



River of Fire

By Ken Cooper



The fiends were spreading oil on the water—igniting it. There could be no escape!

When Bob Carson went into the bayou country with his young wife, he thought only of combating superstition and disease. But he soon found truth in the saying— “Women don’t mean nothin’ down in this here neck o’ the woods!”

“YOU know what this assignment means, Dr. Carson?” The gray-haired Divisional Director of the United States Public Health Service looked up.

Bob Carson nodded. “Yes, I understand perfectly.”

“You will be as much a missionary as a physician,” the director continued. “These bayou people are almost fanatic in their distrust of medical science. Despite every effort to wipe it out, barbaric voodooism is still rampant. Our latest report shows a ghastly increase in mortality. The Okochee Bayou is a fester of filth and disease. Are you still willing to accept the post?”

A faint smile curled Bob’s lips. He was thinking of Pasteur, of Lister, of Walter Reed. They had all flirted with death to bring enlightenment. He squared his broad shoulders.

“Yes, I’m willing. Mrs. Carson will accompany me as my nurse.”

The director frowned. “If I may so suggest, Dr. Carson,” he said, “I don’t think it’s wise to take a woman into the bayou country. You will find conditions precarious enough without the added burden of protecting your wife. The practically uncivilized men who inhabit the region regard women as chattels. I feel it imperative to warn you about this.”

“Mrs. Carson is eager to go along. I’ve told her of the dangers. She comes from pioneer stock, sir. I’m certain she can be of great assistance.”

The director shrugged. “It’s up to you, doctor.” He fumbled through some papers. “This is your assignment. Arrangements have already been made to ship instruments, medicinals, and food supplies. A bungalow has been built. Naturally, utmost secrecy as to its

purpose was necessary. Nobody knows, as yet, who will occupy the bungalow. Now, as to getting there. The Spring floods have made the wagon roads impassable. You will have to go by steam launch up the Okochee River to the delta. There, according to our investigator, you will find a native eel fisher who can row you across the bayou to the bungalow. If possible, send out monthly reports.”

He rose, extended his hand. “You have my best wishes, doctor. The knowledge that you are aiding humanity should compensate for any discomfiture you may experience. Good-bye and good luck!”

AN HOUR later, in a Savannah hotel room, Bob interrupted his packing to sweep the slim, lovely figure of Enid, his bride of a month, into his arms. He kissed the soft hollow of her throat, her cheeks, her warm, poppy-red lips. His arms tightened lovingly about her mature curves, moulding her high firm breasts against him.

“This can easily make a name for me, darling,” he enthused. “If we go in there and clean those people up we’ll both be famous.” His face darkened. “There’s just one thing, Enid. It’s about you. Blake, at the Health Service, warned me against letting you go along. He said it might be dangerous.”

Enid pressed her young, vitally alive body close. “Do you think I’d let you go without me?”

“No, but—but I thought I might refuse the post.”

“Goose! It’s a wonderful opportunity, isn’t it? Haven’t you been talking about it all the way from New York? How many young men just out of medical school get appointments to the Public Health Service?” She twined her arms about Bob’s neck, mashed her parted lips down on his mouth. The swelling of her splendid breasts was Bob’s answer. She amplified it only when she drew her moist lips away. “We’re

going together, darling. If it’s dangerous you need me and I need you. Right?”

Bob thrilled to her courage. “Right,” he whispered, again seeking the ecstatic well-spring of her mouth, feeling the globular fullness of her breasts as his arms enfolded her.

NIGHT on the bayou. Only the deep croaking of giant bull frogs and the faint, muffled splash of an oar in the dark water.

Huddled in the back seat of a flat-bottomed eel boat, Enid shivered as the chorus of throaty sound echoed from the ebony pine grove on the far side of the bayou.

Bob tightened his arm about her waist. “Cold?” he whispered.

“N-No.” Her teeth chattered. “It—it’s just a little spooky.”

The wrinkled, stoop-shouldered native in the prow of the boat spat into the water. “Nigguh night,” he mumbled.

The very timbre of his voice seemed to match the croaking of the frogs. Bob’s hand slid up to where he could feel the pounding of her heart.

“You’re not frightened, are you, darling?”

She laughed softly. “Of course not.” Her head came back and her mouth sought Bob’s lips. They were warm when they touched, but they turned to ice as a weird shriek knifed out of the black pine grove, rippled over the water like a snake and scuttled into the valley beyond the bayou.

“What’s that?” Bob gasped.

The fisherman answered without turning. “Screech owl. Swamp’s full uh dem. Ain’ no hurt but dey sho’ frightens duh wits out uh yuh.” He cackled hideously. “Some folks say dey’s duh spirits ub duh dead. Ah dunno.”

The boat swung around as it neared the steep-banked shore. Bob made out the outlines of a small building set in a cluster of towering pines. There was a flickering light in one

window.

“Is—is that the bungalow?” he questioned.

Their ferryman leaned over, grabbed the stump of a sapling tree and pulled the boat in close. “Yassuh, dat’s it. Don’ look so good in duh night but it’s a right smaht shack. Heah, step easy.” He held a bony hand out to Enid. She drew back.

Bob lifted her from the boat to the bank, handed up his personal instrument bag, their two suitcases. He dug into his pocket and brought out a dollar bill. The ancient took it, examined it in the orange-yellow glow of an oil lamp.

“Fixin’ to stay on a spell?” he questioned.

Bob caught a whiff of his breath. It was heavy with raw alcohol. “I—I suppose we’ll be here some time,” he replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Wal, ah thought mebbe you’d be a-needin’ some fresh eels. I’ll be over mebbe in a week. If yuh’r heah, I’ll see yuh.”

Bob stepped up on the bank. The boat slid out on the black water. The eel fisher’s fiendish cackle came back to them faintly.

Enid hugged Bob close. “What did he mean?” she panted. “Why did he say if we’re here?”

Bob tried desperately to make his voice sound cheery. It was a pitiful effort. “He—he doesn’t know we’re staying, that’s all. You take the small bag and I’ll take the rest. I’m anxious to see our new home. Come on.”

AS THEY neared the bungalow the door opened and a man in boots and breeches stepped out on the porch. The high crown of his tan sombrero almost touched the porch roof. He was big and rangy. The light from the room beyond silhouetted his broad-shouldered figure.

“You the Doc?” he questioned.

Bob stepped in front of Enid. “Yes, I am.”

“Here, let me take those bags.” Ham-like hands reached out and snatched the baggage

from Bob’s grip. “Been waitin’ for you. Got a fire all set. There’s a chill.”

Holding Enid’s arm, Bob followed the giant stranger inside. He turned to face them, pushing his hat back on his head, towering like a Goliath above them. The skin of his cheeks was like oil-rubbed leather. Bright gray eyes flashed from beneath shaggy brows.

“My name’s Eddinger,” he said bluffly. “Boll Eddinger. Heard you were comin’ down so thought I’d drop in an’ get things set to rights.”

His hand grip had the strength of a vise. Bob winced. “That—that’s aw-fully nice of you,” he stammered.

Eddinger shrugged. “Nothin’ at all.” He eyed Enid curiously, but there was warmth in the movement of his eyes over her youthfully curved figure. “Didn’t expect a woman, though.”

“My wife,” Bob explained. “Mrs. Carson, Mr. Eddinger.”

Enid forced a wan smile. “How—how do you do, Mr. Eddinger.”

He nodded, shuffled his feet self-consciously. “It’s high time we had a doc down here,” he said. “Yes, sir, it sure is. Why, them white trash are dyin’ off like rats in a flood, they are. Burned six yesterday.”

“Burned?” Bob echoed.

“Sure thing. They don’t believe in decent burial, no, sir. Burn up the corpses an’ eat the ashes, that’s what they do.”

Enid turned white. Her hand covered her mouth. Even Bob blanched. Eddinger seemed not to notice their disgust.

“They kinda figure a man’s soul stays with his ashes,” he continued. “So they eat ‘em to keep him alive. When a woman dies they scatter the ashes on the bayou for the eels. Women don’t mean nothin’ down in this here neck of the woods.”

“But—but how do you happen to be here, Mr. Eddinger?” Bob questioned.

“Me? Oh, I come in before the Spring floods an’ stay on until late summer. I buy up all the turps they tap, haul it out around August.”

“Turps?”

“Turpentine.” He pulled a turnip of a silver watch out of his pocket. “Guess I’ll be goin’ along. You folks’ll be wantin’ some sleep. There’s just one thing, Doc. You won’t be gettin’ much thanks for anythin’ you do. These folks kinda got their own way of handlin’ sickness. Last week a girl run a sliver through her hand. They didn’t wait to see what come of it. They just chopped the hand off. She bled to death durin’ the night.” He paused at the door. “Jus’ go easy for a spell. If you need me ask anyone where Boll is. G’night.”

When the door had closed behind him Bob turned to Enid. Her cheeks were tallow white and her eyes burned like live coals.

“Bob!” she whispered. “Did—did you ever hear anything so horrible?”

He slipped his arms about her waist. “Buck up, kid. We knew what we were coming to. That’s why we came, because it was this way. In a month we’ll have them eating out of our hands.” He kissed the delicately soft hollow of her throat, ran his lips up over her chin to her mouth.

Neither of them saw the face at the window. It was thin, sallow and heavily bearded. Dark, malevolent eyes peered out from under scraggly, unkempt brows. The yellow-green tusks of root-rotted teeth hung viscously over a twisted lower lip. It was the face of a maniac; the face of a warped, undeveloped mentality; the face of a human creature whose habitat was the sluggish, oily bayou.

A white-coated tongue slithered out and licked the shapeless lips as Bob and Enid’s mouths joined. Saliva drooled from the tartar-stained teeth and dropped to the filthy rag that was the creature’s only covering. Its pupils dilated sensuously, riveted on Enid’s breasts. Then, breathing heavily, it melted into the

darkness.

THAT first night was mental and physical torture. The macabre croaking of the frogs, the ghastly outcries of the screech owls, all conspired to keep them both awake until sheer exhaustion conquered stark, unmentionable terror. As best they could, they tried to hide from each other the fear that gripped them.

Daylight brought surcease from the pitch horror of night. A bright sun shone down on the bayou. Gay plumaged birds dipped low over the surface of the water. It was a different world with the shades of darkness gone.

Bob unpacked his instruments and medicinals. Enid busied herself with the foodstuffs. Not a human soul other than themselves disturbed the sylvan tranquility of their pine-shaded retreat.

“I don’t suppose there’s much transient trade here,” Bob said jokingly. “No use hanging up a shingle.”

Enid laughed. “This drum of kerosene, Bob. What’s it for?”

“Lamps and lice. That’s where you’ll come in, darling.” He scratched his head significantly. “I’ll wager every kid on the bayou is inhabited. You won’t mind working on them, will you?”

“Mind?” She slid into Bob’s arms, pressed his cheeks between the palms of her hands. “You know I won’t mind doing anything—for you.”

As though they were powerful magnets, the upthrust hills of her breasts drew his caressing eyes. It seemed as though he could never get enough of Enid’s loveliness. Her body was a holy shrine on which he laid the votive offering of his adoration.

“I love you,” he whispered, his lips close to the sweet warmth of her mouth. “I love, love, love, love you!”

Enid’s eyes smiled. Her lips parted in expectancy. “I guess you love me, she murmured.

DARKNESS fell all too soon. Gray fingers of dusk reached down over the bayou, clutched at the daylight, moved it beyond the horizon. The frogs began their incessant croaking. Crickets chirped in the swamp grass outside the cabin.

Enid prepared dinner. It was while she was washing up the few dishes and Bob was labeling his bottles, that a knock sounded at the door. Bob answered.

It was a barefoot girl clothed in a filthy rag of a cotton dress. At first glance Bob thought she was a child. Her ethereally beautiful face was hunger-pinchd and dirt-smear'd. Her black eyes burned in deep-sunk sockets.

“Cud yuh come, mistuh?” she queried. “Paw’s sick tuh dyin’.”

Her voice was thin and quavering. Her lips, ripe and full, quivered. Bob ran his eyes up and down her figure. He was amazed to see the plump, globular outlines of mature breasts, the lyred sweep of curved hips. She was a woman rather than a child. A full-grown woman, voluptuously soft and rounded. The bodice of her faded dress had been torn. The grimy color of her face almost belied the whiteness of the breast Bob could see through the rent.

“Come in,” he said.

The girl hung back. “‘Druther not,” she blurted. “Cud yuh come quick, mistuh?” Her fingers fidgeted with the front of her dress, tightening the thin material over her high, swelling breasts. It was evident that the dress was her sole covering.

Enid came out of the kitchen. Her eyes dampened sympathetically as she saw the woe-begone figure at the door. “What is it, Bob?” she questioned.

“She says her father is sick. I’d better go along with her. Do you mind staying alone or do you want to come along?”

“Don’t be silly! I’ll stay.” She addressed the girl. “Won’t you come in for a moment?”

The girl’s eyes dropped to the floor. She hid

one dirty foot behind the other. The rapid rhythm of her breathing raised and lowered her resilient breasts. Bob was back with his bag.

“What’s the matter with your father?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Dunno.”

“What’s your name?” Enid questioned.

Again the girl hung her head. She seemed dazzled in the presence of a woman who wore clean things, stockings, shoes.

“Peg Cowber,” she mumbled. Bob kissed Enid hurriedly on the lips. “I’ll be back as soon as possible. Don’t worry.”

“Bring her with you,” Enid whispered. “I have an old dress she can wear. She looks hungry, too.”

“Sweet!”

HE WAS gone, following the bare-foot girl through the pine grove. Enid stood in the doorway until the crunch of his footsteps in the dry brown needles was lost in the black beyond. The slim crescent of a cold, silvery moon was coming up over the bayou. A bat crossed it, wings widespread. Enid shuddered, closed the door, returned to her dishes.

As she worked she sang softly. The sound of her own voice seemed to lend warmth to the aloneness. She could feel the pounding of her heart under the flesh cushion of her breast. It made the soft hillock throb like the pulses in her temples. Afraid? Yes, she was afraid. It was a fear born of the intangible; fear of the pagan unknown lurking in these wilds.

Finished with the dishes, Enid busied herself measuring dimity curtains for the windows. She was attaching the rod on one of the two windows facing the bayou when her face froze in an expression of abysmal horror. There, staring at her through the glass, was the sallow-cheeked creature whose malevolent eyes had licked sensuously at her once before.

A scream rose in Enid’s throat, died as it reached her numbed lips. The walking, living

cadaver pressed its face against the pane. A leer, spawned of the darkest pits of hell, twisted its shapeless mouth.

Enid stumbled to the center of the room. She wanted to cry out but the fingers of hideous fright were iron claws about her throat. She braced herself against the table, waiting for the inevitable, helpless before its coming.

The door opened slowly and the blackness of the night vomited the hunched, bearded man. His shoe-button eyes were maliciously bright as they glittered from rheumy lids. His white-coated tongue slid like a giant grub over a twisted lower lip.

“Ain’ aimin’ tuh harm yuh,” he croaked. “Jus’ come by tuh tell yuh we don’t like town folk messin’ in our business. S’pect yuh’d bettuh be shippin’ back f’um wheah yuh come. Ain’ healthy in these heah pahts.”

He wasn’t an idiot. His speech was thick but he knew what he was talking about. He waited for a reply, his eyes moving up and down Enid’s body.

She could almost feel the hot, covetous flame of them penetrating her cotton dress and curling about her naked breasts. It was an unclean sensation. Somehow, the power of speech returned to Enid. She drew a deep breath. “You—you can’t force us to go! My husband is a government employee! He’s here to help you!”

A wolfish snarl leaped from the man’s blue lips. “We ain’ askin’ none o’ yuh’r help! We got ways o’ makin’ yuh git.” He backed to the door, motioned.

Enid quivered as she heard the *clump-clump-clump* of heavy feet. A shuffling, gray-haired hag appeared in the orange-yellow light thrown by the lamp on the table. Saliva dripped from her bloodless lips.

Madness was probing into the softness of Enid’s brain. She was a graven image, incapable of movement, as the bent, hooded crone came forward. The dank odor of flesh rot swept across

Enid’s nostrils, choking her with its foulness.

“Put th’ hex on her, Ada!” the man screeched. “Show her we ain’ no fools!”



“Get out!” Enid screamed. “Get out!”

THE old hag raised her bony arms. They were fleshless. Her toothless gums gleamed behind spread lips. She began to chant, swaying from side to side.

“Light intuh darkness, blacker’n pitch,
Eye o’ th’ night-owl, hell’s own witch,
Debbil come up f’um the pits o’ sin,
Ole Ada askin’ th’ ha’nt tuh begin!”

The bearded man laughed hysterically, eyes glowing like live coals. Enid’s fingernails bit into the wooden table until the excruciating pain was almost an analgesic. The room began getting darker and she wondered whether she was losing consciousness. She seemed to be in a different world; a world divorced from reality. The old crone and the leering, bearded men were not humans. They were creatures of the black beyond.

“Light intuh darkness, blacker’n pitch,
Eye o’ the night-owl—”

Droning . . . droning . . . droning. Enid

turned her head, looked at the lamp on the table. The flaming wick was fluttering, going out! The same thing was happening to the lamp in the kitchen!

“—hell’s own witch,
Debbil come up f’um th’ pits o’ sin . . .”

Droning . . . droning . . . droning. And darkness, settling like a death’s pall over the cabin.

“Get out!” Enid screamed. “*Get out!*”

The man’s mocking laughter and the old crone’s droning. On and on and on . . . endlessly . . . while it grew darker. The wick of the kitchen lamp sputtered, went out. The second lamp, giving off a feeble, crooked light, threw gaunt, eerie shadows across the walls.

“Light intuh darkness!
Light intuh darkness!
Light intuh darkness!”

The hag was screaming now . . . screaming like a demented thing.

“Light intuh darkness, blacker’n pitch!
Eye o’ th’ night-owl, hell’s own witch!
Darkness!
Darkness!
Eeeee . . . ooooooohh!”

The second lamp went out. A Stygian blackness descended on the room. Even the slim, silver crescent of the moon dipped behind a cloud

PETRIFIED, Enid stood rooted to the spot. What madness was this? What evil machinations of black magic? Why had the lamps gone out when the hag began chanting?

Her mind, torn by fear beyond all human endurance, spun like the vortex of a whirlpool. Numbed, timeless moments passed on leaden

feet. A heavy, oppressive silence seemed to have come with the darkness, was one with the pall of pitch. Then, out of the nothingness came the shuffle of feet. *Swish-thud. swish-thud, swish-thud.* Ever nearer, ever louder.

Enid tensed herself, scarcely daring to breathe. Oh, God, why didn’t Bob come? She wanted to scream for him, but her vocal cords were like taut-drawn piano wires.

She sensed the presence of an alien thing even before she saw the two great, glaring eyes looking out at her from a stygian depth whose boundaries were endless.

They were no human eyes, of that she was certain. They were either the eyes of a beast or the eyes of a monstrosity spawned in the womb of hell. They glowed like two balls of white fire; two balls of white fire alone in the darkness.

The shock brought speech to Enid’s icy lips. “Bob!” she shrieked insanely, tearing at her dress to pull it away from her constricted throat. “*Bob!*”

As though in answer to her frenzied cry, there came the chanting of the crone. Softly, so softly, now. A flat, toneless threnody of horror.

“Body is young an’ flesh is white,
All foh th’ debbil on th’ ha’ntin’ night!”

An agonized shriek, ripped from Enid’s very soul, screamed like a million mad denizens of hell’s furnace as it shuddered out into the night, echoing across the bayou only to return in a ghastly echo.

Again and again her tortured throat gave voice. Spasms shook her body. In her hysteria she had torn the bodice of her cotton dress, ripped it to the waist. Tears that felt as cold as liquid air rolled down her cheeks and dropped on her bare breasts.

“*No!*” her brain shrilled. “*No!*” her lips answered. “*No! No!*”

The eyes grew larger as they came closer. Enid felt hot exhalations, the smacking of thick,

moist lips. Two shrouded arms came out, wrapped themselves around her.

Nausea turned Enid's stomach. She tried to escape the thing's horrible clutching arms, but they held her tight, painfully contorting her, digging into her soft flesh like thick, torturous ropes. Wet, clammy fingers raced over her body, leaving their hideous marks on her flesh.

Blindly, Enid fought to repulse the creature. Its brutal clawings had left her half-naked. Her dress was a tattered shred about her body. In her heart she knew this was the end. Death would be sweet by comparison.

"Bob! Bob!"

HER stark cry pierced the gray veil of horror. The echo of it came back in a faint whisper. Again a shrill, high wail—her own agonized voice—threaded through space quiveringly. The slimy lips of the thing were against her mouth, forcing all sound back into her throat.

"Bob! Bob!" The plea was no longer spoken. It came from deep within the tumult of her tortured soul, found no expression. Enid opened her eyes for one horrific instant. Then, blissfully, darkness swept into her brain, shrouding all the beastly ugliness, all the mad, tragic horror.

FOR twenty minutes Bob dogged Peg Cowber's footsteps as she led him through the pine woods. They had gone at least a mile from the cabin taking a devious, twisting route the girl seemed to know unerringly.

Suddenly, when they reached a thick-set growth through which not a beam of moonlight could penetrate, the girl darted off into the blackness.

"Come back!" Bob shouted. "Hey!"

There was only the boom of his own voice and the rustling of underbrush. Then out of the silence that followed, came a cry of pain, the thud of a body on the soft bed of dry pine

needles.

Bob stumbled in the direction the girl had taken, the direction from which the cry had come. He might just as well have been blind, so complete was the darkness. A faint, sobbing moan led him to the twisted trunk of a fallen tree. His groping hands told him the story. Peg Cowber had caught her ankle in the vise-like space where a thick branch joined the trunk of the tree. She was sprawled out on the ground, her leg twisted cruelly, unable to pull it free.

Bob fumbled for his tiny throat light, flashed it on. A twig had caught in the girl's dress bodice, ripped it down the front. It had fallen from her shoulders. Her youthfully firm breasts were bare, but more than that, the whiteness of her shoulders and back was marred by ghastly green and blue bruises.

She fainted as Bob wrenched her ankle out of its constricting prison. He opened his bag, brought out a bottle of smelling salts. Cradling her head in the crook of his arm he passed the open bottle under her nostrils. Her eyelids fluttered, a moan escaped her pale lips.

Bob directed his tiny light on her body. The soft flesh had been struck again and again by some blunt object. The bruises were not new, no result of her fall. Someone had beaten her.

She opened her eyes. Terror lights flickered in the dilated pupils. "I ain' th' one!" she gasped. "I ain', mistuh!"

She was frightened to death. Her body quivered spasmodically. Her lips trembled.

Bob touched his fingers to her discolored skin. "Who did this?"

"Muh paw! He's th' one, mistuh! He made me!"

"Your father beat you?"

"Yuh!"

"Why?"

"Ah dunno."

"I thought you said your father was sick."

"He ain'! He made me say ut! Ah swear ah didn' do ut muhself, mistuh! It's muh paw an'

maw! They say yuh ain' got no right heah! They tol' me tuh get yuh intuh th' woods!"



"My paw made me do it," she said. "He tol' me to get yuh intuh the woods!"

BOB went cold. The horrible truth hit him in the pit of the stomach, sickening him. He had been drawn away from the cabin so that this girl's parents might wreak their vengeance on Enid!

He shot to his feet. "Show me the way back to the cabin!" he gasped.

The girl cowered. "Ah can't! They'll whip me!"

Bob jerked her up. Pain contorted her face. The ankle that had been caught was swollen and useless. She couldn't walk.

Panic gripped Bob. Chilling visions of Enid at the mercy of these primitive bayou settlers froze his heart. God only knew what was happening to her! Torture, death—maybe worse!

He leaned over, lifted the girl in his arms. "I'll carry you!" he panted. "Tell me how to go!"

Peg Cowber was no lightweight. Her body was full and solid. Sweat stood out on Bob's brow before he had gone half the distance. His arms ached and his legs were lead heavy. He felt the girl's warm, plump breasts against his

chest but the voluptuous lure of them was lost on him. He knew only one thing. He *had* to reach that cabin before—before it was too late.

Now he remembered the warning he had been given, the warning that the bayou country was no place for a civilized woman. He cursed himself for being a blind fool.

When it seemed as though he could no longer carry on, the woods opened up and there was the black bayou sucking in the light from the moon crescent, the cabin on the bank.

Bob dropped the girl to the ground. From his bag, slung over his arm, he snatched a keen-edged scalpel. He ran forward, heart pounding, each drop of cold sweat on his face paradoxically burning like acid. His body was a twisted bundle of tortured nerves when he reached the open door. In the semi-darkness he stumbled over the kneeling figure of the old hag. The scalpel slashed out, caught the crone across the back of her wrinkled neck. She dropped like an empty sack, blood pouring from the deep slash.

Bob vaulted her body. A ray of moonlight penetrated the dark interior of the hut. What he saw in its cold, silvery light dragged him down . . . down into the deepest pits of hellish horror. Enid, practically stripped of clothing, was stretched out on the floor. Hovering over her was a huge, shapeless Thing with great, glaring eyes.

Reason fled from Bob's mind. That the Thing was inhuman failed to check his savage lunge. He closed with it feeling himself sucked into a foulness beyond life. The Thing enclosed him, shut out every breath of air. Time and again he struck at it with the sharp scalpel, but the deadly weapon wasted itself on nothingness; on soft masses that were without substance.

Then, suddenly, a great force pushed him back against the wall. There was a *swish* and a black shadow passed out of the door. Then silence—utter and complete silence. Bob looked at the dead witch woman, her haggard face

swimming in a crimson pool of her own blood. He looked at Enid, pale, lifeless. The power of movement returned to his muscles. He dropped on his knees beside Enid, lifted her, carried her into the bedroom. He pressed his cheek to her cruelly lacerated face, laid soothing caresses on the velvet softness of her skin.

“Enid,” he whispered. “Enid, darling.”

She stirred and her eyes opened. They looked at him strangely, as though her beaten mind refused to believe what they conveyed. He touched her lips with his fingers.

“Bob!” she cried. “It’s *you!*”

His lips were against hers. “Yes, darling.”

“Oh, God!” she murmured.

His voice was low and soothing. “It’s all over, Enid.”

FOOTSTEPS sounded on the wooden floor of the front room. Bob leaped to his feet, wheeled. It was the native girl, Peg Cowber. Her eyes were fear bright.

“They’re comin’ aftuh yuh, mistuh!” she gasped. “Yuh bettuh go! They’ll kill yuh! He got cut up an’ he’s dyin’.” She pointed to the bayou. “I know where theah’s a boat. Yuh gottuh hurry.”

Frantic minutes later, Peg shoved the rowboat bearing Bob and Enid out into the dark water. Bob gripped the oars.

“Thanks,” he called to the girl on the bank.

The echo of his voice had scarcely died when a chorus of maniacal shrieks drowned out even the sombre croaking of the frogs. In the light of the moon Bob saw a tattered army of men and women pouring out of the pine woods. They lined the bank, screaming and cursing at the departing boat. Suddenly a burst of flame shot up from the water near the shore. It scuttled out like a giant red bug. Another. Another. In a moment the surface of the bayou was a roaring furnace. Bob knew what was happening. The fiends were spreading oil on the surface of the water! *Igniting it!* There would be no escape!

They were trapped, like rats, with a wall of flames around them!

Bob rowed feverishly in an effort at escaping the almost certain death that faced them. But it was useless. The viscous, flaming oil seemed to have feet as it spread. Now, to make the end more certain, the madmen on the bank were hurling full cans of oil far out into the water. As it bubbled to the placid surface it caught fire.

Now there was only a small area around the boat that was, as yet, untouched. It was only a matter of minutes before the searing flames would catch the dry wood. Bob helped Enid to her feet. The boat rocked, moving nearer to the hell of heat.

“Take a deep breath!” he gasped. “Hold it in as long as you can! Dive with me! Keep your arms around my neck!”

A split second before the licking flames enveloped the boat, Bob and Enid went over. Down . . . down into the murky depths. Blindly, Bob struck out for shore. Enid’s dead weight hampered him, but he knew that if he failed there was only the roaring inferno above them; the roaring inferno and hideous cremation.

Another foot . . . another foot! His lungs were bursting for lack of air. He felt Enid’s arms loosen from about his throat. Twisting, he grabbed her hair in his fingers, paddled furiously with his free hand.

When it seemed that his chest would burst apart, when he could no longer stand the pressure, his feet scraped against the mud bottom of the bayou. He reached a hand up. The water on the surface was warm, but there was no fire. It had burned out close to shore, was raging in the center of the bayou, feeding gluttonously at the wooden boat.

He shot his head up, lifted Enid. She was limp in his arms. He sucked air into his tortured lungs, all they could stand. Through a haze he saw the gaping natives on the bank. They were down on their knees, chanting. Horror gripped

him until he realized they were no longer mad, inhuman beasts. For some unknown reason they were worshipping him.

The truth dawned on him. They had, with their own eyes, seen him come unscathed through a river of fire! It was a miracle! They considered him the possessor of magic powers.

“Help me!” he called.

Willing hands lifted Enid to the bank, dragged him up. Then, the tumult and the raging within him snapped all reason.

“Enid!” he screamed. “Enid!”

The rest was shrouded in the black of night.

HOURS later they both stood at the cabin door, gazing at the reflection of flame against the black sky.

“It was Eddinger,” Bob said. “He was playing on the superstitions of these ignorant people and exchanging mystic potions for their turpentine. When we came, he knew he had to get rid of us. You remember he was here when

we first arrived. He had emptied the lamps of all but enough oil to make certain they would go out when that hag and her husband came to frighten you away. I guess I stabbed him and he bled to death. They’re burning his body now.”

He slipped his arm around Enid’s waist. “When I think of that river of fire, I marvel how we escaped it.”

“Let’s not think,” Enid whispered, huddling close to him. “There’s only one thing, Bob. Those eyes—those hideous glaring eyes.”

Bob pointed towards the bayou. “See the fireflies? He caught a lot of them, rubbed the phosphorescence of their bodies on the hood he wore.”

He drew her into the cabin, closed the door. His arms tightened about the pliant softness of her body. His lips hovered over her mouth.

“We won,” he whispered, “you and I. That’s all that counts.”

They embraced with only the night and the moon to bear witness.