

# A SINGLE HAIR

By FRED M. WHITE

Illustrated by Charles Crombie



ALFRED BARNES, eke of London University, M.D., looked despairingly out to sea. He was seated on the edge of a rotten verandah of a tumble-down bungalow on the margin of the Coral

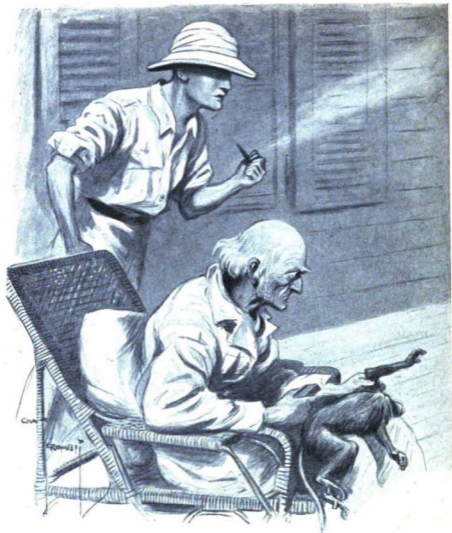
Sea down there, in the South Pacific, on the outer fringe of civilisation. In front of him was a stretch of white sand, with the whiter surf beyond, creamy and mantling in the sunshine, and behind him the swaying plumes of the palms, or, at least, they would have been the swaying plumes of the palms but for the fact that the little islet of Omolo lay in the centre of the anti-cyclone, and not a breath of air came to Barnes's almost atrophied lungs. He could feel the perspiration trickling down his forehead as he sat there cursing his fate and the imps of chance that had brought him all the way from London and Janet Blyth.

It was not his fault entirely. He had put his little capital into a practice largely built on bogus ledgers and apocryphal patients, so that, at the end of a year, instead of a comfortable living, with Janet by his side, he had found himself on the verge of bankruptcy.

When everything was disposed of, he found himself facing the world with a five-pound note, and looking a black future squarely into its forbidding eyes. Then, in a fit of despair, he had sold himself to Mark Gride, the eminent pathologist, for three thousand pounds. With the money went Barnes into practically three years' penal servitude, though he had not grasped it at the time. He had talked the matter over with Janet, and it had seemed to her that the opening was a good one. It meant, of course, three years' separation, with fifteen thousand miles of sea

between them; but then Wilfred would be able to save every penny of the money, and, when he came back, be in a position to buy another practice more promising than the first one. And so Barnes had set his teeth grimly and come all that way to a little island on the edge of the Solomon Group, with the firm determination to make the best of things; and here he was, at the end of the first year, cursing his bonds and wishing, from the bottom of his heart, that Fate had never brought him in contact with the cold-blooded brute and unfeeling savage who was known to men as Mark Gride. Far better had he stayed in England and accepted a job as *locum* to some sixpenny doctor in the East End of London. And he had known something of Gride's reputation, too. The man in question had had a brilliant career at Cambridge and University College, where he had towered over his fellows like the intellectual giant that he undoubtedly was. But then he was ill-disciplined, intolerant, and brutal in his manner, and so callous in his methods as to bring him, in the course of time, before the Council of the College of Surgeons. There had been a pretty big scandal over some vivisection atrocities, and it was only Gride's amazing record that had saved him from professional disgrace. Fortunately for him, he was the possessor of ample private means, a mad enthusiast as far as his profession was concerned, a daring experimentalist and pioneer, and so it came about that he shook the dust of London from his feet and migrated to a region where he would be able to pursue his investigations in an atmosphere of greater freedom and less responsibility. And when he had offered the post of assistant to Barnes, the latter had jumped at the offer immediately.

The conditions were pretty stringent, too, though the pay was good enough. Barnes was to have three thousand pounds for three years' services, the money to be paid in one sum at the termination of the contract. If



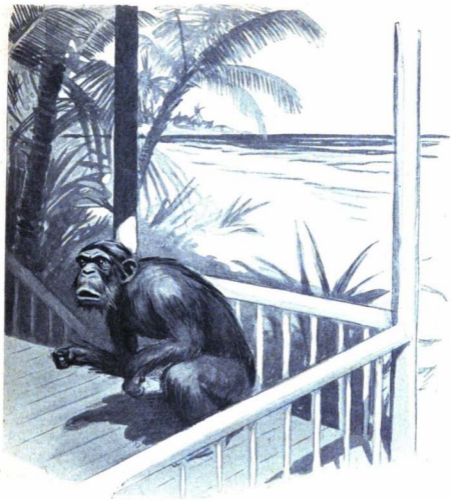
“Look at Crim! Take care of yourself!”

in the meantime Barnes decided to cancel the agreement, then he was to get nothing except his passage home. And if in the meantime anything happened to Gride, then the whole of the money was to be payable at once through the latter's solicitors in London, who had the necessary authority to deal with the case.

And then there followed for Barnes a year of hideous nightmare that racked his soul and filled him with the lust for slaughter a dozen times a day. For out there, in Omolo, Gride could do as he liked. He had his

menagerie of beasts and reptiles, monkeys and the like, upon which he experimented with a cold-blooded malignity that amounted almost to mania. Indeed, in a fashion, the man was mad. He had no fear of the College of Surgeons before his eyes out there, and he seemed to revel in a refined cruelty which might possibly have been accounted for by the fact that between his spells of scientific research he had heavy bouts of drinking that brought him frequently to the verge of *delirium tremens*.

The year was passing in a review before



"He . . . advanced towards Gride with hands clenched and eyes aflame."

Barnes's eyes as he sat there, wondering if it was possible for flesh and blood to stand it any longer. A score of times he had made up his mind to quit the whole thing and return home without being a penny the better for all he had done. And then the vision of Janet would rise before his eyes, and he would grip his teeth and string himself to go on to the bitter end. Even then he probably might not have done so, had it not been for Denton.

This Denton was a cheery American naturalist attached to Columbia University, who was out there, in Omolo, studying the local butterflies. Perhaps he hated Gride as much as did Barnes, but his philosophy

was a little wider than that of the Englishman; and, besides, the American was not called upon to take any part in those mumbo-jumbo rights and sacrifices of blood that Gride's seared and blackened soul revelled in. Still, he was a tonic to Barnes, and a sympathetic companion who kept him going from day to day.

He came on to the balcony now with a glorious purple-and-gold butterfly on the palm of his hand. It was a new and rare specimen, and his shrewd grey eyes twinkled as he contemplated it.

"Well, how are we getting on?" he asked cheerfully. "How's old Moloch this morning?"

"Infernally bad," Barnes said moodily. "He hasn't been sober for the last three days, though signs are not wanting that he is coming round. I've had a ghastly week, old chap—perfectly ghastly—an orgy of blood and cruelty that has made my very soul retch. And not a pennyworth of anæsthetic on the island, except the morphia that Gride uses to soothe his nerves after one of his outbreaks. I wouldn't mind if there were, but when I see those poor brutes—I tell you, Denton, I'm an infernal scoundrel to go on with it! And yet what can I do? I have sold myself for a price, and, Heaven knows, I am earning every penny of the money!"

As Barnes spoke, Denton jerked his thumb significantly over his shoulder, and a moment later Gride appeared. He was shivering from head to foot in spite of the heat, his strong, intellectual face was green and ghastly, his chin was dingy with a five days' beard. And yet, though he was racked and broken by the brandy he had been drinking, the man's mind was clear and vigorous enough, and his great, strong will was dominating his tortured body.

"You were talking about me," he said suspiciously. "Oh, I can guess what Barnes has been saying. Let him grumble as much as he likes, I've got him all right. He is a sort of Jacob serving for Rachel. Ha! Ha! Go in the house and mix me a .30 injection of morphia. We are going to be busy to-night, Barnes. You had better clear out, Denton, and don't come here again till I send for you."

"It's a cordial invitation," Denton drawled, "and I shall have much pleasure in availing myself of it."

The American sauntered off with the butterfly in his hand, and the ghastly wreck with a five days' beard turned angrily upon his unhappy assistant.

"You just drop that," he said. "I'm sick of your whining. You are my servant."

"Your slave," Barnes said bitterly.

"Well, perhaps that's a better word. My slave for the next two years to come, and don't you forget it. Not that I am complaining about the way you do your work. Why, good Heavens, man, there are scores of young doctors who would give their heads for a chance like yours! Look what I've taught you! Look what you will be able to teach the snivelling sentimentalists in England when you get back! And yet you whine and whimper because I put a knife into a strapped monkey, without anæsthetic, as if he were a human being. Look at Crim,

yonder! Is he any the worse for what he has gone through?"

As Gride spoke, he pointed a trembling forefinger to a chimpanzee perched on the edge of the balcony. The monkey seemed to know by some instinct that he was under discussion, for he chattered and gibbered and scolded in Gride's direction. As a rule, Crim was mild-mannered enough, and for Barnes the intelligent beast had quite an affection. But Gride he hated at the bottom of his simian soul. He had known what it was to come under the Professor's knife, and even at that moment, as he turned, Barnes could see the recent stitches in a comparatively new wound between the ape's shoulders.

"I wouldn't drive Crim too far, if I were you," he said. "Some of these days he'll do you a mischief. And he's powerful enough to do so, despite his gentleness."

Gride laughed harshly.

"I've flayed him a score of times," he said. "He'll never do any mischief—he hasn't got pluck enough. And I am not going seriously to hurt the best subject I've got. Now go and get me that morphia, and I'll show you something presently that no pathologist has ever dreamt of before. I'm going to show you a new serum; I am going to show you an absolute certain cure for cancer. You know what I've been doing with that little banana monkey Mini. She's full of it. I'm going to cut her throat—it's the only way of doing it—and then you will be part-discoverer of the greatest healing power in the world. And yet people whine and snivel over vivisection, and pretend that the whole of humanity had better suffer than some furry little beast should be tortured. Then I'll have a shave and a bath, and we'll open a case of champagne for dinner. Now, get a move on."

Barnes came out presently with a hypodermic syringe, and injected the morphia into the arm of his chief. In less than a minute Gride was a new man. The green tinge left his cheek, the haggard look faded from his eyes, he paced up and down the verandah with the air of a man to whom the secrets of continents are revealed. Then he went into his own operating-room, and came back presently with a tiny monkey in a cage. He had under his arm a small leather dressing-case containing a set of razors and the necessary implements of shaving. Then, without a word, he took the tiny simian from its cage and laid it face upwards on his

knees. With a hand as steady as a rock, he drew the edge of the shining blade across the monkey's throat. There was just a little gasping cry, with a creepy suggestion of humanity in it, and the tiny creature lay dead.

"Behold, you see there is practically no flow of blood," Gride said, in the tones of a man who is demonstrating some everyday problem. "Not more than a tablespoonful altogether. But the precious serum is there on the fur, and we can easily cultivate from that. Simple, isn't it?"

"Horrible, ghastly!" Barnes shuddered. "But look at Crim! Take care of yourself!"

All this time the chimpanzee had been watching the proceedings with an intelligence almost weirdly human. He hopped down from his perch and advanced towards Gride with hands clenched and eyes aflame with anger. Then his mood seemed to change, for he stooped and picked up the razor and ran his paw along the edge much as a man might have done who is in the act of shaving. He dropped the weapon again, and, with a quick, strangled cry, disappeared in the hanging foliage of a palm. Something seemed to grip Barnes by the throat.

He stood there, holding himself in hard and sweating from head to foot with the nausea and horror of it. Not that it was anything fresh, but there were moments of high nervous tension, one little episode piled upon another, till it seemed to him that he could stand it no longer. He saw Gride stoop, and with a surgical knife cut the little blood-stained patch of hair from the dead monkey's throat, and place it carefully in a tin specimen case, which he dropped into the pocket of his filthy dirty linen jacket, together with the razor with which the thing had been done.

To Gride it was nothing, merely a trivial incident in the day's work. He lay back in the big basket-chair and half closed his eyes, for the morphia had him in its grip now, and the man was worn fine by the need of sleep. He could see nothing of the contempt and anger in Barnes's eyes. And yet, had Gride been possessed of one touch of humanity, one shred of human feeling, then a greater man he might have been. As it was, he was a kind of scientific Bismarck, with all that individual's brutal contempt for anything or anybody that came between him and the goal of his desire. He had all the massive intellectuality, too, with the spiteful cruelty of a Marat, a highly organised machine with as much sensibility and feeling.

He closed his eyes, and muttered something to the effect that he needed sleep, and that on no account was he to be disturbed.

"All right," Barnes said. "And if you die in your sleep, I shall thank God for it."

"Yes, it would be a good get out for you," Gride chuckled. "In the meantime, go on with your dinner, and don't worry about me. And tell Cosmos I want him."

The middle-aged Kanaka boy who cooked and cleaned and did for the two Englishmen emerged from his black hole at the back of the bungalow and stood to attention.

"I am going to sleep for an hour, Cosmos," Gride said. "Don't disturb me anyhow. Bring out my shaving glass and the soap and some warm water, and put it on the table there, so that I can shave when I wake."

The Kanaka complied obediently. He placed the tackle by the side of his master. He stropped the razor and laid it on the table convenient to Gride's hand. The latter might wake up in an hour, or he might sleep there all night, as he frequently did after one of his drinking bouts. For the moment he was worn out, body and soul. When the fiery spirit reached him, he would drink for two or three days at a time, eating nothing and working night and day, forced on by driving pressure that he could not resist. In these abnormal conditions his brain was at its best and brightest. Then Nature would call a halt, and after a dose of the blessed nepenthe he would frequently sleep the clock round.

And these were times that Barnes looked forward to, hours that he had entirely to himself to think and dream and plan for the future. He was turning matters over in his mind now as he pushed his chair back from the dining-room table and lit his pipe. How much longer could he go on like this? he wondered. Would it be possible to continue to the end of his servitude? Or should he throw up the whole thing and go back to Janet, and tell her that he had failed? An hour or so passed; the great full tropical moon crept up over the edge of the lagoon and flooded the sweating palm beach with a light as bright as day. There was silence everywhere, and not a sound to break it save the murmur of the tide on the sand and the hum of insects in the air. Then presently Cosmos, in the black hole that he called his kitchen, began to sing some weird Kanaka song, and Barnes was glad, for there was something near and companionable even in the nigger's voice. Then his own storm

of black thoughts began to drift away, and he stepped out through the open window into the flooded glory of the perfect night. How far away from strife and trouble it all seemed, how peaceful and attractive!

Gride still lay there, with his long legs outstretched and his big, massive head thrown back against the cushions of his chair. He was in for a night's sleep, evidently. Probably he would not wake again till far into the next day. He was as still and rigid as the fringe of palms behind the golden beach—almost ominously still, Barnes thought. Some night he would die like this, for the man had an aneurism of the heart, and he had always declared that, if the trouble gripped him at the same time as he was in the midst of one of his drinking bouts, he would go out like the snuff of a candle. Almost in a spirit of hopefulness—an emotion of which he was slightly ashamed—Barnes approached the man who held him in bondage. Then he staggered back with a choking cry in his throat.

It was practically daylight, and every little detail stood out clear-cut as a cameo. Gride lay there. Barnes could see his head thrown back, and his throat cut from ear to ear. The keen blade had swept through the carotid artery and had penetrated almost to the spinal column. The dingy linen jacket and the discoloured shirt were stained with blood, already beginning to congeal, and from this Barnes judged that his brutal taskmaster had been dead an hour or two. A few yards away, on the edge of the verandah, lay a bloodstained razor, as if it had been hurriedly thrown down there by the assassin in his flight. But for this evidence, Barnes might have concluded that Gride had taken his own life; but no man could have inflicted such a mortal injury upon himself and at the same time fung the lethal weapon so far away. No, beyond a doubt, Gride had been murdered, and Barnes's first fierce emotion was one of gladness.

Then he took a pull at himself, and his reasoning faculties began to assert themselves. Who could have done this thing? There were only six people on the island altogether—two inoffensive Kanaka boys besides Cosmos and the three Europeans—and from the moment that dinner had been served, Cosmos had not moved a yard from the kitchen. A wild desire for human companionship gripped Barnes like a plague. He stepped down from the verandah and

fled like a hunted thing in the direction of the hut where Denton had made his headquarters, and where he gave employment to the other Kanaka boys. The American was seated outside his shanty, smoking a green cigar and drinking some cool, seductive-looking mixture from a long tumbler by his side.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You look a heap troubled. Sit down and have a drink."

"Gride has been murdered," Barnes said hoarsely. "He went to sleep on the verandah instead of coming to dinner—you know his way—and when I went out just now, I found him with his head almost severed from his body."

"Not much loss, anyway," Denton drawled.

"Very likely, but that isn't the point. Who could have done it? Not Cosmos, I swear."

"And not my boys, either, for they haven't been outside the hut ever since I came back. It seems to lie between you and me, Barnes. I suppose you haven't seen red yourself——"

"I see red every day," Barnes said bitterly; "but my hands are clean, thank God. I can't think. I am wearied and worn out, and my brain is numb. Come over to the bungalow with me, like a good chap, and see what you can make of it."

But it was very little that the American had to suggest. They carried the dead man into his room and covered him over with a sheet, and then Denton began to ask questions.

"Tell me everything," he said, "and don't omit any detail, however small. There aren't many details in a case like this, and, if you don't mind, I'll take this razor home with me. I should like to put it under my microscope, and don't you forget that I am some naturalist as well as a collector of butterflies, and I know as much about this amazing household of yours as you do yourself. Now, there's only one thing for it. You go quietly off to bed and sleep, if you can, and I'll come and talk it over with you in the morning, and if you take my advice, you'll have a few grains of morphia yourself. If ever I saw anybody who needs a drug, you are the hairpin in question."

It was about eleven the following morning when Denton lounged up to the bungalow, cool and collected as usual, with a smile on his face and a general suggestion of being master of the situation.

"Well," Barnes said wearily—"well?"

"I think I've got it," Denton said. "I worried it all out last night, and I found something on the handle of that razor that confirms my suspicions. Where's Crim?"

"Oh, how do I know? And what on earth has the chimpanzee got to do with it? As a matter of fact, I haven't seen him this morning."

"Now, you just come with me and bring a gun. When we have found Crim, I'll go on with the story."

Since the previous evening the chimpanzee had not been seen. He had not even come in for his breakfast. They found him presently high up in the centre of a clump of cocoa-nut palms, from which he nodded and chattered and showed his teeth in defiance. He seemed to be filled with a rage and terror that was quite foreign to his usual friendly and peaceful demeanour. Without a word, Denton raised his gun and shot the simian clean through the heart.

"That's as good as murder!" Barnes cried, aghast. "What did you do that cold-blooded thing for?"

"Waal, I guess we couldn't haul Crim up before a court of justice," Denton said. "We couldn't bring him before a jury and the rest of the fixings. In these parts, when you meet a murderer, you just shoot him. It's rough-and-ready justice, but it's just as effective. And I shot your chimpanzee, because he it was who murdered Gride. Not that I care anything about Gride, but when an animal takes to that kind of thing, he never stops. Now, look here, sonny, it's like this. When you told me all those details last night, I began to see my way. To a

certain extent I was rather fond of Crim—he was as near a human as makes no matter, and he hated Gride almost as much as you did. Look how the poor brute had suffered at the hands of that cold-blooded piece of human machinery. Look at the times he has been operated upon without an anæsthetic, and him big and strong enough to strangle Gride as easy as I can stick a pin through a butterfly. I tell you, Crim was waiting his chance. Didn't he see the little banana monkey have its throat cut? And wasn't everything ready to his hand when Gride went to sleep on the balcony last night? Why, it was as if that chap had been giving Crim an object-lesson. And Crim took advantage of it. He watched Gride till he went to sleep, and then he took the razor and cut the throat of the man that he had hated and feared and loathed more than anything that crawled on earth. And he had his revenge all right."

"Seems almost incredible," Barnes said. "But how are you going to prove it?"

Denton took an envelope from his pocket.

"I told you I was a naturalist," he said. "Anyway, I've studied the habits of the simian, and I know what he's capable of. Besides, I took that razor home last night for a purpose, and in the haft I found what I expected to find—a few hairs, which I have examined under the microscope. And those hairs came from Crim, beyond the shadow of a doubt. And I think that ought to satisfy you, as well as it satisfies me. At any rate, you are free now, and if any man ever earned his money, that man's name is Wilfred Barnes."