

# The Sleeper in the Well



*By Stephen J Dutton*

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Miles Borne has spent many years since the end of The Great War travelling the globe with his daughter. When he charts the steamship *Auckland* to take him around the islands of the Dutch East Indies though he discovers that it is possible for travel to broaden the human mind too much as an ancient evil is awoken.

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The steamship *Auckland* was making its way between the thousands of islands that made up the Dutch East Indies as while the man who had chartered it, Miles Borne, looked out over the side at the closest. In the years following the Great War Miles had spent a lot of time travelling through some of the most remote places in the world and had been to Africa, the Americas and now he had set his sights on Asia. By chartering a ship in New Zealand he had been able to travel at his own pace and go wherever he wished. Now his journey through the Dutch East Indies was drawing to a close, however and he was starting to consider where next he should visit.

"We should be back in Jakarta within a fortnight Hasan." he said to the guide he had hired. Hasan was familiar with many of the islands in this part of the region and spoke enough of the local languages to make him a capable translator as well. Hasan was about to reply when all of a sudden Miles' daughter Alice came rushing along the deck.

"Father!" she called out, "Father come quickly!"

"My dear, what's the matter?" Miles asked.

"It's Captain Baker and his men. They have guns."

"Guns? Whatever for? Come on girl, show me." Miles said and he hurried after Alice as she led him towards the prow of the ship.

"It's just up ahead." Alice said right before Eraka, the Maori crewman appeared through a hatch. In his hands the large man held an old Martini-Enfield rifle. Obsolete it may have been but it could still kill a man from several hundred yards away. Across his chest he wore a leather bandolier and Miles saw that it held extra ammunition in many of the small loops.

"Excuse me sir. Miss." he said, bowing his head as he moved past Miles and Alice, heading towards the aft deck.

"What is going here?" Miles said as he stepped through the hatchway and found himself in the presence of many of the ship's crew, both officers and men. There was a set of cupboards that ran along one wall of this compartment and though Miles had been in here many times during the voyage he had never seen fit to ask what was in them or why they were always kept locked. Now though he saw that they contained the ship's supply of weapons and Captain Baker and his first officer Collins were handing them out to the crew. Most of the weapons were old single shot Martini-Enfields like the one Miles had seen Eraka with, but there were also a few double barrelled shotguns and some Webley revolvers.

"Captain Baker," Miles said, "would you mind explaining why you are distributing arms to your men?"

"One of the lookouts spotted a boat from one of the nearby islands." Baker answered.

"So?" Miles said.

"So there's only one inhabited island around here and it's best to keep its inhabitants as far as way as possible Mister Borne." Collins added.

"I don't understand." Miles said.

"Go ask that native you've got working for you." Baker said, "The natives that live near here are known for kidnapping people and taking them back to their island. Rumour has it that they are sacrificed to some ancient god. Either that or the locals could be cannibals. But no-one knows for certain since none of them are seen again."

"But why haven't the government done anything to stop this?" Alice asked.

"No proof miss." one of the crewmen said just as he was handed a rifle and ammunition, "The Dutch have sent troops to the island but never found any trace of the people who have supposed to have been taken there."

The captain then took one of the Webley revolvers and a small box of ammunition for it from one of the cupboards and handed them both to Miles.

"Do you know how to use this?" he asked.

"Of course. I carried one for three years in Belgium." Miles answered, "Are we close enough to this island to see it?"

"Aye, we should be." Captain Baker told him.

"Then I want to see it." Miles said and the captain nodded.

"If you'll come with me sir." he said. Then he looked at his crew, "The rest of you know what to do. Give them one warning shot and if they don't turn around then the next shots should be aimed right at them."

Taking a shotgun and handful of shells from among the supply of weapons Captain Baker then led Miles back towards the deck at the stern of the ship where Eraka and Hasan both stood looking out over the ocean.

"The island is over there." he said, pointing towards a dull shape just about visible on the horizon. Then he took the binoculars from around his neck and passed them to Miles.

"Thank you captain." Miles said before raising the binoculars to his eyes and looking towards the island. From this distance the island looked like any of the others in the area, mainly covered in tropical jungle it looked uninhabited.

"I don't see any signs of settlement." he said.

"The native village is on the far side." Captain Baker told him.

"I want to visit it." Miles said, lowering the binoculars and returning them to the captain.

"No Mister Borne sir, those are bad people sir." Hasan responded before the captain could speak.

"Do they have firearms Captain Baker?" Miles asked, glancing at the captain.

"Not that I know of." he replied, shaking his head, "Mainly spears but some bows and arrows. Traders avoid them."

"Then we should be fine. Even with the weapons we have we will out gun them easily if they choose to attack." Miles said.

"But Mister Borne sir, all the stories say they will kill us. Their god-" Hasan protested but Miles was in no mood to tolerate his guide's defiance.

"Hasan!" he snapped, "I am paying for your services and also for your passage aboard this vessel. Now if you no longer wish to be in my employ then I am sure that the good captain will be willing to set you off at the closest inhabited island."

"Which happens to be where we're heading now anyway." Captain Baker added.

"So are you staying Hasan?" Miles said.

"Yes Mister Borne sir." the guide responded.

"Excellent. Captain, please adjust our course."

"Of course Mister Borne."

Smoke rising from cooking fires gave Miles the first indication that the *Auckland* was approaching the native islander settlement and he rushed to the side of the ship with a set binoculars so that he could get a good look as soon as the settlement came into view.

"Father what can you see?" Alice asked, "Are they cooking people?"

"Not as far as I can see my dear." Miles told her as he saw natives cooking fish over fires near the shore where there were several primitive boats lined up where they had been pulled out of the water far enough that they would not simply wash away with the tide.

An area of the jungle had been cleared to make room for the settlement and Miles could see that the buildings were made from the usual mix of wood, woven vines, mud and stone. There was only a limited number of natives on the beach as Miles studied it but from the number and size of the structures he could see it looked as if the village could contain several hundred people. As the *Auckland* continued to round the island its approach came to the attention of the islanders and they began to gather by the shore. Miles was grateful to see that this remote tribe still wore clothing even if it was limited to loin cloths and a few necklaces. From among the growing crowd of people on the beach a number of armed tribesmen appeared, moving to the front and Miles saw that as Captain Baker had said they were armed with just spears and bows and arrows.

One of the tribesmen raised his bow, aiming it towards the *Auckland* but before he could loose an arrow and provoke the crew into responding with a volley of rifle fire another of the natives, this one wearing a more ornate furred cloak in addition to his loincloth, forcibly pushed the bow away and the native lowered his weapon.

"That's encouraging." Miles said, "They don't seem eager to start a fight."

"Can we go ashore father?" Alice asked and Miles hesitated. Since the moment he had decided to come here he had intended to go ashore with Hasan and a party of armed men from the *Auckland* but the idea of risking his daughter on an island rumoured to be inhabited by savage tribesmen had not occurred to him. However, having already lectured Hasan on the advantage offered by their weapons, Miles could not think of a reason why he should refuse Alice's request.

"I suppose so Alice." he said, "But you must promise me that you will not wander away from the rest of us. The crew and I can only protect you if you are with us."

"Of course father." Alice replied, "How soon can we go?"

A boat was lowered over the side of the *Auckland* and the shore party then climbed aboard. The party was well armed, with six crewmen carrying rifles as well as first officer Collins who not only had a flare pistol in a holster on his belt but also one of the ship's shotguns slung over his shoulder. Miles still carried the revolver he had been given by Captain Baker while Alice and Hasan were the only members of the party who were unarmed.

Four of the six crewmen manned the boat's oars, rowing away from the *Auckland* and towards the island shore. Rather than take the chance on coming ashore at the settlement and being immediately surrounded by the natives, the crewmen rowed to a spot several hundred yards away where they could disembark from the boat in safety.

"Looks like the chief is here to meet us." Collins said as a group of natives led by the man wearing the cloak came walking towards them and he closed the breech of his shotgun while leaving it pointed away from the natives so as not to appear too threatening.

"Hasan, greet them." Miles said.

"Yes Mister Borne sir." Hasan replied nervously and he stepped forwards before addressing the natives in one of the local languages. Immediately the chief brought the rest of the natives to a halt and then when Hasan had stopped speaking he responded, moving his arm around to indicate the island. Then Hasan looked at Miles to translate, "Sir I told them that we are visitors who have heard of this island and wish to see how people live here. I told them that we mean no harm and will not interfere in their lives but can protect ourselves if attacked."

"And what did the head man say in return?" Collins asked.

"He said that all of this island belongs to The Sleeper and that he is the high priest of this being." Hasan answered.

"The Sleeper? So if he's a high priest does that mean that this Sleeper is their god?" Miles asked.

"I think so Mister Borne sir."

"Sounds like the tales about sacrifices could be right." Collins commented.

"Tell them that we want to look around their village." Miles said.

"Eraka, Dunn, stay with the boat." Collins ordered while Hasan translated Miles' request and the high priest beckoned the party towards him.

"He agrees Mister Borne sir." Hasan said and Miles nodded before he started to walk along the beach.

Though the party from the *Auckland* was following the natives who had come to greet them, they were careful to keep a safe distance between themselves and the natives just in case they did turn out to be hostile.

The village itself looked much like any of the others Miles had already seen on his travels around the Dutch East Indies although there did not seem to be even the smallest object from the outside world present. Most native tribes would acquire some small objects from travellers but this particular tribe seemed to have been able to remain totally cut off from the outside world and Miles considered how the tales of cannibalism and sacrifice must have contributed to this.

As the party continued to advance towards the village the high priest began to talk again and Hasan translated what he had to say.

"This is where we live. For many generations we have lived on this island to serve The Sleeper and our men go out onto the sea to find offerings for him when the moon is dark." Hasan explained.

"Offerings?" Alice said, "Fish?"

"He did not say Miss Borne." Hasan replied, "He says only that the people here all serve The Sleeper."

The priest led the party through the village right to the edge of the jungle and here he halted in front of a small building that was open at the front and raised his arms, spreading them apart.

"Father that's horrible!" Alice exclaimed when she saw what the building contained.

Inside the simple structure was a stone plinth with sloping sides and sat on the top was an idol that looked as if it was made of copper or some other similar metal. The creature depicted in the idol stood on a mass of tentacles with a vaguely egg-shaped torso sat on top of this with a ring of what looked like eyes all around the widest part.

"Behold The Sleeper." Hasan said as the priest began to speak, "He who waits for when the stars are right. Then he will awaken and call forth his lord Great -" then Hasan stopped and frowned.

"What's wrong man? What's he saying?" Miles demanded.

"I apologise Mister Borne sir, but what he is saying makes no sense." Hasan replied and Miles and the others listened directly to what the priest was saying. Though they could not understand any of the words it was obvious to them that he was repeating the same phrase over and over again.

"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!"

"That statue doesn't look right." Collins said.

"Of course not, it's disgusting." Alice said.

"What do you mean Mister Collins?" Miles asked.

"Well look around you. Do you see anything, anything at all, that's made of metal around here?" Collins pointed out, "These people are living in the stone age Mister Borne. They can't even hammer out an iron knife, let alone produce a detailed metal statue like that."

"Hasan, ask them where that statue came from." Miles said and Hasan repeated the question to the priest before translating his answer.

"He says that the statue came from the stars with The Sleeper."

"Someone probably traded it to them years ago." Collins said and Miles nodded.

"Well this little shrine doesn't look like the sort of place that human sacrifice would be carried out." he said, "Perhaps we should take a look further inshore." then he looked at Hasan, "Hasan, please tell the high priest that we would like to explore his island some more."

Hasan spoke to the priest and immediately the natives' demeanour changed as a group of armed natives moved to block the shore party's path into the jungle while the priest shouted at Hasan.

"My apologies Mister Borne sir, but the priest says that no outsider may enter the sacred ground of The

Sleeper except to feed him." Hasan said.

"Why do I get the feeling that he doesn't mean they'll be carrying food for this Sleeper?" Collins muttered.

"No, it does sound rather threatening doesn't it." Miles replied.

"But father, wouldn't the Dutch have gone into the jungle when they came to investigate the island?" Alice asked.

"Perhaps they just didn't bother asking permission." Miles said, "Hasan, tell the priest that we will respect his wishes and are returning to our ship."

"Yes Mister Borne sir." Hasan replied.

"But father, I thought you wanted to find out what was happening here on this island." Alice protested, "Now you're just giving up?"

"We'll find out what's happening here soon enough my dear. But for now we should return to the *Auckland*." Miles told her.

"Did your little excursion tell you everything you wanted to know Mister Borne?" Captain Baker asked as Miles climbed back aboard the *Auckland*.

"Unfortunately not captain. In fact I'm going to need the services of your crew again tonight." Miles replied.

"Tonight? Why tonight?" the captain said.

"Because the high priest of the local tribe told us that they make offerings to their god, something they call The Sleeper when the moon is dark." Miles told him.

"A new moon you mean?" Captain Baker said and Miles nodded.

"Quite. And if I'm not mistaken then there is a new moon tonight." he said.

"That's right." Collins commented.

"In which case captain, I'd like you to move the ship out of sight of the settlement so that we can send another party to the island tonight under cover of darkness." Miles said.

"It'll be done as soon as the boat is secured sir." Captain Baker replied, looking towards the crewmen stood at the edge of the deck now lifting the small boat out of the water.

The lights aboard the *Auckland* remained extinguished when the sun went down to make it harder to spot from the shore. Though the village was out of sight there was no guarantee that there were none of the natives elsewhere on the island. Captain Baker ordered every man not going ashore armed and onto the deck to act as lookouts just in case the natives decided to launch any of their boats now that the *Auckland* was out of sight. It would do the shore party no good to accomplish their aim of uncovering the secrets held by the island if they returned only to find the *Auckland* occupied by the natives.

Both of the *Auckland's* rowing boats were used to deploy the second, larger shore party that consisted of just over a dozen men including both Miles, Hasan and First Officer Collins again. The party was well armed and equipped, carrying rifles and shotguns as well as ropes, hand axes and lanterns so that they could be ready for any eventuality. Like Miles, many of the *Auckland's* crew had fought in the Great War and so they knew how to take orders and fight if that was what was needed of them. As with the *Auckland* itself, the lanterns carried by the shore party remained unlit while they rowed ashore and in each boat two men faced the shore and aimed their rifles towards it, ready to pick off any native warriors they spotted.

The boats reached the shore of the island without being seen and their occupants dragged them out of the water.

"Eraka and Thomas, stay here with the boats." Collins said softly, "Don't hesitate to shoot if anyone tries to get close."

"Yes sir." Eraka replied and then Collins turned to Miles.

"So now where to Mister Borne?" he asked.

"The village." Miles answered, "We'll get as close as we can without being seen and then wait to see what the natives do now that the sun has set. I don't fancy the idea of randomly wandering around this jungle in the dark."

Moving cautiously through the jungle, the shore party made its way through the jungle towards the native village, keeping close to the treeline so that they could see the beach and had a reference to work from if they needed to turn back towards their boats. Collins brought the party to a halt when he saw lights in the darkness and he pointed them out to Miles.

"Looks like we got here just in time." he said softly, "I think the natives are on the move."

"Then we follow them." Miles responded, "We'll stay back out of sight and see where they lead us to."

The shore party followed the natives as far as a clearing about half a mile from the village where the high priest stood back as the men accompanying him began to brush dirt and leaves from the ground to expose several large wooden panels. At the same time there came muffled shouts from beneath these and Miles looked at Hasan for a translation.

"Well?" he asked.

"Mister Borne sir, there are prisoners here." Hasan said, "They are begging to be released, offering gold and

other valuables in exchange for their freedom.

"This explains why the Dutch didn't find anything." Collins commented, "All the people who disappeared were hidden underground." then he looked at the rest of the shore party, "Okay men, stand by."

"No!" Miles hissed, "Not yet. I want to see what's going to happen. If the natives look like they are about to harm any of the prisoners then we'll intervene but until then we just watch."

"As you wish sir." Collins replied.

Watching as the natives took a number of their prisoners from the underground holding pens, the shore party saw that each of them was bound with his hands behind his back and a length of bamboo tied under their arms so that they could not straighten them enough to be able to slide their hands under their feet and get them in front of themselves. The length of these pieces of bamboo was also long enough to allow the natives to use them as handholds with which to force their captives to move forwards through the jungle as they were led away from the underground pens. Miles counted seventeen of them in all and from the shouts coming from the pens as the natives covered them over again he could tell that there were even more of them still being held captive underground.

Again the shore party followed the natives through the jungle from a distance, using the light given off by their torches to enable them to keep the natives in sight even in the dark of the moonless night. The natives continued until they reached another, smaller clearing in the jungle and again some of them began to uncover something that had been buried there while others stuck their burning torches into the ground in a ring around it. This illuminated the ground in the centre and revealed a flat stone ring that had been concealed beneath the camouflage. Using his binoculars, Miles saw that this ring was covered in some form of carving and that it surrounded a hole in the ground about two yards across.

The priest then pointed to one of the captives and he was picked up, kicking and screaming as he was dragged towards the stone ring and the hole at its centre while the priest began to speak loudly and clearly.

"He is dedicating this man to The Sleeper so that he might continue his slumber until the stars are right."

Hasan said quietly without being asked for a translation and then Miles heard the priest repeat words that Hasan could not translate but that he had heard before.

"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!"

Continuing to chant, the priest drew a long knife and held it up high, prompting a scream from the captive as the terrified man looked up at the weapon. However, before the priest could bring the knife down the ceremony was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a gunshot as Miles fired his revolver into the air.

"Stop this madness!" he yelled out as he rushed forwards.

"Come on men." Collins said and the rest of the shore party also revealed their presence as they advanced behind Miles with their weapons held at the ready.

The high priest immediately began to shout at Miles and Hasan told him what the priest was saying.

"He is very angry sir. He says that if we do not allow them to continue with their ceremony then The Sleeper will awaken early."

"Tell them that I have no intention of letting them murder any of these men." Miles said and Hasan translated the statement for the high priest.

Upon hearing this one of the natives stepped forwards to hurl a spear at Miles but one of the shore party saw him and fired his rifle. The bullet struck the native in his chest and from this close range it passed right through him to hit another man behind him. The first native fell dead while the one behind him was merely injured and staggered back, dropping his spear and screaming in pain as he clutched at his wounded shoulder while the sailor who had fired the shot quickly ejected the spent case from his rifle and loaded another round from his bandolier as quickly as he could.

"Hold fire!" Collins ordered when it looked like his men might be about to unleash a full volley into the crowd of natives.

"Hasan, tell them to back away from their prisoners." Miles said.

Hasan translated Miles' order but as the natives began to slowly retreat, leaving their captives where they were the high priest waved his knife towards Miles and shouted at him.

"What's he saying?" Miles asked.

"Mister Borne sir, he says that he will not do you the favour of killing you before he offers you up to The Sleeper." Hasan replied.

"That's a risk I'm willing to take." Miles said and then he looked around at the rest of the shore party, "Mister Collins, have your men release these captives, we need to get them back to the *Auckland*."

"Yes mister Borne." Collins responded and he waved his men forwards.

Hurrying up to the captives, some of the shore party's members began to cut through the ropes binding them while others kept watch for the natives returning. As soon as they were cut loose the captives went to embrace their rescuers and Hasan explained that they were expressing their gratitude and promising to reward them as best they could. One of the freed captives pulled a gold ring from his finger and held it out towards Miles.

"Mister Borne sir he is offering to pay you for saving him." Hasan said.

"Tell him he can keep his ring, I don't need paying." Miles said. Then he looked at Collins, "What do you make of this hole Mister Collins?" he asked and the two men looked closely at the flat stone ring.

"If I didn't know better then I'd it was some sort of well." Collins replied.

"If you didn't know better?" Miles commented and Collins nodded.

"Obviously you don't throw bodies into a well unless you're looking to poison everyone that drinks from it." he said.

"My thoughts exactly. Plus the carvings around the edge are interesting. They don't look like any of the local alphabets I know of. What about you Hasan?"

"No Mister Borne sir. I have never seen such things before." Hasan answered.

"In the absence of a suitable camera perhaps we should take some rubbings of them." Miles said, "After we've dealt with more pressing matters of course."

"Such as?" Collins asked.

"There are more captives in those pens." Miles reminded him, "We'll have to get these men to safety and then go back for them. In the mean time we should leave a couple of your men here to make sure that the natives don't come back."

"I'll volunteer for that sir." one of the Auckland's crew, a man with greying hair and a beard said.

"Very good Ford." Collins said.

"And young Cooper can stay as well." Ford added.

"Me?" one of the younger members of the shore party said. Cooper was barely out of his teens and was easily the smallest member of the shore party.

"Yes Cooper, you. You're too small for the natives to be able to hit with those spears and arrows." Ford said.

"Very good. Ford and Cooper will stay here." Collins said and he drew the flare pistol from his belt and passed it to Ford, "Take this. If you do come under attack then fire a flare and fall back. Stay out of sight of the natives and harass them to-"

"Yes sir, I understand." Ford interrupted as he took the flare pistol and tucked it into his own belt.

Ford and Cooper watched as the rest of the shore party disappeared into the darkness of the jungle and Cooper then looked at Ford and frowned at the larger man.

"Why did you say that I'd stay here with you?" he said, "What if those natives come back?"

"They're not coming back. Even if they did we'd hear them coming in time to do something about it. In the mean time I've got a plan that I need your help with."

"My help? Why mine?"

"Yes Cooper, your help. You're the smallest of us so you'll be easiest to lower down that hole."

Cooper's jaw dropped and he turned his head towards the hole.

"What the hell are you talking about Ford? Why would I go down that hole?" he exclaimed and Ford grinned.

"Because there's money in it for the pair of us. Possibly quite a bit." he said and Cooper frowned.

"How do you figure that?" he asked.

"Because one of those guys we rescued tried to give Mister Borne a gold ring and the one who only just avoided getting run through by that witch doctor was wearing a ring as well. I saw rings, pendants and even the odd gold tooth among that lot and the natives didn't seem to be bothered about them."

"So what?"

"So if all the others they chucked down that well had jewellery on them, that means that it's still down there just waiting for me to lower you down and get it. Now give me your rope."

Both Ford and Cooper had long lengths of rope slung across their chests and both men lifted them over their heads.

"Here you go." Cooper said as he handed over his rope.

"Good. Now keep watch for the natives and don't hesitate to shoot any of them you lay eyes on." Ford said and he then proceeded to secure both lengths of rope to a nearby tree. The other end of one of these was then thrown into the hole while the other was tossed towards Cooper.

"Now wrap that around your waist and I'll lower you down." Ford said and Cooper nodded obediently, resting his rifle against a tree beside Ford's as he tied the rope around himself, "And don't forget your lantern, it's bloody dark down there and you'll need to see all that gold."

With the lantern lit and attached to his belt Cooper used the rope thrown down the hole as a handhold and began to climb down the inside while Ford remained on the surface and released a small amount of rope at a time while holding on tight to the rest so that it would act as a safety line if Cooper lost his grip or footing.

"How deep down does this hole go?" Cooper called out as he continued to climb but could not see the bottom below him.

"No idea. But the faster you climb down the better." Ford shouted back down the hole.

Cooper continued to climb until all of a sudden he saw the end of the rope where it had coiled at the bottom of the hole. But of any bodies thrown down here or, more importantly to Ford and Cooper, their valuables there was no sign.



"Ford, there's nothing down here." Cooper shouted.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this hole is empty. There's just mud at the bottom. Maybe the natives clean it out."

"Don't be stupid. Feel about in that mud. The gold must be buried under it or something." Ford told Cooper and the smaller man climbed down to the very bottom of the hole and placed a foot on the muddy bottom, feeling it compress beneath his foot.

Standing by the edge of the hole on the surface, Ford felt the rope go slack as Cooper's weight was taken off it and he placed it on the ground as he peered into the hole himself. Looking down the hole he could make out the light being given off by Cooper's lantern but nothing else.

"Have you found anything yet Cooper?" he called out down the hole.

"Hold on, I think that there's something beneath this-" Cooper began and then there was a sudden scream and the light from the lantern suddenly vanished.

"Cooper!" Ford called out, "Cooper are you okay down there?"

Getting no response he reached down and picked up the rope by his feet again and started to pull it back up. When the rope went taught Ford pulled as hard as he could but despite the small size of Cooper he found himself unable to pull the man back up the hole. All of a sudden Ford felt a sharp tug on the rope in the other direction and he was pulled off his feet, landing face down on the ground right at the edge of the hole.

"Cooper what are you playing at?" Ford shouted but once again there was no response from down the hole and Ford realised that the rope was still being pulled into the hole. Then he realised that it was looped around his leg. As quickly as he could Ford reached for the rope around his leg to try and remove it but he was not fast enough and he let out a cry as the rope was pulled tight, suddenly digging into his flesh as he was dragged towards the hole. In an attempt to save himself from being pulled into the hole he reached out and grabbed hold of the other rope and it pulled taught against the tree it was tied around. However, Ford's grip was not strong enough to resist the pull from inside the hole and he let out another cry as he was dragged backwards, the rope cutting through the skin of his hands and he too vanished into the hole.

It took two trips of each boat to transfer the freed captives to the *Auckland* and return the boats to shore and in that time Miles and Collins had plenty of time to discuss how they were going to proceed.

"We need all the manpower we can get so everyone needs to go this time, we won't be leaving anyone to watch the boats. We'll head back to the well first and collect Ford and Cooper." Miles said, "From there we'll head back to the underground cages where the prisoners are being kept."

"I agree. That way if the natives are getting a new lot of sacrifices ready then we'll be guaranteed of heading them off." Collins agreed.

There then came a low rumbling sound and the ground beneath their feet shook for a few brief moments along with the sound.

"An earthquake?" Collins said as the shore party looked around in confusion.

"I can't think of any other explanation." Miles responded, "Fortunately it doesn't seem to have been too strong. Now let's get going. I'd like to be done before the sun comes up."

"Ford!" Collins shouted into the darkness as the shore party approached the location of the natives' ceremony, anxious not to be fired on by his own men but there was no answer, "Ford! Cooper! Where are you?"

"We may be too late. The natives could have come back. We should hurry." Miles said and the shore party began to dash forwards until they reached the clearing and found it deserted.

"What happened here?" Collins said.

"There are rifles over here sir." Eraka said as the Maori found the two Martini-Enfields leant up against a tree.

"And ropes leading to the well." Collins added and he crept closer to the hole to peer into it.

"Well whatever happened to them we can't afford to waste time looking for them." Miles said, "If they've just wandered off then we'll find them when we're done. On the other hand if the natives have got to them then we need to avenge them. Now let's go. The cells were this way."

The shore party started to make its way back towards the natives' underground prison, watching for any signs of the natives coming in the other direction. Along the way the party halted suddenly as the ground shook just as it had earlier only this time the tremor was noticeably stronger.

"There aren't any volcanoes in this area are there?" Miles asked, looking at Hasan.

"No Mister Borne sir. There are none." he answered as the ground stopped shaking.

"We need to keep going." Miles said and he waved the party onwards.

Continuing through the jungle the party saw lights in the darkness that could only have been created by the torches carried by the natives and soon after the first native warrior armed with a spear appeared. Miles fired his revolver at the native, shooting the man dead before he could attempt to hurl his spear. This provoked more gunfire from the rest of the party as rifles were fired into the darkness and in return arrows and spears came flying back towards them.

"Stop firing! Check your targets!" Collins ordered, "We don't want to hit any of the prisoners."

"Hasan, tell them to release their captives to us and then we'll leave." Miles said and Hasan shouted the offer at the natives. In return the voice of the high priest called out from the darkness.

"Mister Borne sir, the high priest orders us to leave. He says that because of us The Sleeper is already stirring and they must pacify his hunger." Hasan translated and then the ground shook again.

"Those tremors are getting stronger." Collins commented.

"Yes and these primitives must think that it's their heathen god waking up." Miles replied, "We need to press on."

Collins waved the shore party forwards and the shapes of the natives became visible by the light of their own torches. Now that they could identify their opponents the sailors from the *Auckland* opened fire and this time Collins joined them as well, the two loud blasts from his shotgun distinct from the sharper 'cracks' of the rifles that the majority of the shore party were armed with.

The natives returned fire with their bows and there was a scream from one of the shore party that was cut suddenly short as he was shot in the throat by an arrow. Some of the natives charged out of the darkness, screaming at the shore party as they attempted to run them through with spears. Most were simply cut down by rifle rounds or shotgun blasts, however a few were able to get through these volleys of gunfire and the sailors they faced were generally still in the process of reloading their weapons. This did not make the crewmen of the *Auckland* helpless though, their rifles were heavy and well built enough that they could be pressed into service as a functional club if needed and more than one of the natives was brought down with his skull smashed by a blow from a rifle stock.

Miles himself spotted the high priest and he fired his revolver at the man, missing him by a narrow margin. He attempted to fire another shot but found that his weapon was now empty and he cursed himself for having made such an elementary mistake. Had he done such a thing in the trenches of Europe then it would have undoubtedly cost him his life but fortunately for him the native leader had no ranged weapon with which to shoot him. Instead while Miles ejected the spent cases from his weapon and hurried to reload it the high priest charged towards him with his sacrificial dagger held high. Just in time Miles snapped his revolver closed and fired a shot into the high priest's abdomen. The native screamed as he dropped his knife and clutched at his wound before Miles hit him a second time. Falling backwards to the ground the high priest looked up at Miles and gasped his last words at him. Miles understood none of what was said but he did recognise the last few words that the man repeated before he died.

"Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!"

Another tremor then hit the island and both natives and sailors struggled to remain standing because of the strength of this. The natives began to panic at this point, those who were in close combat with members of the shore party attempted to disengage while other just turned and fled. Most of those closer to the shore party were shot in the back as they turned but a large number still managed to escape into the darkness.

"Quickly, free the captives." Collins yelled, looking at the prisoners who had been abandoned by the natives when they fled.

Members of the shore party ran forwards, drawing knives to cut through the ropes binding the prisoners who were now calling out to be rescued but before any of them could be freed the ground shook violently and everyone was knocked off their feet. Before the shore party could recover from this the ground beneath them exploded upwards as an enormous mass broke the surface. This threw rock, trees and men into the air and there were screams from men as they fell back to earth uncontrollably.

More than twice as thick as the largest of tree trunks on the island, the long object was coated in mud but where this fell away it revealed a dark fleshy tentacle that stretched from much further inland out to the coast.

"What in God's name is that?" Collins exclaimed as he looked up at the massive tentacle.

"My guess would be the natives' god." Miles replied.

The tentacle then came back down to earth with a crash as it smashed through more trees before it landed beside the deep trench it had created when it burst out of the ground. The tentacle then moved rapidly sideways and Eraka and two other sailors were struck, all three men being hurled through the air.

"Open fire!" Collins yelled and the remaining members of the shore party began to shoot at the tentacle, reloading their rifles as rapidly as they could between shots. The tentacle was far too massive for this to have any noticeable effect, however and it moved towards the shore party again to swat several more men as if they were insects.

"Back to the boats!" Miles shouted, "We need to get out of here!"

The survivors of the shore party needed no further prompting to turn and run. There was no attempt to maintain any sort of organisation among the shore party now as each man ran back towards the beach where their boats had been left. However, just as the beach came into view the ground began to shake again and another of the massive tentacles burst out of the ground, hurling several of the party aside as it made its appearance. The tentacle then came back down to the ground, landing right on top of the two boats and crushing them both into splinters.

"The boats!" Collins exclaimed when he saw this.

"Now what do we do?" another of the party asked, looking at his superior officer.  
"The village." Miles said, "There were boats at the village. We can use them to get back to the *Auckland*.  
Come on men, hurry!"

The *Auckland's* rear deck was crowded with the freed prisoners and when they witnessed the tentacles appear from under the ground they began to panic.

"Somebody get down there and calm those people down!" Baker snapped, "Shoot some of them if you have to."

"Captain Baker, what's happening?" Alice asked as she burst onto the *Auckland's* bridge while he used his binoculars to study the island as tentacles began to emerge from beneath it.

"I don't know." he replied, "I've never seen anything like this." then he let out a gasp as he saw a large clump of earth with a tree extending from one side come flying down towards the ship and moments later this struck the crowded rear deck and there were screams, "We're hit!" Baker exclaimed as more debris began to rain down on the *Auckland*.

The ship rocked under another large impact and Baker caught Alice as she fell.

"Captain Baker, what shall we do?"

"Abandon ship." Baker told her before he rushed to the wireless set located at the rear of the bridge and he picked up the microphone, "Mayday! Mayday! This is the *Auckland*. We have taken critical damage and are abandoning ship. Our co-ordinates are-" and then a piece of rock more than twenty feet across struck the *Auckland's* bridge and smashed it and everyone inside into pieces.

Emerging from the jungle into the village, Miles fired his revolver at a native and then looked around.

"The boats are over there." he said, pointing to the beach.

"But what are the natives doing?" Collins asked and he pointed towards their shrine where it looked like most of the survivors were now gathered and bowing down to their idol. Even from this distance they could be heard chanting.

"Cthulhu fhtagn. Cthulhu fhtagn."

"Never mind the savages man, let's take those boats." Miles replied to Collins and he started to run towards the beach.

He had got only a few yards when he felt a familiar trembling and he came to a sudden halt just as the ground ahead of him burst open as yet another tentacle broke the surface, destroying several structures as it headed upwards. When the tentacle came back down it crushed more of the shore party as well. The tentacle then moved sideways and Miles threw himself to the ground just in time to avoid being struck by it. As soon as the tentacle had passed overhead Miles looked up and he saw that he was now alone. Collins had been impaled by a wooden strut from one of the structures while the last of the other sailors had been crushed under the weight of the tentacle.

Getting to his feet Miles continued to run, hoping that at least one of the native boats would be small enough that he could operate it on his own but when he reached the beach he found that like the boats from the *Auckland* the natives' boats had all been smashed by the waking Sleeper. Miles looked around, hoping to find some other small water craft that was still intact but there was nothing that looked even remotely seaworthy.

Looking towards the horizon Miles watched in horror as an enormous bulk hundreds of feet across pulled itself up out of the ground and he could not fail to recognise the bulbous body with its ring of eyes as the creature depicted by the statue in the village shrine. Transfixed on this monstrous creature that defied all scientific explanation Miles found himself rooted to the spot and his jaw dropped open as he continued to watch it emerge from its underground resting place. The tentacle that had just emerged from beneath the village then swiped across the settlement and Miles threw himself to the ground again as its remaining structures were smashed to pieces. This included the shrine dedicated to The Sleeper and when Miles felt something hard strike his side he reached out to grab hold of it only to find that he was now holding the mysterious metal statue of The Sleeper. Then he looked upwards again just as the massive tentacle blocked out what little light came from the moonless sky as it came down once more.

The patrol boat from the Royal Netherlands Navy made its way slowly through the water. Given the partial nature of the distress signal sent by the *Auckland* it had taken some time for the location where the ship went down to be determined but now pieces of wreckage and bodies were being fished out of the water by the Dutch sailors. What confused the vessel's commander though was the apparent disappearance of the island that his charts suggested should have been at this location as well. Some of the debris found floating in the ocean obviously came from jungle vegetation but there was no jungle covered island present for it to have come from. The only logical answer seemed to be that the charts were incorrect and that the vegetation had been carried aboard the *Auckland* when it was destroyed.

"This one's alive!" one of the Dutch sailors called out and the patrol boat's captain came running to see what

he had found. There the sailor who had called out along with a second one were in the process of pulling a large piece of wreckage towards the patrol boat's hull with boat hooks. The captain frowned when he saw the wreckage given that it looked more like part of a wall from a tribal hut than the hull of a modern steamship. There was a man lying on top of this wreckage and his clothing had the look of being of high quality had it not been in the water for more than a day. When the wreckage was close enough one of the sailors climbed down the side of the patrol boat to wrap a rope around the man so he could be pulled out of the water onto the deck and only then did the captain see that he was clutching a strange metal statue to his chest. "What's he saying?" the captain asked when he heard the man muttering something and he and the two sailors leant in closer. Meanwhile Miles opened his eyes and looked back up at them. "Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn! Cthulhu fhtagn!" he screamed at them.