TOM CURRY

FROM AN AMBER BLOCK

"

These should prove especially valuable and interesting without a doubt, Marable," said the tall, slightly stooped man. He waved a long hand toward the masses of yellow brown which filled the floor of the spacious workrooms, towering almost to the skylights, high above their heads.

A giant amber block at last gives up its living, ravenous prey.

"Is that coal in the biggest one with the dark center?" asked an attractive young woman who stood beside the elder of the men.

"I am inclined to believe it will prove to be some sort of black liquid," said Marable, a big man of thirty-five.

There were other people about the immense rooms, the laboratories of the famous Museum of Natural History. Light streamed in from the skylights and windows; fossils of all kinds, some immense in size, were distributed about. Skilled specialists were chipping away at matrices other artists were reconstructing, doing a thousand things necessary to the work.

A hum of low talking, accompanied by the irregular tapping of chisels on stone, came to their ears, though they took no heed of this, since they worked here day after day, and it was but the usual sound of the paleontologists' laboratory.

Marable threw back his blond head. He glanced again toward the dark haired, blue eyed young woman, but when he caught her eye, he looked away and spoke to her father, Professor Young.

"I think that big one will turn out to be the largest single piece of amber ever mined," he said. "There were many difficulties in getting it out, for the workmen seemed afraid of it, did not want to handle it for some silly reason or other."

Professor Young, curator, was an expert in his line, but young Marable had charge of these particular fossil blocks, the amber being pure because it was mixed with lignite. The particular block which held the interest of the three was a huge yellow brown mass of irregular shape. Vaguely, through the outer shell of impure amber, could be seen the heart of ink. The chunk weighed many tons, and its crate had just been

removed by some workmen and was being taken away, piece by piece.

The three gazed at the immense mass, which filled the greater part of one end of the laboratory and towered almost to the skylights. It was a small mountain, compared to the size of the room, and in this case the mountain had come to man.

"Miss Betty, I think we had better begin by drawing a rough sketch of the block," said Marable.

Betty Young, daughter of the curator, nodded. She was working as assistant and secretary to Marable.

"Well—what do you think of them?"

The voice behind them caused them to turn, and they looked into the face of Andrew Leffler, the millionaire paleontologist, whose wealth and interest in the museum had made it possible for the institution to acquire the amber.

Leffler, a keen, quick moving little man, whose chin was decorated with a white Van Dyke beard, was very proud of the new acquisition.

"Everybody is talking about the big one," he continued, putting his hand on Marable's shoulder. "Orling is coming to see, and many others. As I told you, the workmen who handled it feared the big one. There were rumors about some unknown devil which lay hidden in the inklike substance, caught there like the proverbial fly in the amber. Well, let us hope there is something good in there, something that will make worth while all our effort."

Leffler wandered away, to speak to others who inspected the amber blocks.

"Superstition is curious, isn't it?" said Marable. "How can anyone think that a fossil creature, penned in such a cell for thousands and thousands of years, could do any harm?"

Professor Young shrugged. "It is just as you say. Superstition is not reasonable. These amber blocks were mined in the Manchurian lignite deposits by Chinese coolies under Japanese masters. They believe anything, the coolies. I remember working once with a crew of them that thought—"

The professor stopped suddenly, for his daughter had uttered a little cry of alarm. He felt her hand upon his arm, and turned toward her.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

She was pointing toward the biggest amber block, and her eyes were wide open and showed she had seen something, or imagined that she had seen something, that frightened her.

Professor Young followed the direction of her finger. He saw that she was staring at the black heart of the amber block; but when he looked he could see nothing but the vague, irregular outline of the inky substance.

"What is it, dear?" asked Young again.

"I—I thought I saw it looking out, eyes that stared at us—"

The girl broke off, laughed shortly, and added, "I suppose it was Mr. Leffler's talking. There's nothing there now."

"Probably the Manchurian devil shows itself only to you," said her father jokingly. "Well, be careful, dear. If it takes a notion to jump out at you, call me and I'll exorcise it for you."

Betty blushed and laughed again. She looked at Marable, expecting to see a smile of derision on the young man's face, but his expression was grave.

The light from above was diminishing; outside sounded the roar of home-going traffic.

"Well, we must go home," said Professor Young. "There's a hard and interesting day ahead of us to-morrow, and I want to read Orling's new work on matrices before we begin chipping at the amber."

Young turned on his heel and strode toward the locker at the end of the room where he kept his coat and hat. Betty, about to follow him, was aware of a hand on her arm, and she turned to find Marable staring at her.

"I saw them, too," he whispered. "Could it have been just imagination? Was it some refraction of the light?"

The girl paled. "I—I don't know," she replied, in a low voice. "I thought I saw two terrible eyes glaring at me from the inky heart. But when father laughed at me, I was ashamed of myself and thought it was just my fancy."

"The center is liquid, I'm sure," said Marable. "We will find that out soon enough, when we get started."

"Anyway, you must be careful, and so must father," declared the girl.

She looked at the block again, as it towered there above them, as though she expected it to open and the monster of the coolies' imagination leap out.

"Come along, Betty," called her father.

She realized then that Marable was holding her hand. She pulled away and went to join her father.

It was slow work, chipping away the matrix. Only a bit at a time could be cut into, for they came upon many insects imbedded in the amber. These small creatures proved intensely interesting to the paleontologists, for some were new to science and had to be carefully preserved for study later on.

Marable and her father labored all day. Betty, aiding them, was obviously nervous. She kept begging her father to take care, and finally, when he stopped work and asked her what ailed her, she could not tell him.

"Be careful," she said, again and again.

Her father realized that she was afraid of the amber block, and he poked fun at her ceaselessly. Marable said nothing.

"It's getting much softer, now the outside shell is pierced," said Young, late in the day.

"Yes," said Marable, pausing in his work of chipping away a portion of matrix. "Soon we will strike the heart, and then we will find out whether we are right about it being liquid. We must make some preparations for catching it, if it proves to be so."

The light was fading. Outside, it was cold, but the laboratories were well heated by steam. Close by where they worked was a radiator, so that they had been kept warm all day.

Most of the workers in the room were making ready to leave. Young and Marable, loath to leave such interesting material, put down their chisels last of all. Throughout the day various scientific visitors had interrupted them to inspect the immense amber block, and hear the history of it.

All day, Betty Young had stared fascinatedly at the inky center.

"I think it must have been imagination," she whispered to Marable, when Young had gone to don his coat and hat. "I saw nothing to-day."

"Nor did I," confessed Marable. "But I thought I heard dull scrapings inside the block. My brain tells me I'm an imaginative fool, that nothing could be alive inside there, but

just the same, I keep thinking about those eyes we thought we saw. It shows how far the imagination will take one."

"It's getting dark, Betty," said her father. "Better not stay here in the shadows or the devil will get you. I wonder if it will be Chinese or up-to-date American!"

The girl laughed, said good night to Marable, and followed her father from the laboratory. As they crossed the threshold a stout, red-faced man in a gray uniform, a watchman's clock hanging at his side, raised his hat and smiled at the young woman and her father.

"Hello, Rooney," cried Betty.

"How d'ye do, Miss Young! Stayin' late this evenin'?"

"No, we're leaving now, Rooney. Good night."

"G' night, Miss Young. Sleep happy."

"Thanks, Rooney."

The old night watchman was a jolly fellow, and everybody liked him. He was very fond of Betty, and the young woman always passed a pleasant word with him.

Rooney entered the room where the amber blocks were. The girl walked with her father down the long corridor. She heard Marable's step behind them.

"Wait for me a moment, father," she said.

She went back, smiling at Marable as she passed him, and entered the door, but remained in the portal and called to Rooney, who was down the laboratory.

He came hurrying to her side at her nervous hail.

"What is it, ma'am?" asked Rooney.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Rooney?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I'm always careful. Nobody can get in to harm anything while Rooney's about."

"I don't mean that. I want you to be careful yourself, when you're in this room to-night."

"Why, miss, what is there to be wary of? Nothin' but some funny lookin' stones, far as I can see."

The young woman was embarrassed by her own impalpable fears, and she took leave of Rooney and rejoined her father, determined to overcome them and dismiss them from her mind.

All the way home and during their evening meal and afterwards, Professor Young poked fun at Betty. She took it good-naturedly, and laughed to see her father in such fine humor. Professor Young was a widower, and Betty was housekeeper in their flat; though a maid did the cooking for them and cleaned the rooms, the young woman planned the meals and saw to it that everything was homelike for them.

After a pleasant evening together, reading, and discussing the new additions to the collection, they went to bed.

Betty Young slept fitfully. She was harassed by dreams, dreams of huge eyes that came closer and closer to her, that at last seemed to engulf her.

She awakened finally from a nap, and started up in her bed. The sun was up, but the clock on the bureau said it was only seven o'clock, too early to arise for the day's work. But then the sound of the telephone bell ringing in the hall caused her to get up and don her slippers and dressing gown and hurry out into the living room.

Before she reached the phone, however, she heard her father's voice answering.

"Hello.... Yes, speaking. Good morning, Smythe."

Smythe was the janitor of the museum. Betty, standing behind her father, wondered what he could want that he should phone so early in the morning. Her father's next words sent a thrill of fright through her heart.

"My God! I—I can't believe it!" cried Young. "Is he dead?"

There was a pause; Betty caught the sound of the excited Smythe's tones through the receiver.

"Who—who is it?" she whispered, clasping her parent's arm.

"I'll be right down, yes."

Young hung up, turned to his daughter. His face was sad, heavily lined with shadows of sorrow.

"Dear, there's been a tragedy at the museum during the night. Poor Rooney has been murdered—at least so they believe—and Smythe, who found him, wants me to come down and see if anything has been stolen. I must go at once. The body is in our laboratory."

"Rooney? Ah, poor fellow."

The girl wept a little, but braced herself to assist her father.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"No, no. You'd better remain here: you can come along later," said Young. "I don't like to have you see such sights, dear. It wouldn't be good for you."

"I'll be all right. I promise you I will."

She insisted and he was forced to let her accompany him to the museum. They hailed a cab and were soon at the door. The elevator took them to the top floor, and swiftly they passed along the corridors and came to the portal which led into the rooms where the amber blocks were.

Smythe greeted them, a worried look on his seamed face. "I've sent for an ambulance, Professor," he said.

Young nodded, brushed past him, and entered the laboratory. In the morning light the amber blocks had taken on a reddish tinge. Now, they seemed to oppress the young woman, who had bravely remained at her father's side as he walked quickly to the base of the biggest block.

A vague shape lay in the shadows between the wall and the largest amber mass. Professor Young bent over the body of Rooney, and felt the pulse.

"He's been dead some time," he said.

She nodded, stricken to the heart by this terrible end of her old friend Rooney.

"There's nothing we can do for him, now," went on her father soberly. "It looks as though he had been set upon and stabbed time after time by his assailant or assailants, whoever they were."

"How—how pale he is," said Betty. "Poor Rooney was so jolly and red-faced, but his skin is like chalk."

"And he's shrunken, too. It seems there's no blood left in his veins," said her father.

Marable, who had been called also, came in then and aided in the examination. He said good morning to Betty and her father, and then went to bend over Rooney's body.

"See the look of abject terror on his face," Betty heard Marable say to her father as the two examined the corpse. "He must have been very much afraid of whoever killed him."

"They beat him up frightfully," said Young. "There must have been several of the assassins; it would take more than one man to do such damage."

"Yes. His ribs are crushed in—see, this gash, Professor, would be enough to cause death without any of the other wounds."

Betty Young could not take her eyes from the ghastly sight. She steeled herself to bear it, and prayed for strength that she should not faint and cause her father trouble. She could see the two men examining a large blistered area under the corpse's armpit, in the center of which was a sharp vertical slit which had without doubt punctured the artery near the surface of the axilla. Perhaps it had pierced even to the heart.

"Bloodless," exclaimed Marable, noticing the same thing as her father had spoken of. "It is as if the blood had been pumped out of his body!"

"Yes, I think it has drained out."

"There is not much of a pool here where he lies, though," said Marable, in a low voice. "See, there are only splotches about, from various cuts he received."

"Maybe he was dragged here from another room," said Young. "When the others come, we will soon know if anything is missing. It seems that men desperate enough to commit such a murder would not leave without trying to get what they came after. Unless, of course, the killing of Rooney frightened them away before they could get their booty."

Smythe approached the group, with a physician in tow. The latter confirmed the facts which Marable and Young had found: that Rooney had been killed by the deep gash near the heart and that most of the blood was drained from the body.

"They seem like the slashes from an extremely sharp and large razor," said the medical man.

Others were coming in to look at Rooney, and the museum was buzzing with activity as various curators, alarmed about the safety of their valuable collections, feverishly examined their charges.

"He punched his clock in here at two A.M.," said Smythe. "I seen that. It's the last time he'll ever do his duty, poor feller."

"Curious odor," said the doctor, sniffing. "It smells like musk, but is fetid. I suppose it's some chemical you use."

"I noticed that, too," said Professor Young. "I don't recognize it, myself."

Marable, who had been looking at the floor between the great block of amber and the body, uttered an exclamation which caused the two men to look up.

"There are wavy lines leading around back of the block," said Marable, in answer to their questions.

The young man disappeared behind the block, and then he called to them excitedly to join him. Betty Young pressed closer, and finally slipped past the corpse and stood by her father.

Before her, she saw a large pool of black liquid. It had been hidden by the corner of the block, so that they had not noticed it, so busy were they looking at Rooney.

And there was a great cavity in the heart of the amber block. Pieces of the yellow brown mass lay about, as though they had fallen off and allowed the inky substance to escape.

"It's hardened or dried out in the air," said Young.

"It looks like black lacquer," said Betty.

The musky smell was stronger here. The great amber block seemed to stifle them with its size.

"Our chipping and hammering and the heat of the radiator causing it to expand must have forced out the sepia, or whatever it is," said Young. There was a disappointed note in his voice "I had hoped that inside the liquid we would discover a fossil of value," he went on.

Marable looked at Betty Young. They stared at one another for some seconds, and both knew that the same thought had occurred to the other. The frightful eyes—had they then been but figments of the imagination?

Marable began looking around carefully, here and there. Betty realized what he was doing, and she was frightened. She went to his side. "Oh, be careful," she whispered.

"The giant block has been moved a little," he replied, looking into her pretty face. "Have you noticed that?"

Now that she was told to look, she could see the extremely heavy amber block was no longer in the position it had been in. Marks on the floor showed where it had been dragged or shifted from its original resting place.

Betty Young gasped. What force could be so powerful that it could even budge so many tons? A derrick had been used, and rollers placed under the block when men had moved it.

Reason tried to assert itself. "It—it must have exploded. That would cause it to shift," she said faintly.

Marable shrugged. His examination was interrupted by the arrival of the museum's chemist, sent for by Young. The chemist took a sample of the black liquid for analysis. Reports were coming in from all over the museum, different departments declaring, one after another, that nothing had been disturbed or stolen from their sections.

Betty Young went again to Marable's side. She followed the direction of his eyes, and saw long, clawlike marks on the floor, radiating from the sepia.

"Doctor Marable," she said, "please don't—don't look any longer. Leave this terrible place for the day, anyway, until we see what happens in the next twenty-four hours."

He smiled and shook his head. "I must make a search," he replied. "My brain calls me a fool, but just the same, I'm worried."

"Do you really think ...?"

He nodded, divining her thought. The girl shivered. She felt terror mounting to her heart, and the matter-of-fact attitudes of the others in the great laboratory did not allay her fears.

Rooney's body was removed. The place was cleaned up by workmen, and Marable's search—if that was what his constant roving about the laboratory could be called—ceased for a time. The chemist's report came in. The black liquid was some sort of animal secretion, melonotic probably.

In spite of the fact that they had learned so many facts about the murder, they as yet had not solved the mystery. Who had murdered Rooney, and why? And where had his blood gone to? In no other rooms could be found any traces of a struggle.

"If you won't do anything else, please carry a gun," begged Betty of Marable. "I'm going to try to take father home, right after lunch, if he'll go. He's so stubborn. I can't make him take care. I've got to watch him and stay beside him."

"Very well," replied Marable. "I'll get a revolver. Not that I think it would be of much use, if I did find—" He broke off, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

Leffler came storming into the room. "What's this I hear?" he cried, approaching Marable. "A watchman killed in the night? Carelessness, man, carelessness! The authorities here are absurd! They hold priceless treasures and allow thieves to enter and wreak their will. You, Marable, what's all this mean?"

Leffler was angry. Marable looked into his red face coolly. "We do the best we can, Mr. Leffler," he said. "It is unlikely that anyone would wish to steal such a thing as that block of amber."

He waved toward the giant mass.

Leffler made a gesture of impatience. "It cost me many thousands of dollars," he cried.

"It is time for lunch, Professor," said Betty.

Marable bowed to Leffler and left the millionaire sputtering away, inspecting the various specimens he had contributed.

The one o'clock gong had struck, and all the workers and investigators were leaving in paleontological laboratories for a bite to eat.

Marable, with Betty, went out last. Leffler was over in one corner of the room, hidden from their sight by a corner of an amber block. They could hear Leffler still uttering complaints about the carelessness of the men in charge of that section of the museum, and Marable smiled at Betty sadly.

"Poor Rooney," he said. "Betty, I feel more or less responsible, in a way."

"No, no," cried the girl. "How could you have foreseen such a thing?"

Marable shook his head. "Those eyes, you know. I should have taken precautions. But I had no idea it could burst from its prison so."

For the first time Marable had definitely mentioned his idea of what had occurred. The girl had understood it all along, from their broken conversation and from the look in the young scientist's eyes.

She sighed deeply. "You will get a revolver before you search further?" she said. "I'm going to. Smythe has one, and I know he'll lend it to me."

"I will," he promised. "You know, Leffler has the same idea we have, I think. That's why he keeps talking about it being our fault. I believe he has seen something, too. His talk about the devil inside the block was half in earnest. I suppose he put it down to imagination, or perhaps he did not think this fossil to be dangerous."

They went out together, and walked toward the restaurant they frequented. Her father was there, lunching with one of the superintendents of the museum. He smiled and waved to Betty.

Everyone, of course, was discussing the killing of Rooney.

After an hour, during which the two young people spoke little, Marable and Betty Young left the restaurant and started back toward the museum. Her father was still at his table.

They walked up the driveway entrance, and then Marable uttered an exclamation. "Something's wrong," he said.

There was a small crowd of people collected on the steps. The outer doors, instead of being open as usual, were closed and guards stood peering out.

Marable and Betty were admitted, after they had pushed their way to the doors.

"Museum's closed to the public, sir," replied a guard to Marable's question.

"Why?" asked Marable.

"Somethin's happened up in the paleontological laboratories," answered the guard. "Dunno just what, but orders come to clear the rooms and not let anybody in but members of the staff, sir."

Marable hurried forward. Betty was at his heels. "Please get yourself a gun," she said, clutching his arm and holding him back.

"All right. I'll borrow one from a guard."

He returned to the front doors, and came back, slipping a large pistol into his side pocket.

"I want you to wait here," he said.

"No. I'm going with you."

"Please," he said. "As your superior, I order you to remain downstairs."

The girl shrugged. She allowed him to climb the stairs to the first floor, and then she hurried back in search of Smythe.

Smythe obtained a gun for her, and as she did not wish to wait for the slow elevator, she ran up the steps. Smythe could not tell her definitely what had occurred in the upper laboratory that had caused the museum to be closed for the day.

Her heart beating swiftly, Betty Young hurried up the second flight of stairs to the third floor. A workman, whom the girl recognized as a manual laborer in the paleontological rooms, came running down, passing her in full flight, a look of abject terror on his face.

"What is it?" she cried.

He was so frightened he could not talk logically. "There was a black fog—I saw a red snake with legs—"

She waited for no more. A pang of fear for the safety of Marable shot through her heart, and she forced herself on to the top floor.

Up there was a haze, faintly black, which filled the corridors. As Betty Young drew closer to the door of the paleontological laboratories, the mist grew more opaque. It was as though a sooty fog permeated the air, and the girl could see it was pouring from the door of the laboratory in heavy coils. And her nostrils caught the strange odor of fetid musk.

She was greatly frightened; but she gripped the gun and pushed on.

Then to her ears came the sound of a scream, the terrible scream of a mortally wounded man. Instinctively she knew it was not Marable, but she feared for the young professor, and with an answering cry she rushed into the smoky atmosphere of the outer laboratories.

"Walter!" she called.

But evidently he did not hear her, for no reply came. Or was it that something had happened to him?

She paused on the threshold of the big room where were the amber blocks.

About the vast floor space stood the numerous masses of stone and amber, some covered with immense canvas shrouds which made them look like ghost hillocks in the dimness. Betty Young stood, gasping in fright, clutching the pistol in her hand, trying to catch the sounds of men in that chamber of horror.

She heard, then, a faint whimpering, and then noises which she identified in her mind as something being dragged along the marble flooring. A muffled scream, weak, reached her ears, and as she took a step forward, silence came.

She listened longer, but now the sunlight coming through the window to make murky patches in the opaque black fog was her chief sensation.

"Walter!" she called.

"Go back, Betty, go back!"

The mist seemed to muffle voices as well as obscure the vision. She advanced farther into the laboratory, trying to locate Marable. Bravely the girl pushed toward the biggest amber block. It was here that she felt instinctively that she would find the source of danger.

"Leffler!" she heard Marable say, almost at her elbow, and the young man groaned. The girl came upon him, bending over something on the floor.

She knelt beside him, gripping his arm. Now she could see the outline of Leffler's body at her feet. The wealthy collector was doubled up on the ground, shrivelled as had been Rooney. His feet, moving as though by reflex action, patted the floor from time to time, making a curious clicking sound as the buttons of his gray spats struck the marble.

But it was obvious, even in the murky light, that Leffler was dead, that he had been sucked dry of blood.

Betty Young screamed. She could not help it. The black fog choked her and she gasped for breath. Leaving Marable, she ran toward the windows to throw them open.

The first one she tried was heavy, and she smashed the glass with the butt of the gun. She broke several panes in two of the windows, and the mist rolled out from the laboratory.

She started to return to the side of Marable. He uttered a sudden shout, and she hurried back to where she had left him, stumbling over Leffler's body, recoiling at this touch of death.

Marable was not there, but she could hear him nearby.

Cool air was rushing in from the windows, and gradually the fog was disappearing. Betty Young saw Marable now, standing nearby, staring at the bulk of an amber block which was still covered by its canvas shroud. Though not as large as the prize exhibit, this block of amber was large and filled many yards of space.

"Betty, please go outside and call some of the men," begged Marable.

But he did not look at her, and she caught his fascinated stare. Following the direction of his gaze, the girl saw that a whisp of smoky mist was curling up from under the edge of the canvas cover.

"It is there," whispered Betty.

Marable had a knife which he had picked up from a bench, and with this he began quietly to cut the canvas case of the block, keeping several feet to each side of the spot where the fog showed from beneath the shroud.

Marable cut swiftly and efficiently, though the cloth was heavy and he was forced to climb up several feet on the block to make his work effective. The girl watched, fascinated with horror and curiosity.

To their ears came a curious, sucking sound, and once a vague tentacle form showed from the bottom of the canvas.

At last Marable seized the edge of the cut he had made and, with a violent heave, sent the canvas flap flying over the big block.

Betty Young screamed. At last she had a sight of the terrible creature which her imagination had painted in loathing and horror. A flash of brilliant scarlet, dabbed with black patches, was her impression of the beast. A head flat and reptilian, long, tubular, with movable nostrils and antennae at the end, framed two eyes which were familiar enough to her, for they were the orbs which had stared from the inside of the amber block. She had dreamed of those eyes.

But the reptile moved like a flash of red light, though she knew its bulk was great; it sprayed forth black mist from the appendages at the end of its nose, and the crumpling of canvas reached her ears as the beast endeavored to conceal itself on the opposite side of the block.

Marable had run to the other side of the mass. The air, rushing in from the windows, had cleared the mist, in spite of the new clouds the creature had emitted, and Betty could see for some feet in either direction now.

She walked, with stiff, frozen muscles, around to join Marable. As she came near to him, she saw him jerking off the entire canvas cover of the block to expose the horrible reptile to the light of day.

And now the two stood staring at the awful sight. The creature had flattened itself into the crevices and irregular surfaces of the block, but it was too large to hide in anything but a huge space. They saw before them its great bulk, bright red skin blotched with black, which rose and fell with the breathing of the reptile. Its long, powerful tail, tapering off from the fat, loathsome body, was curled around the bottom of the block.

"That's where it's been hidden, under the shroud. We've been within a few feet of it every moment we've been at work," said Marable, his voice dry. "There were many hiding places for it, but it chose the best. It came out only when there was comparative quiet, to get its food...."

"We—we must kill it," stammered the girl.

But she could not move. She was looking at the immense, cruel, lidless eyes, which balefully held her as a serpent paralyzes a bird. The tubular nostrils and antennae seemed to be sniffing at them, waving to and fro.

"See the white expanse of cornea, how large it is," whispered Marable. "The pupils are nothing but black slits now." The interest excited by this living fossil was almost enough to stifle the dread of the creature in the man.

But the girl saw the huge flat head and the crinkled tissue of the frilled mouth with its sucker disks.

Suddenly, from the central portion of the sucker-cup mouth issued a long, straight red fang.

The two drew back as the living fossil raised a short clawed leg.

"It has the thick body of an immense python and the clawed legs of a dinosaur," said Marable, speaking as though he were delivering a lecture. The sight, without doubt, fascinated him as a scientist. He almost forgot the danger.

"Oh, it's horrible," whispered the girl.

She clung to his arm. He went on talking. "It is some sort of terrestrial octopus...."

To the girl, it seemed that the living fossil was endless in length. Coil after coil showed

as the ripples passed along its body and the straight fang threatened them with destruction.

"See, it is armored," said Marable.

"Betty, no one has ever had such an experience as this, seen such a sight, and lived to tell of it. It must be ravenous with hunger, shut up in its amber cell inside the black fluid. I—"

A sharp, whistling hiss interrupted his speech. The reptile was puffing and swelling, and as it grew in bulk with the intake of the air, its enamel-like scales stood out like bosses on the great body. It spat forth a cloud of black, oily mist, and Marable came to himself at last.

He raised his revolver and fired at the creature, sending shot after shot from the heavy revolver into the head.

Betty Young screamed as the reptile reared up and made a movement toward them. Marable and the girl retreated swiftly, as the beast thumped to the floor with a thud and started at them, advancing with a queer, crawling movement.

It was between them and the door. Betty thrust her gun into Marable's hands, for his own was empty and he had hurled it at the monster.

"Hurry! Run for your life!" ordered Marable, placing himself between Betty and the reptile.

She would not leave him till he swerved to one side, going dangerously close to the beast and firing into its head. The rush of the flowing body stopped; it turned and pursued him, leaving the girl safe for the moment, but separated from Marable.

Luckily, on the smooth marble it could not get an efficient grip with its clawlike arms. It was clumsy in its gait, and for a time the man eluded it.

Betty Young, looking about for a weapon, calling for help at the top of her lungs, caught sight of a fireman's ax in a glass case on the wall. She ran over, smashed the glass with the small hammer, and took out the heavy ax.

Shot after shot reverberated through the big laboratory as Marable tried to stop the monster. Betty, bravely closing in from the rear, saw Marable leaping from side to side as the brute struck viciously at him time and again.

The creature had been emitting cloud after cloud of black fog, and the atmosphere, in spite of the open windows, was dim in its vicinity. Vaguely Betty heard shouts from the

far hall, but all she could do was to call out in return and run toward the horror.

Marable, out of breath, had climbed to the top of an amber block. Betty, close by, saw the reptile rear its bulk up into the air, until it was high enough to strike the man.

Before it could send forth its death-dealing fang to pin Marable to the block, however, Betty Young brought the ax down on its back with all her strength.

There was a sickening thud as the sharp weapon sunk deep into the fleshy back. She struck again, and the creature fell in folds, like a collapsing spring. It lashed back at her, but she leaped clear as it slashed in agony, thrashing about so that the whole room seemed to rock.

Marable came scrambling down the side of the block to help her. He was breathing hard, and she turned toward him; as Betty looked away, a portion of the scarlet tail hit her in the body and she fell, striking her head on the floor.

Marable reached down, seized the ax, and in a desperate frenzy hacked at the reptile's awful head. He leaped in and out like a terrier, sinking the ax deep into the neck and head of the beast. He gave the impression of slashing at heavy rubber, and Betty Young, trying to drag herself away from that dangerous body, heard his whistling breath.

They were almost hidden from one another now, in the mist which came from the thing's nostrils.

"Help, help!" screamed the girl, mustering her last strength in the despairing cry.

She saw Marable go down, then, as the reptile hit him a glancing blow with its body. When the powerful young fellow did not rise, the girl thought it was all over. The air really became black to her; she fainted and lay still.

When Betty Young opened her eyes, the air had cleared greatly, and she could see the familiar outlines of the paleontological laboratory and the bulks of the amber blocks. Her father was holding her head in his lap, and was bathing her temples with water.

"Darling," he said, "are you badly hurt?"

"No," she murmured faintly. "I'm—I'm all right. But—but Walter—did it—"

"He's all right," said her father. "The reptile was dying, and could do him no damage. We finished it off."

Then, Marable, covered with blood, which he was trying to wipe from his hands and

clothes, came and smiled down at her.

"Well," said Professor Young, "you two have mutilated a marvelous and unique specimen between you."

There were several men examining something nearby. Turning her eyes in their direction, Betty saw they were viewing the remains of the reptile.

Marable helped her to her feet, and stood with one arm about her. Professor Orling, the famous specialist on fossil reptiles, was speaking now, and the others listened.

"I think we will find it to be some sort of missing link between the dinosaurs and mososaurs. It is surely unbelievable that such a creature should be found alive; but perhaps it can be explained. It is related to the amphibians and was able to live in or out of the water. Now, we have many instances of reptiles such as lizards and toads penned up in solid rock but surviving for hundreds of years. Evidently this great reptile went through the same sort of experience. I would say that there has been some great upheaval of nature, that the reptile was caught in its prison of amber thousands and thousands of years ago. Through hibernation and perhaps a preservative drug it emitted in the black fluid, this creature has been able to survive its long imprisonment. Naturally, when it was released by the cutting away of part of the amber which penned it in, it burst its cell, ravenous with hunger. The fanglike tooth we see was its main weapon of attack, and it set upon the unfortunate watchman. After knocking him unconscious, its sucker-like fringe glued the mouth near the heart while the fang shot into the arteries and drew forth the body fluids. There is a great deal to be done with this valuable find, gentlemen. I would suggest that—"

Marable grunted. "Oh, hell," he murmured in Betty Young's ear. "To the devil with paleontology, Betty. You saved my life. Come out and let's get married. I love you."

The girl smiled up into his eyes. The scientists close by were listening fascinatedly to Orling's words, and had no time to watch the two young people, for they stared at the reptile's body as the great man went from section to section, lecturing upon one point after another.

"You've forgotten paleontology for a moment, thank goodness," said Betty. "I'm glad."

From some far reach of leagueless Space came a great pillar of flame to lay waste and terrorize the Earth.

"Yes, Betty dear. This terrible experience has shaken me, and I realized how much I love you when I saw you in danger. What an awful few minutes! If I had to live them over again, I don't think I could face them."

"Never mind," she murmured. "We are safe, Walter. After all, it's not every woman who is helped by a living fossil to make the man she loves realize he loves her!"