly radiance over the land and etching boldly the dark clumps of shadows that were trees. A light breeze came whispering out of the east, and the unmowed grass swayed before it in long, sinuous waves, dimly visible in the moonlight; and from among the group upon the veranda there came a swift gasp, a sharp intake of breath that caused us all to turn and gaze.

Faming was leaning forward, clutching the arms of his chair, his face strange and pallid in the spectral light; a thin trickle of blood seeping from the lip in which he had set his teeth. Amazed, we looked at him, and suddenly he jerked about with a short, snarling laugh.

"There's no need of gawking at me like a flock of sheep!" he said irritably and stopped short. We sat bewildered, scarcely knowing what sort of reply to make, and suddenly he burst out again.

"Now I guess I'd better tell the whole thing or you'll be going off and putting me down as a lunatic. Don't interrupt me, any of you! I want to get this thing off my mind. You all know that I'm not a very imagina-

tive man; but there's a thing, purely a figment of imagination, that has haunted me since babyhood. A dream!" He fairly cringed back in his chair as he muttered, "A dream! and God, what a dream! The first time—no, I can't remember the first time I ever dreamed it—I've been dreaming the hellish thing ever since I can remember. Now it's this way: there is a sort of bungalow, set upon a hill in the midst of wide grasslands—not unlike this estate; but this scene is in Africa. And I am living there with a sort of servant, a Hindoo. Just why I am there is never clear to my waking mind, though I am always aware of the reason in my dreams. As a man of a dream, I remember my past life (a life which in no way corresponds with my waking life), but when I am awake my subconscious mind fails to transmit these impressions. However, I think that I am a fugitive from justice and the Hindoo is also a fugitive. How the bungalow came to be there I can never remember, nor do I know in what part of Africa it is, though all these things are known to my dream self. But the bungalow is a small one of a very few rooms, and is situated upon the top of the hill, as I said. There are no other hills about and the grasslands stretch to the horizon in every direction; knee-high in some places, waist-high in others.

"Now the dream always opens as I am coming up the hill, just as the sun is beginning to set. I am carrying a broken rifle and I have been on

a hunting trip; how the rifle was broken, and the full details of the trip, I clearly remember—dreaming. But never upon waking. It is just as if a curtain were suddenly raised and a drama began; or just as if I were suddenly transferred to another man's body and life, remembering past years of that life, and not cognizant of any other existence. And that is the hellish part of it! As you know, most of us, dreaming, are, at the back of our consciousness, aware that we are dreaming. No matter how horrible the dream may become, we know that it is a dream, and thus insanity or possible death is staved off. But in this particular dream, there is no such knowledge. I tell you it is so vivid, so complete in every detail, that I wonder sometimes if that is not my real existence and this a dream! But no; for then I should have been dead years ago.

"As I was saying, I come up the hill and the first thing I am cognizant of that is out of the ordinary is a sort of track leading up the hill in an irregular way; that is, the grass is mashed down as if something heavy had been dragged over it. But I pay no especial attention to it, for I am thinking, with some irritation, that the broken rifle I carry is my only arm and that now I must forego hunting until I can send for another.

"You see, I remember thoughts and impressions of the dream itself, of the occurrences of the dream; it is the memories that the dream 'I' has, of that other dream existence that I can not remember. So I come up the hill and enter the bungalow. The doors are open and the Hindoo is not there. But the main room is in confusion; chairs are broken, a table overturned. The Hindoo's dagger is lying upon the floor, but there is no blood anywhere.

"Now, in my dreams, I never remember the other dreams, as sometimes one does. Always it is the first

dream, the first time. I always experience the same sensations, in my dreams, with as vivid a force as the first time I ever dreamed. So. I am not able to understand this. The Hindoo is gone, but (thus I ruminate, standing in the center of the disordered room) what did away with him? Had it been a raiding party of negroes they would have looted the bungalow and probably burned it. Had it been a lion, the place would have been smeared with blood. Then suddenly I remember the track I saw going up the hill, and a cold hand touches my spine; for instantly the whole thing is clear: the thing that came up from the grasslands and wrought havoc in the little bungalow could be naught else except a giant serpent. And as I think of the size of the spoor, cold sweat beads my forehead and the broken rifle shakes in my hand.

"Then I rush to the door in a wild panic, my only thought to make a dash for the coast. But the sun has set and dusk is stealing across the grasslands. And out there somewhere, lurking in the tall grass is that grisly thing—that horror. God!" The ejaculation broke from his lips with such feeling that all of us started, not realizing the tension we had reached. There was a second's silence, then he continued:

"So I bolt the doors and windows, light the lamp I have and take my stand in the middle of the room. And I stand like a statue—waiting—listening. After a while the moon comes up and her haggard light drifts through the windows. And I stand still in the center of the room; the night is very still—something like this night; the breeze occasionally whispers through the grass, and each time I start and clench my hands until the nails bite into the flesh and the blood trickles down my wrists—and I stand there and wait and listen but it does not come that

night!" The sentence came suddenly and explosively, and an involuntary sigh came from the rest; a relaxing of tension.

"I am determined, if I live the night through, to start for the coast early the next morning, taking my chance out there in the grim grasslands—with it. But with morning, I dare not. I do not know in which direction the monster went; and I dare not risk coming upon him in the open, unarmed as I am. So, as in a maze, I remain at the bungalow, and ever my eyes turn toward the sun, lurching relentlessly down the sky toward the horizon. Ah, God! if I could but halt the sun in the sky!"

The man was in the clutch of some terrific power; his words fairly leaped at us.

"Then the sun rocks down the sky and the long gray shadows come stalking across the grasslands. Dizzy with fear, I have bolted the doors and windows and lighted the lamp long before the last faint glow of twilight fades. The light from the windows may attract the monster, but I dare not stay in the dark. And again I take my stand in the center of the room—waiting."

There was a shuddersome halt. Then he continued, barely above a whisper, moistening his lips: "There is no knowing how long I stand there; Time has ceased to be and each second is an eon; each minute is an eternity stretching into endless eternities. Then, God! but what is that?" he leaned forward, the moonlight etching his face into such a mask of horrified listening that each of us shivered and flung a hasty glance over our shoulders.

"Not the night breeze this time," he whispered. "Something makes the grasses swish-swish—as if a great, long, pliant weight were being dragged through them. Above the bungalow it swishes and then ceases—in front of the door; then the hinges

creak—creak! the door begins to bulge inward—a small bit—then some more!" The man's arms were held in front of him, as if braced strongly against something, and his breath came in quick gasps. "And I know I should lean against the door and hold it shut, but I do not, I can not move. I stand there, like a sheep waiting to be slaughtered—but the door holds!" Again that sigh expressive of pent-up feeling.

He drew a shaky hand across his brow. "And all night I stand in the center of that room, as motionless as an image, except to turn slowly, as the swish-swish of the grass marks the fiend's course about the house. Ever I keep my eyes in the direction of that soft, sinister sound. Sometimes it ceases for an instant, or for several minutes, and then I stand scarcely breathing, for a horrible obsession has it that the serpent has in some way made entrance into the bungalow, and I start and whirl this way and that, frightfully fearful of making a noise, though I know not why, but ever with the feeling that the thing is at my back. Then the sounds commence again and I freeze motionless.

"Now here is the only time that my consciousness, which guides my waking hours, ever in any way pierces the veil of dreams. I am, in the dream, in no way conscious that it is a dream, but, in a detached sort of way, my other mind recognizes certain facts and passes them on to my sleeping—shall I say 'ego'? That is to say, my personality is for an instant truly dual and separate to an extent, as the right and left arms are separate, while making up parts in the same entity. My dreaming mind has no cognizance of my higher mind; for the time being the other mind is subordinated and the subconscious mind is in full control, to such an extent that it does not even recognize

the existence of the other. But the conscious mind, now sleeping, is cognizant of dim thought-waves emanating from the dream mind. I know that I have not made this entirely clear, but the fact remains that I know that my mind, conscious and subconscious, is near to ruin. My obsession of fear, as I stand there in my dream, is that the serpent will raise itself and peer into the window at me. And I know, in my dream, that if this occurs I shall go insane. And so vivid is the impression imparted to my conscious, now sleeping mind that the thought-waves stir the dim seas of sleep, and somehow I can feel my sanity rocking as my sanity rocks in my dream. Back and forth it totters and sways until the motion takes on a physical aspect and I in my dream am swaying from side to side. Not always is the sensation the same, but I tell you, if that horror ever raises its terrible shape and leers at me, if I ever see the fearful thing in my dream, I shall become stark, wild insane." There was a restless movement among the rest.

"God! but what a prospect!" he muttered. "To be insane and forever dreaming that same dream, night and day! But there I stand, and centuries go by, but at last a dim gray light begins to steal through the windows, the swishing dies away in the distance and presently a red, haggard sun climbs the eastern sky. Then I turn about and gaze into a mirror—and my hair has become perfectly white. I stagger to the door and fling it wide. There is nothing in sight but a wide track leading away down the hill through the grasslands—in the opposite direction from that which I would take toward the coast. And with a shriek of maniacal laughter, I dash down the hill and race across the grasslands. I race until I drop from exhaustion, then I lie until I can stagger up and go on.

"All day I keep this up, with superhuman effort, spurred on by the horror behind me. And ever as I hurl myself forward on weakening legs, ever as I lie gasping for breath, I watch the sun with a terrible eagerness. How swiftly the sun travels when a man races it for life! A losing race it is, as I know when I watch the sun sinking toward the skyline, and the hills which I had hoped to gain ere sundown seemingly as far away as ever."

His voice was lowered and instinctively we leaned toward him; he was gripping the chair arms and the blood was seeping from his lip.

"Then the sun sets and the shadows come and I stagger on and fall and rise and reel on again. And I laugh, laugh, laugh! Then I cease, for the moon comes up and throws the grasslands in ghostly and silvery relief. The light is white across the land, though the moon itself is like blood. And I look back the way I have come—and far—back"—all of us leaned farther toward him, our hair a-prickle; his voice came like a ghostly whisper—"far back—I—see—the—grass—waving. There is no breeze, but the tall grass parts and sways in the moonlight, in a narrow, sinuous line—far away, but nearing every instant." His voice died away.

Somebody broke the ensuing stillness: "And then—?"

"Then I awake. Never yet have I seen the foul monster. But that is the dream that haunts me, and from which I have wakened, in my childhood screaming, in my manhood in cold sweat. At irregular intervals I dream it, and each time, lately"—he hesitated and then went on—"each time lately, the thing has been getting closer—closer—the waving of the grass marks his progress and he nears me with each dream; and when he reaches me, then—"

He stopped short, then without a

word rose abruptly and entered the house. The rest of us sat silent for awhile, then followed him, for it was late.

How long I slept I do not know, but I woke suddenly with the impression that somewhere in the house someone had laughed, long, loud and hideously, as a maniac laughs. Starting up, wondering if I had been dreaming, I rushed from my room, just as a truly horrible shriek echoed

through the house. The place was now alive with other people who had been awakened, and all of us rushed to Faming's room, whence the sounds had seemed to come.

Faming lay dead upon the floor, where it seemed he had fallen in some terrific struggle. There was no mark upon him, but his face was terribly distorted; as the face of a man who had been crushed by some superhuman force—such as some gigantic snake.