



Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Thunderstones of Nuflo

By RALPH ALLEN LANG

A grim story of Haitian Voodoo, of revived corpses, and the gruesome death that stalked the deck of the yacht Oberon

THE old dark jungle gods that walk in Haiti have left strange inscriptions upon official records of the Black Republic, but few events there recorded surpass in strangeness the case of the yacht *Oberon*, found off the coast of La Gonave on the morning of September 21st, 1923, with sails furled and anchor down, but manned by a crew of dead men.

Except for her appearance of complete desertion, the *Oberon* would have attracted no immediate attention, for while appearing storm-ravaged to some extent,

she still was sufficiently seaworthy. The boarding party found other marks of a violent storm she had weathered in shattered spars and a deck swept clear, but nothing to explain the staring-eyed ring of dead men grouped around the capstan, as though their last act had been to let go the anchor.

Strange it appears even to me, who know more of the facts than any other living white man. The *Oberon's* owner, De Gooch, was a friend of mine, or intimate acquaintance at least, and I had sailed with him on that last ill-fated



"The dead men were grouped around the capstan, as though their last act had been to let go the anchor."

voyage. A Frenchman, he had become interested in various phases of occultism, and especially in the darkly mysterious practises represented in African and Haitian Voodoo. It was this interest that led to our acquaintance in the first place; for I had spent several years of study in Haiti, winning in some measure the confidence and secrets of the ritualists, and he had sought me out. De Gooch was well supplied with means to gratify his whim—I scarcely think it was more than that—and I accepted his proposal because I felt that adequate financial backing would enable me to pursue my studies on a larger scale, not only in Haiti but in

Africa as well. He asked only to accompany me and share whatever knowledge and experience I chanced upon; exchanging, in a word, his financial aid for the benefit of traveling with one in the confidence of the natives.

IT ALL goes back to that gray September morning when we stood at the entrance to Nuflo's *houmfort*, drawing in with relish the cool, clean air, and letting the freshness of dawn clear our eyes and brains after a night spent in the close air of the Voodoo temple, heavy with the odor of body-sweat, and stupefyingly charged with the mad pulse of the *Rada*

drums. Old Nuflo, the *papaloi*, whose fame with the thunderstones had gone abroad through the island, had exercised his weird power to relieve a drought; and rain was falling gently over the long green strath, thunder rumbling fitfully through the lowering sky. De Gooch looked a bit shaken by his experience, but there was a nervous brightness in his eyes, almost feverish, and an unreadable expression that I did not like. He excused himself on the pretext of verifying some particular point of his notes, and re-entered the *houmfort*, where I saw him move to the altar and stand before it briefly. When he returned I was finishing my farewell to Nuflo, for we were to sail that day to the land of my long desire, Africa, the dark, the mysterious.

A ship's boat was waiting to take us off, and as we pulled away from the shore De Gooch's eyes gradually lost their strained expression. He leaned easily against a large knapsack he had carried ashore with him, and regarded me quizzically.

"Really, my friend," he said jestingly, "you appear almost *en famille* amongst these natives. Your farewell with yonder darky, so expressive of mutual regard, was quite striking. Is he then so great a wizard? The rain-making was convincing, I own; but one can never quite get rid of the thought that coincidence had a hand in it."

His tone and manner were lightly provoking, and I accepted the challenge in a like spirit.

"Spoken like a true skeptic," I returned, "and it must be admitted that there is some slight reasonableness in your lack of faith. Nevertheless, in the light of still more unexplainable wonders I have witnessed, my own doubts are negligible. This same Nuflo, for instance, is said to have far darker powers than those

we witnessed last night. I have not seen them displayed, but am far from ready wholly to doubt."

"And what is the nature of these so extraordinary powers?" His lightly bantering tone still held.

"Among other things he is reputed to be familiar with the sorceries of the *culte des morts*, and even to be acquainted with the ghastly processes by which buried corpses are taken from the grave and by means of sorcery given the mechanical ability to walk and act as though they were alive. The active existence of these *zombies*, as they are called, is not lightly to be laughed off, being attested to not only by ignorant jungle peasants but also by many of the more enlightened natives. No matter what part of the island you may be in, you will be told, upon inquiry, that *zombies* are actually being used to work in the fields at no great distance away; and natives who have never deceived you will testify to having had visual proof of their existence. I, myself, have seen at a distance what was pointed out to me as *zombies*; plodding, shuffling figures with heads bent down, laboring in a cane-field under the close supervision of an overseer or keeper. At that distance I could not, of course, satisfy myself as to their nature, but I am satisfied that behind the *zombie* belief there is some mystery worth any effort it may cost to bring it to light. As it is now, the thing is hard either to refute or substantiate; for it is impossible to gain the confidence of these reputed keepers, and difficult even to approach them."

We reached the ship as I finished speaking, and De Gooch, impressed and interested, but smilingly quizzical, allowed the conversation to drop as we went to our cabins. The *Oberon* was already a-flutter with white sails as the crew swarmed through her rigging, and

by the time I had finished changing clothes we were under way.

The Frenchman was moody and pre-occupied as we stood together watching the dark isle fade from view, and I could not help but wonder at the noticeable change in his attitude toward Voodooism, approaching indifference, which he had exhibited on the way out to the ship. His manner had appeared distraught and nervous when he had re-entered the temple, a manner quite different from the casual skepticism he had exhibited in the boat.

It was not until later in the day that I realized how completely his once seemingly authentic interest had evaporated. And it was only by accident that I learned, with anger and chagrin, what his re-entrance to the Voodoo temple had meant; the heavy price I must pay in loss of native confidence for the financial aid he had offered. While opening a bottle I had suffered a slight cut from broken glass, and remembering the first-aid kit De Gooch habitually carried in his knapsack, I went to his cabin to get it. There my hand encountered, as though of no more consequence than hotel souvenirs, nothing less than the thunderstones of Nuflo.

FORGETTING the medicine kit, I made my way on deck to where he was talking with the captain.

"This is the end of our relationship," I told him hotly. "I see my folly in thinking it possible to pursue my studies in company with one whose only prevailing interest in the Voodoo religion seems to be curiosity. Put about the ship! We are going to return these to where they belong, and then we part company."

Anger struggled with shame in his face, and finally merged into an expression that can only be described as a particularly evil nastiness.

"But what have I to gain by turning back?" he grimaced, in a manner that was wrath-provoking. "Leave me you shall, I promise you, but it will be on the shores of Africa, or more probably France; for I begin to lose taste for this business that so fascinates you."

Turning from him I made my demand to the captain, a phlegmatic Hollander. To my protestation he declared that although he was master of the ship while on the open sea he had nothing to say regarding its destination, a matter which was up to the owner, De Gooch. Nothing was to be gained from him, and I turned away with the intention of securing the thunderstones at least, to keep until I was able to return them to their rightful owner.

Divining my intention, De Gooch sprang forward, and we arrived at the cabin together. To my consternation the knapsack containing the stones was gone!

Under the surprize of it we both stood nonplussed and bewildered for a long instant, and then I saw uncertain suspicion flick out at me from the Frenchman's eyes. My own mind was working on a different track, and occupied with the thought that had struck me, I gave no heed to his attitude.

"Check up and see whether anything else is missing," I directed sharply, and myself commenced a searching survey of the room. De Gooch followed my example without fully knowing what was in my mind, going first to examine the clothing he had taken off upon reaching the ship. Immediately I heard him utter a startled curse, and read in his features an expression of the same ugly thought that had prompted my search. He knew as well as I did the Voodoo practise of securing a garment that had been worn next to the skin of victims marked for

vengeance, to be used in a death-charm, or *ouanga*. And the shirt which had absorbed his body perspiration during that sweating night in the Voodoo *bounfort* was, like the knapsack, missing.

Neither of us could doubt that Voodoo vengeance, prompted by the theft of the thunderstones, had followed us aboard the yacht; its work already started before we were aware of its presence. De Gooch sprang to the deck and ordered an immediate search of the ship, while I examined my own effects to see if anything was missing. Apparently I was not included in the wrath directed against the Frenchman, for nothing of mine had been molested. Going on deck again I learned that the search had been fruitless, De Gooch ordering the men back for a second effort. No known nook or cranny of the yacht was left unexamined, but the second search proved as barren of results as the first.

De Gooch slumped on a deck chair, scarcely attempting to dissimulate a nervousness verging on panic. Whether his mood was infectious, or whether unrest was in the atmosphere, the men also were sullenly ill at ease, although for the most part unacquainted with the nature of our fears. A strained, waiting tension hung over the yacht like an oppressive, depressing cloud; and even my own spirits sagged as I stood at the stern-rail watching the waves darken before the approach of a starless night, with difficulty repressing a shudder at the sight of parallel fins cutting the water, a pair of sharks following the ship.

UPON retiring to my cabin for the night I found sleep difficult, the disturbing events of the day forming a barrier that effectually warded off slumber. The breeze had subsided to a mere breath during the afternoon, and the closeness

of the air in my cabin seemed accentuated by the unnatural calm of the elements, vaguely oppressive to the mind. I lay fitfully tossing while the ship's bell chimed off the periods of night, its indication of the passing hours adding to my restlessness.

Finally I could stand it no longer, and slipped into my robe with the intention of going on deck. I had purposely struck no light in order that my eyes might be accustomed to the darkness of the companionway, and as I closed the door behind me I was thankful for the precaution. Far forward, nearly the ship's length away, a faint light was glowing rosily, spreading around the edges of a blob of blackness that I took to be some manner of screen intended to shield the flame from view.

Silently I crept forward, pressing as far as I could to the side in an endeavor to obtain a view behind the screen. As I drew nearer, my efforts in this were partly successful, one edge of the blaze coming into view, flanked by a crouching shadow. So uncertain was the weird light in its surrounding darkness that I could not satisfactorily make out whether this shadow was the shadow of a man, or whether it was the man himself, crouching on the opposite side of the fire, and apparently kneading something with his hands.

I was about to attempt a still closer position when gradually I became vaguely conscious of a presence other than that of myself and the man I was stalking. Certainly I heard no sound, and the blackness that enveloped everything precluded the possibility of seeing, but in some peculiar manner the intelligence was forced on me that some one was there in the darkness behind me. Apparently the figure crouching by the fire sensed something at the same time, for he jerked

suddenly erect. I had one brief, unrevealing glimpse of him, when suddenly a cry burst through the ship:

"Fire!"

Instantly the scene was alive, lights flared up, and running figures appeared from everywhere in answer to that cry which is most dreaded at sea. Immediately I sprang toward the sheltered fire and the dark figure beside it, who stooped to snatch up something as I approached. Then, as effortlessly as though he were part of the night itself, he faded away into the blackness, leaving me totally unable to tell even the direction in which he had disappeared. I turned to find De Gooch at my side. His, evidently, was the presence I had felt in the darkness, like myself stalking the mysterious flame.

With upraised hand he halted the approaching men, one of whom had raised the alarm upon seeing the glow forward. Impatiently and briefly he explained to them the mistake, ordering them back to their quarters. When we were alone again, the captain having also grumpily retired, we turned our attention to the scene of the shielded fire.

The glow had proceeded from a tiny flame kindled upon a heavy tin pannikin, and from several candles ranged around in the form of a mystic pentagram. A small mortar and pestle, together with a brazier, lay beside the fire, the former containing traces of some dark-colored decoction that had been brayed in it. Various remnants of roots and herbs lay about the brazier, among which I recognized the poisonous leaves of the manchineel tree. Plainly, it was the layout of some malignant *ouanga*, and we could have no doubt for whom it was intended. For among the remnants of other ingredients were a few shreds of white fabric, such as might have formed a part of De Gooch's missing shirt. That he

recognized them as such was evidenced by the sickly pallor of his face.

His voice sounded harassed as he appealed to me:

"What do you think?"

"The same thing you do," I replied. "Voodoo vengeance is on the ship with us, bent certainly upon your destruction. Danger is present every moment the person who kindled this fire is loose on the ship, and I know nothing to counsel except extreme watchfulness. I am surprised that you did not immediately order the men to another search."

"It would have yielded nothing," he returned wearily. "The ship was thoroughly searched today, and we should find now what we found then. And I wanted them out of the way while we examined these." He indicated the Voodoo implements; and then, gathering them all upon the pannikin, he threw them over the rail.

"Watchful I shall be," he continued, accepting my counsel, "but not cowardly. I am going to bed again, and devil take the he-hag. Come what may!" And before I could answer he left me, passing into his cabin alone. Courage, I reflected, at least was one thing he did not lack.

FOLLOWING his example, I succeeded in finally dropping into a fitful, half-waking slumber, troubled by vague dreams. When I opened my eyes again dawn was gray on the sea, and some one was shaking me awake. Without being told, I sensed fresh trouble, as though the day held but a waking continuation of my nightmare dreams of the night.

Such, in actuality, proved to be the case, for I found De Gooch pacing beside the recumbent forms of three seamen, lying on the deck where they had slept after the night's alarm. So composed were their faces that I should have im-

aged them still bound only by sleep, had not the Frenchman's manner indicated otherwise. Bending down for a closer examination, I found them pulseless and cold, having evidently been dead for some time.

De Gooch had not yet called the captain, and together we went to his cabin—only to find that the mysterious death had struck here also. As in the case of the sailors, the captain's face and form appeared perfectly composed as though in sleep, but the heart had long since ceased to beat.

Returning to the deck we found the wind freshening into the promise of a gale, the sky still continuing gray and overcast. Under the fourfold blow of death our situation had become alarming; for besides the loss of Captain Schmidt, the number of our seamen had been reduced nearly by half, the *Oberon* having been manned by a crew of seven. To go on, under the circumstances, seemed madness; and the alternative, a retracing of our course to Haiti, held equal terrors for De Gooch. He gave orders to prepare burial canvas for the dead men while we debated what to do. But there was a note in the Frenchman's tone as we talked, in harmony with the deep atmosphere of gloom that hung over the ship, which gave the impression that it mattered little what our decision might be. Port was over a day's sail distant, and death was hovering on the wings of each new hour.

The bodies of the four dead men had been laid out in their canvas on the deck, the sailors starting to stitch them in with coarse needles. I thought of "the last stitch" of which I had read in Melville, and could not suppress a shudder. But the last stitch on these bodies was destined never to be taken, the last act of our floating tragedy and its final curtain intervening.

The sea had grown rougher as we talked, the continuing gale piling up waves in deep furrows that caused the yacht to lurch drunkenly. The sky, too, had increased in blackness, heavy clouds piling up from windward, while off on the horizon a strange copper sheen was visible, shading off in drab yellow. Captain Schmidt doubtless would have made his preparations for the impending storm long before we awakened to a realization of its nearness, but we did bestir ourselves in time to save the main spars. The men were still reefing in, however, when the blow fell, starting in a weird staccato rumble of thunder like a burst from the Voodoo drums in Nuflo's *boumfort* when his thunderstones had brought an answer from the sky.

There was something terrifying even in the natural menace the sound implied, and to De Gooch it seemed to be maddening. He started violently, and his eyes rolled wild like those of negroes in ritualistic ecstasy. Then the storm struck us in the full swoop of its power, and I heard his voice in a hoarse scream as a wedge of flying tackle carried him over the side. A towering wave followed the wind's destruction across the deck, and I found myself swept off my feet and suffocated by crushing weights of water. The world reeled drunkenly, driving from my mind all impressions but that of the Frenchman being hurled over the side tangled in the mass of tackle—a fate to which the wave was hurrying me also. Then I brought up with stunning impact against timbers, finding myself when the wave receded jammed in between the sternpost and rudder.

As freakishly as it had come the storm abated, and although I still clung to the supports in fear of being carried away, we were not again boarded by so heavy a sea. The wind fell off, after the first

sweep of its fury, and although the vessel still wallowed heavily in the trough, I ventured to relinquish my hold and make my way along the deck. The havoc had been terrific, the main spars by a miracle having been left, but everything else had been wrenched away, leaving a clear-swept scene of desolation. But the thought that struck me most heavily of all was that I was alone on the ship, no human thing being visible except a figure dangling down from the starboard rail. Approaching it, I recognized the body of De Gooch, hanging by his neck from the tangled mass of tackle. His swollen face was a mottled purple, and the tongue protruded in a ghastly manner.

AS I GAZED in horror my attention was distracted by a sound from behind me, and I turned to see emerging from the companionway a dusky figure—a figure that I recognized as Nuflo. And behind him, shuffling clumsily with heads down, appeared the four men I had seen that morning being sewed into burial canvas, Captain Schmidt and the three sailors. I started forward, but Nuflo warned me away from them. Advancing past me to the rail he looked long at the figure dangling there, producing finally a machete with which he severed the ropes and let it fall into the sea. I thought of the sharks I had seen the previous evening, and did not look. When he turned to me his grim face was not without kind-

liness, expressing something even of his wonted affection toward me.

"Agoué has preserved you, my son," he said gravely, "and I welcome back the friend Agoué has given me. Your welcome is secure both in *caille* and *houmfort*—but come no more in company with the skeptic and despoiler. These things rot the soul."

After repairing the sails and tackle to the best of our ability we retraced the course we had followed from the islands, sighting land near evening on the next day. I spent the interval in a state of nervous and physical exhaustion, scarcely attending to the management of the ship, except to note that it was worked by the *zombies*, under the direction of Nuflo. *Zombies* I knew them to be, although he was silent before my questions, and would not suffer me to approach near to them.

I had recovered from my experience by the time we dropped anchor sufficiently to help drop the ship's boat into the sea, and man one of the oars. At the beach we parted, after having first shoved the boat off and watched it drift out to the open sea. We parted; Nuflo to make his way back to his own village; I to seek out the owner of a fishing-boat who would carry me to Port-au-Prince. With strange, mixed feelings I watched him disappear on his way, a form hard to identify with that of Nemesis. But on his back was De Gooch's knapsack.

