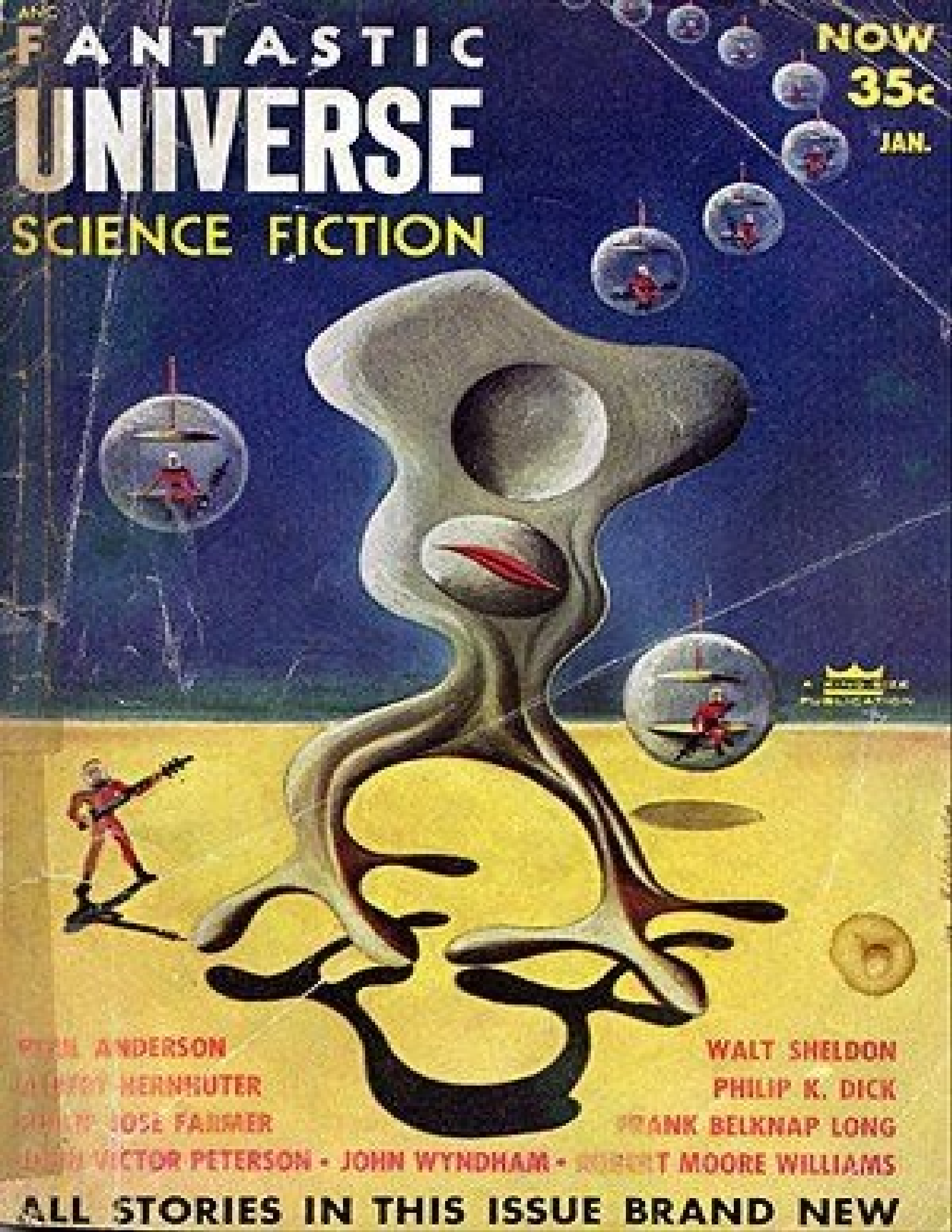
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*This story contains what is, to us, at any rate, a novel idea—that when we of Earth finally reach Mars we may find there records of prehistoric Earth far surpassing those of our paleontologists. Or, in other words, that creatures of Mars may have visited this planet tens of thousands of years ago and returned home with specimens for their science. A nice idea well told.*

# THE RECORD OF CURRUPIRA

*by … Robert Abernathy*

**From ancient Martian records came the grim song of a creature whose very existence was long forgotten.**

JAMES DALTON strode briskly through the main exhibit room of New York's Martian Museum, hardly glancing to right or left though many displays had been added since his last visit. The rockets were coming home regularly now and their most valuable cargoes—at least from a scientist's point of view—were the relics of an alien civilization brought to light by the archeologists excavating the great dead cities.

One new exhibit did catch Dalton's eye. He paused to read the label with interest—

MAN FROM MARS:

*The body here preserved was found December 12, 2001, by an*

*exploring party from the spaceship* NEVADA, *in the Martian city which we designate E-3. It rested in a case much like this, in a building that had evidently been the municipal museum. Around it, in other cases likewise undisturbed since a period estimated at fifty thousand years ago, were a number of Earthly artifacts. These finds prove beyond doubt that a Martian scientific expedition visited Earth before the dawn of our history.*

On the label someone had painstakingly copied the Martian glyphs found on the mummy's original case. Dalton's eyes traced the looping ornamental script—he was one of the very few men who had put in the years of work necessary to read inscriptional Martian—and he smiled appreciation of a jest that had taken fifty thousand years to ripen—the writing said simply, *Man From Earth*.

The mummy lying on a sculptured catafalque beyond the glass was amazingly well preserved—far more lifelike and immensely older than anything Egypt had yielded. Long-dead Martian embalmers had done a good job even on what to them was the corpse of an other-world monster.

He had been a small wiry man. His skin was dark though its color might have been affected by mummification. His features suggested those of the Forest Indian. Beside him lay his flaked-stone ax, his bone-pointed spear and spear thrower, likewise preserved by a marvelous chemistry.

Looking down at that ancient nameless ancestor, Dalton was moved to solemn thoughts. This creature had been first of all human-kind to make the tremendous crossing to Mars—had seen its lost race in living glory, had died there and became a museum exhibit for the multiple eyes of wise grey spiderish aliens.

"Interested in Oswald, sir?"

Dalton glanced up and saw an attendant. "I was just thinking—if he could only talk! He does have a name, then?"

The guard grinned. "Well, we call him Oswald. Sort of inconvenient, not having a name. When I worked at the Metropolitan we used to call all the Pharaohs and Assyrian kings by their first names."

Dalton mentally classified another example of the deep human need for verbal handles to lift unwieldy chunks of environment. The professional thought recalled him to business and he glanced at his watch.

"I'm supposed to meet Dr. Oliver Thwaite here this morning. Has he come in yet?"

"The archeologist? He's here early and late when he's on Earth. He'll be up in the cataloguing department now. Want me to show you—"

“I know the way,” said Dalton. “Thanks all the same.” He left the elevator at the fourth floor and impatiently pushed open the main cataloguing room’s glazed door.

Inside cabinets and broad tables bore a wilderness of strange artifacts, many still crusted with red Martian sand. Alone in the room a trim-mustached man in a rough open-throated shirt looked up from an object he had been cleaning with a soft brush.

“Dr. Thwaite? I’m Jim Dalton.”

“Glad to meet you, Professor.” Thwaite carefully laid down his work, then rose to grip the visitor’s hand. “You didn’t lose any time.”

“After you called last night I managed to get a seat on the dawn-rocket out of Chicago. I hope I’m not interrupting?”

“Not at all. I’ve got some assistants coming in around nine. I was just going over some stuff I don’t like to trust to their thumb-fingered mercies.”

Dalton looked down at the thing the archeologist had been brushing. It was a reed syrinx, the Pan’s pipes of antiquity. “That’s not a very Martian-looking specimen,” he commented.

“The Martians, not having any lips, could hardly have had much use for it,” said Thwaite. “This is of Earthly manufacture—one of the Martians’ specimens from Earth, kept intact over all this time by a preservative I wish we knew how to make. It’s a nice find, man’s earliest known musical instrument—hardly as interesting as the record though.”

Dalton’s eyes brightened. “Have you listened to the record yet?”

“No. We got the machine working last night and ran off some of the Martian stuff. Clear as a bell. But I saved the main attraction for when you got here.” Thwaite turned to a side door, fishing a key from his pocket. “The playback machine’s in here.”

The apparatus, squatting on a sturdy table in the small room beyond, had the slightly haywire look of an experimental model. But it was little short of a miracle to those who knew how it had been built—on the basis of radioed descriptions of the ruined device the excavators had dug up on Mars.

Even more intriguing, however, was the row of neatly labeled boxes on a shelf. There in cushioned nests reposed little cylinders of age-tarnished metal, on which a close observer could still trace the faint engraved lines and whorls of Martian script. These were the best-preserved specimens yet found of Martian record films.

Sound and pictures were on them, impressed there by a triumphant science so long ago that the code of Hammurabi or the hieroglyphs of Khufu seemed by comparison like yesterday’s newspaper. Men of Earth were ready now to evoke

these ancient voices—but to reproduce the stereoscopic images was still beyond human technology.

Dalton scrutinized one label intently. “Odd,” he said. “I realize how much the Martian archives may have to offer us when we master their spoken language—but I still want most to hear *this* record, the one the Martians made right here on Earth.”

Thwaite nodded comprehendingly. “The human race is a good deal like an amnesia patient that wakes up at the age of forty and finds himself with a fairly prosperous business, a wife and children and a mortgage, but no recollection of his youth or infancy—and nobody around to tell him how he got where he is.

“We invented writing so doggone late in the game. Now we get to Mars and find the people there knew us before we knew ourselves—but they died or maybe picked up and went, leaving just this behind.” He used both hands to lift the precious gray cylinder from its box. “And of course you linguists in particular get a big charge out of this discovery.”

“*If* it’s a record of human speech it’ll be the oldest ever found. It may do for comparative-historical linguistics what the Rosetta Stone did for Egyptology.” Dalton grinned boyishly. “Some of us even nurse the hope it may do something for our old headache—the problem of the origin of language. That was one of the most important, maybe *the* most important step in human progress—and we don’t know how or when or why!”

“I’ve heard of the bowwow theory and the dingdong theory,” said Thwaite, his hands busy with the machine.

“Pure speculations. The plain fact is we haven’t even been able to make an informed guess because the evidence, the written records, only run back about six thousand years. That racial amnesia you spoke of.

“Personally, I have a weakness for the magical theory—that man invented language in the search for magic formulae, words of power. Unlike the other theories, that one assumes as the motive force not merely passive imitativeness but an outgoing will.

“Even the speechless subman must have observed that he could affect the behavior of animals of his own and other species by making appropriate noises—a mating call or a terrifying shout, for instance. Hence the perennial conviction you can get what you want if you just hold your mouth right, *and* you know the proper prayers or curses.”

“A logical conclusion from the animistic viewpoint,” said Thwaite. He frowned over the delicate task of starting the film, inquired offhandedly, “You got the photostat of the label inscription? What did you make of it?”

“Not much more than Henderson did on Mars. There’s the date of the

recording and the place—the longitude doesn't mean anything to us because we still don't know where the Martians fixed their zero meridian. But it was near the equator and, the text indicates, in a tropical forest—probably in Africa or South America.

"Then there's the sentence Henderson couldn't make out. It's obscure and rather badly defaced, but it's evidently a comment—unfavorable—on the subject-matter of the recording. In it appears twice a sort of interjection-adverb that in other contexts implies revulsion—something like *ugh!*"

"Funny. Looks like the Martians saw something on Earth they didn't like. Too bad we can't reproduce the visual record yet."

Dalton said soberly, "The Martian's vocabulary indicates that for all their physical difference from us they had emotions very much like human beings'. Whatever they saw must have been something we wouldn't have liked either."

The reproducer hummed softly. Thwaite closed the motor switch and the ancient film slid smoothly from its casing. Out of the speaker burst a strange medley of whirrings, clicks, chirps, trills and modulated drones and buzzings—a sound like the voice of grasshoppers in a drought-stricken field of summer.

Dalton listened raptly, as if by sheer concentration he might even now be able to guess at connections between the sounds of spoken Martian—heard now for the first time—and the written symbols that he had been working over for years. But he couldn't, of course—that would require a painstaking correlation analysis.

"Evidently it's an introduction or commentary," said the archeologist. "Our photocell examination showed the wave-patterns of the initial and final portions of the film were typically Martian—but the middle part isn't. The middle part is whatever they recorded here on Earth."

"If only that last part is a translation…." said Dalton hopefully. Then the alien susurration ceased coming from the reproducer and he closed his mouth abruptly and leaned forward.

For the space of a caught breath there was silence. Then another voice came in, the voice of Earth hundreds of centuries dead.

It was not human. No more than the first had been—but the Martian sounds had been merely alien and these were horrible.

It was like nothing so much as the croaking of some gigantic frog, risen bellowing from a bottomless primeval swamp. It bayed of stinking sunless pools and gurgled of black ooze. And its booming notes descended to subsonic throbbings that gripped and wrung the nerves to anguish.

Dalton was involuntarily on his feet, clawing for the switch. But he stopped, reeling. His head spun and he could not see. Through his dizzy brain the great

voice roared and the mighty tones below hearing hammered at the inmost fortress of the man's will.

On the heels of that deafening assault the voice began to change. The numbing thunder rumbled back, repeating the pain and the threat—but underneath something crooned and wheedled obscenely. It said, "*Come … come … come….*" And the stunned prey came on stumbling feet, shivering with a terror that could not break the spell. Where the squat black machine had been was something that was also squat and black and huge. It crouched motionless and blind in the mud and from its pulsing expanded throat vibrated the demonic croaking. As the victim swayed helplessly nearer the mouth opened wide upon long rows of frightful teeth….

The monstrous song stopped suddenly. Then still another voice cried briefly, thinly in agony and despair. That voice was human.

Each of the two men looked into a white strange face. They were standing on opposite sides of the table and between them the playback machine had fallen silent. Then it began to whir again in the locust speech of the Martian commentator, explaining rapidly, unintelligibly.

Thwaite found the switch with wooden fingers. As if with one accord they retreated from the black machine. Neither of them even tried to make a false show of self-possession. Each knew, from his first glimpse of the other's dilated staring eyes, that both had experienced and seen the same.

Dalton sank shivering into a chair, the darkness still swirling threateningly in his brain. Presently he said, "The expression of a will—that much was true. But the will—was not of man."

James Dalton took a vacation. After a few days he went to a psychiatrist, who observed the usual symptoms of overwork and worry and recommended a change of scene—a rest in the country.

On the first night at a friend's secluded farm Dalton awoke drenched in cold sweat. Through the open window from not far away came a hellish serenade, the noise of frogs—the high nervous voices of peepers punctuating the deep leisured booming of bullfrogs.

The linguist flung on his clothes and drove back at reckless speed to where there were lights and the noises of men and their machines. He spent the rest of his vacation burrowing under the clamor of the city whose steel and pavements proclaimed man's victory over the very grass that grew.

After awhile he felt better and needed work again. He took up his planned study of the Martian recordings, correlating the spoken words with the written

ones he had already arduously learned to read.

The Martian Museum readily lent him the recordings he requested for use in his work, including the one made on Earth. He studied the Martian-language portion of this and succeeded in making a partial translation—but carefully refrained from playing the middle section of the film back again.

Came a day, though, when it occurred to him that he had heard not a word from Thwaite. He made inquiries through the Museum and learned that the archeologist had applied for a leave of absence and left before it was granted. Gone where? The Museum people didn't know—but Thwaite had not been trying to cover his trail. A call to Global Air Transport brought the desired information.

A premonition ran up Dalton's spine—but he was surprised at how calmly he thought and acted. He picked up the phone and called Transport again—this time their booking department.

"When's the earliest time I can get passage to Belem?" he asked.

With no more than an hour to pack and catch the rocket he hurried to the Museum. The place was more or less populated with sightseers, which was annoying, because Dalton's plans now included larceny.

He waited before the building till the coast was clear, then, with handkerchief-wrapped knuckles, broke the glass and tripped the lever on the fire alarm. In minutes a wail of sirens and roar of arriving motors was satisfyingly loud in the main exhibit room. Police and fire department helicopters buzzed overhead. A wave of mingled fright and curiosity swept visitors and attendants alike to the doors.

Dalton, lingering, found himself watched only by the millennially sightless eyes of the man who lay in state in an airless glass tomb. The stern face was inscrutable behind the silence of many thousand years.

"Excuse me, Oswald," murmured Dalton. "I'd like to borrow something of yours but I'm sure you won't mind."

The reed flute was in a long case devoted to Earthly specimens. Unhesitatingly Dalton smashed the glass.

Brazil is a vast country, and it cost much trouble and time and expense before Dalton caught up with Thwaite in a forlorn riverbank town along the line where civilization hesitates on the shore of that vast sea of vegetation called the *mato*. Night had just fallen when Dalton arrived. He found Thwaite alone in a lighted room of the single drab hotel—alone and very busy.

The archeologist was shaggily unshaven. He looked up and said something

that might have been a greeting devoid of surprise. Dalton grimaced apologetically, set down his suitcase and pried the wax plugs out of his ears, explaining with a gesture that included the world outside, where the tree frogs sang deafeningly in the hot stirring darkness of the near forest.

"How do you stand it?" he asked.

Thwaite's lips drew back from his teeth. "I'm fighting it," he said shortly, picking up his work again. On the bed where he sat were scattered steel cartridge clips. He was going through them with a small file, carefully cutting a deep cross in the soft nose of every bullet. Nearby a heavy-caliber rifle leaned against a wardrobe. Other things were in evidence—boots, canteens, knapsacks, the tough clothing a man needs in the *mato*.

"You're looking for *it*."

Thwaite's eyes burned feverishly. "Yes. Do you think I'm crazy?"

Dalton pulled a rickety chair toward him and sat down straddling it. "I don't know," he said slowly. "*It* was very likely a creature of the last interglacial period. The ice may have finished its kind."

"The ice never touched these equatorial forests." Thwaite smiled unpleasantly. "And the Indians and old settlers down here have stories—about a thing that calls in the *mato*, that can paralyze a man with fear. *Currupira* is their name for it.

"When I remembered those stories they fell into place alongside a lot of others from different countries and times—the Sirens, for instance, and the Lorelei. Those legends are ancient. But perhaps here in the Amazon basin, in the forests that have never been cut and the swamps that have never been drained, the *currupira* is still real and alive. I *hope* so!"

"Why?"

"I want to meet it. I want to show it that men can destroy it with all its unholy power." Thwaite bore down viciously on the file and the bright flakes of lead glittered to the floor beside his feet.

Dalton watched him with eyes of compassion. He heard the frog music swelling outside, a harrowing reminder of ultimate blasphemous insult, and he felt the futility of argument.

"Remember, I heard it too," Dalton said. "And I sensed what you did. That voice or some combination of frequencies or overtones within it, is resonant to the essence of evil—the fundamental life-hating self-destroying evil in man—even to have glimpsed it, to have heard the brainless beast mocking, was an outrage to humanity that a man must…."

Dalton paused, got a grip on himself. “But, consider—the outrage was wiped out, humanity won its victory over the monster a long time ago. What if it isn’t quite extinct? That record was fifty thousand years old.”

“What did you do with the record?” Thwaite looked up sharply.

“I obliterated that—the voice and the pictures that went with it from the film before I returned it to the Museum.”

Thwaite sighed deeply. “Good. I was damning myself for not doing that before I left.”

The linguist said, “I think it answered my question as much as I want it answered. The origin of speech—lies in the will to power, the lust to dominate other men by preying on the weakness or evil in them. “Those first men didn’t just guess that such power existed—they *knew* because the beast had taught them and they tried to imitate it—the mystagogues and tyrants through the ages, with voices, with tomtoms and bull-roarers and trumpets. What makes the memory of that voice so hard to live with is just knowing that what it called to is a part of man—isn’t that it?”

Thwaite didn’t answer. He had taken the heavy rifle across his knees and was methodically testing the movement of the well-oiled breech mechanism.

Dalton stood up wearily and picked up his suitcase. “I’ll check into the hotel. Suppose we talk this over some more in the morning. Maybe things’ll look different by daylight.”

But in the morning Thwaite was gone—upriver with a hired boatman, said the natives. The note he had left said only, *Sorry. But it’s no use talking about humanity—this is personal.*

Dalton crushed the note angrily, muttering under his breath, “The fool! Didn’t he realize I’d go with him?” He hurled the crumpled paper aside and stalked out to look for a guide.

They chugged slowly westward up the forest-walled river, an obscure tributary that flowed somewhere into the Xingú. After four days, they had hopes of being close on the others’ track. The brown-faced guide, Joao, who held the tiller now, was a magician. He had conjured up an ancient outboard motor for the scow-like boat Dalton had bought from a fisherman.

The sun was setting murkily and the sluggish swell of the water ahead was the color of witch’s blood. Under its opaque surface *a mae dágua*, the Mother of Water, ruled over creatures slimy and razor-toothed. In the blackness beneath the great trees, where it was dark even at noon, other beings had their kingdom.

Out of the forest came the crying grunting hooting voices of its life that woke

at nightfall, fiercer and more feverish than that of the daytime. To the man from the north there seemed something indecent in the fertile febrile swarming of life here. Compared to a temperate woodland the *mato* was like a metropolis against a sleepy village.

"What's that?" Dalton demanded sharply as a particularly hideous squawk floated across the water.

"*Nao é nada. A bicharia agitase.*" Joao shrugged. "The menagerie agitates itself." His manner indicated that some *bichinho* beneath notice had made the noise.

But moments later the little brown man became rigid. He half rose to his feet in the boat's stern, then stooped and shut off the popping motor. In the relative silence the other heard what he had—far off and indistinct, muttering deep in the black *mato*, a voice that croaked of ravenous hunger in accents abominably known to him.

"*Currupira,*" said Joao tensely. "*Currupira sai á caçada da noite.*" He watched the foreigner with eyes that gleamed in the fading light like polished onyx.

"*Avante!*" snapped Dalton. "See if it comes closer to the river this time."

It was not the first time they had heard that voice calling since they had ventured deep into the unpeopled swampland about which the downriver settlements had fearful stories to whisper.

Silently the guide spun the engine. The boat sputtered on. Dalton strained his eyes, watching the darkening shore as he had watched fruitlessly for so many miles.

But now, as they rounded a gentle bend, he glimpsed a small reddish spark near the bank. Then, by the last glimmer of the swiftly fading twilight, he made out a boat pulled up under gnarled tree-roots. That was all he could see but the movement of the red spark told him a man was sitting in the boat, smoking a cigarette.

"In there," he ordered in a low voice but Joao had seen already and was steering toward the shore.

The cigarette arched into the water and hissed out and they heard a scuffling and lap of water as the other boat swayed, which meant that the man in it had stood up.

He sprang into visibility as a flashlight in Dalton's hand went on. A squat, swarthy man with rugged features, a *caboclo*, of white and Indian blood. He blinked expressionlessly at the light.

"Where is the American scientist?" demanded Dalton in Portuguese.

"*Quem sabe? Foi-se.*"

“Which way did he go?”

“*Nao importa. O doutor é doido; nao ha-de-voltar*,” said the man suddenly. “It doesn’t matter. The doctor is crazy—he won’t come back.”

“Answer me, damn it! Which way?”

The *caboclo* jerked his shoulders nervously and pointed.

“Come on!” said Dalton and scrambled ashore even as Joao was stopping the motor and making the boat fast beside the other. “He’s gone in after it!”

The forest was a black labyrinth. Its tangled darkness seemed to drink up the beam of the powerful flashlight Dalton had brought, its uneasy rustlings and animal-noises pressed in to swallow the sound of human movements for which he strained his ears, fearing to call out. He pushed forward recklessly, carried on by a sort of inertia of determination; behind him Joao followed, though he moved woodenly and muttered prayers under his breath.

Then somewhere very near a great voice croaked briefly and was silent—so close that it poured a wave of faintness over the hearer, seemed to send numbing electricity tingling along his motor nerves.

Joao dropped to his knees and flung both arms about a tree-bole. His brown face when the light fell on it was shiny with sweat, his eyes dilated and blind-looking. Dalton slammed the heel of his hand against the man’s shoulder and got no response save for a tightening of the grip on the treetrunk, and a pitiful whimper, “*Assombra-me*—it overshadows me!”

Dalton swung the flashlight beam ahead and saw nothing. Then all at once, not fifty yards away, a single glowing eye sprang out of the darkness, arched through the air and hit the ground to blaze into searing brilliance and white smoke. The clearing in which it burned grew bright as day, and Dalton saw a silhouetted figure clutching a rifle and turning its head from side to side.

He plunged headlong toward the light of the flare, shouting, “Thwaite, you idiot! You can’t—”

And then the *currupira* spoke.

Its bellowing seemed to come from all around, from the ground, the trees, the air. It smote like a blow in the stomach that drives out wind and fight. And it roared on, lashing at the wills of those who heard it, beating and stamping them out like sparks of a scattered fire.

Dalton groped with one hand for his pocket but his hand kept slipping away into a matterless void as his vision threatened to slip into blindness. Dimly he saw Thwaite, a stone’s throw ahead of him, start to lift his weapon and then stand frozen, swaying a little on his feet as if buffeted by waves of sound.

Already the second theme was coming in—the insidious obbligato of invitation to death, wheedling that *this way … this way …* was the path from the

torment and terror that the monstrous voice flooded over them.

Thwaite took a stiff step, then another and another, toward the black wall of the *mato* that rose beyond the clearing. With an indescribable shudder Dalton realized that he too had moved an involuntary step forward. The *currupira's* voice rose triumphantly.

With a mighty effort of will Dalton closed fingers he could not feel on the object in his pocket. Like a man lifting a mountain he lifted it to his lips.

A high sweet note cut like a knife through the roll of nightmare drums. With terrible concentration Dalton shifted his fingers and blew and blew….

Piercing and lingering, the tones of the pipes flowed into his veins, tingling, warring with the numbing poison of the *currupira's* song.

Dalton was no musician but it seemed to him then that an ancestral instinct was with him, guiding his breath and his fingers. The powers of the monster were darkness and cold and weariness of living, the death-urge recoiling from life into nothingness.

But the powers of the pipes were life and light and warmth, life returning when the winter is gone, greenness and laughter and love. Life was in them, life of men dead these thousand generations, life even of the craftsmen on an alien planet who had preserved their form and their meaning for this moment.

Dalton advanced of his own will until he stood beside Thwaite—but the other remained unstirring and Dalton did not dare pause for a moment, while the monster yet bellowed in the blackness before them. The light of the flare was reddening, dying….

After a seeming eternity he saw motion, saw the rifle muzzle swing up. The shot was deafening in his ear, but it was an immeasurable relief. As it echoed the *currupira's* voice was abruptly silent. In the bushes ahead there was a rending of branches, a frantic slithering movement of a huge body.

They followed the noises in a sort of frenzy, plunging toward them heedless of thorns and whipping branches. The flashlight stabbed and revealed nothing. Out of the shadows a bass croaking came again, and Thwaite fired twice at the sound and there was silence save for a renewed flurry of cracking twigs.

Along the water's edge, obscured by the trees between, moved something black and huge, that shone wetly. Thwaite dropped to one knee and began firing at it, emptying the magazine.

They pressed forward to the margin of the slough, feet squishing in the deep muck. Dalton played his flashlight on the water's surface and the still-moving ripples seemed to reflect redly.

Thwaite was first to break the silence. He said grimly, "Damned lucky for me you got here when you did. It—*had* me."

Dalton nodded without speaking.

“But how did you know what to do?” Thwaite asked.

“It wasn’t my discovery,” said the linguist soberly. “Our remote ancestors met this threat and invented a weapon against it. Otherwise man might not have survived. I learned the details from the Martian records when I succeeded in translating them. Fortunately the Martians also preserved a specimen of the weapon our ancestors invented.”

He held up the little reed flute and the archeologist’s eyes widened with recognition.

Dalton looked out across the dark swamp-water, where the ripples were fading out. “In the beginning there was the voice of evil—but there was also the music of good, created to combat it. Thank God that in mankind’s makeup there’s more than one fundamental note!”

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