

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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# BLACK CUNJER

By ISABEL WALKER

**B**LACK CUNJER'S CABIN was in the thick of the pine woods where the saw-mill had been located for a month. It had proved difficult to find any negroes in that vicinity willing to work there; money was no object when they feared Black Cunjer's wrath.

They believed he exercised a sort of proprietorship over the forest—a claim much stronger than that of the actual property owners, a corporation which knew nothing and cared less about local superstition. Certain it is that from time immemorial Black Cunjer had lived in the heart of the woods, where the pines grew closest and the shadows made twilight of midday. There, it was whispered, within a semi-circle of tall trees he worshipped his god, and burned fire before him on black nights.

It was a mystery how the ancient negro managed to subsist, for there was no garden, nor cultivated acres about his dilapidated cabin. It was rumored that he ate bats and moles, and that this repulsive fare gave him "night eyes," so he could see in the dark. His eyes did have a curiously *stark* expression, imparting to his wizened face an unearthly aspect.

No one knew Black Cunjer's age; the negroes thought he came straight from Africa two hundred years ago. Judge Blake said he remembered when the old man had been a boy on his father's plantation, and that he clung to the cabin in the pine woods now, because his young wife had died there years ago and was buried in the semi-circular space of trees. Because they guarded her rest, and witnessed his religious rites for her soul, he had grown to regard the pines as sacred.

It was true that Judge Blake appeared to be the only person of either race with whom the solitary negro ever held communication, but the judge, after all, was in his dotage and given to queer fancies. In spite of the fact that a few had seen—so they said—a mound under the tallest trees resembling a grave, it was impossible to connect Black Cunjer with human ties, however long past.

On the rare occasions when he appeared among the negroes, they were

excessively polite, but after nightfall they shunned his cabin as a haunted spot.

The order had gone forth that the entire pine woods must be cut. Some of the logs were to be shipped down the river, and the rest cut into cord wood before the end of September. Work had progressed slowly, for there had been much trouble in securing and keeping enough men for the job; finally, about midsummer, a new foreman was sent down with orders to rush things through at all costs.

This foreman was a huge, hulking brute called Hoek Oberman. He came from "out yonder," with a record for getting results. He had worked only among the lowest class of laborers—mainly foreigners—and rose to his present position by his undoubted power over subordinates. He had had no previous experience with "niggers," but he boasted to the few poor whites, who would consort with him in the village, that he'd sweat the soul out of those fool blacks for once in their lives, and get the pine woods cleaned up on schedule time.

For a month after his arrival at the sawmill the work progressed much more quickly. From early dawn until sunset the *chug-chug* of the engine mingled with the voices of the negroes as they felled the trees, hauled the logs, or joked around the campfire at night.

Oberman was a great drinker, and it began to be rumored that he supplied the workmen with liquor. He always said—when questioned—that he "had a system," accompanying this cryptic remark with a wink from his small, close-set, cruel eyes.

It seemed to work—for a time. Finally all of the larger trees had been cut, except those surrounding Black Cunjer's cabin, for the radius of half a mile. Then trouble began. For some reason, the gang sent day after day to fell those trees returned empty-handed. Once, three axes broke in succession; another time, a gnarled pine, falling on a workman, seriously injured him.

The day after this catastrophe Oberman drove the negroes out to the woods

with threats and curses. They went, muttering sullenly. But less than an hour afterward, in the midst of crashing thunder and livid streaks of lightning, they came running back to camp, nor could they be moved to stir beyond shelter for the rest of that day.

Oberman raged and swore in a frenzy. Utterly ignorant of the type of creature he was dealing with, he could stir no response from the sulky group of negroes.

Then something happened that again gave him the upper hand.

After the storm a steady drizzle had set in; now, at nightfall, the gray skies and cold rain made the gloom inside the rude buildings less preferable than the fire built under a shed. This was open on three sides, facing the branch road which skirted the edge of the forest.

The few white laborers whom Oberman had brought down with him were inside the bunkhouse playing cards by the light of several tin lanterns swung from the low roof. But the negroes were huddled around the fire outside, talking softly among themselves, now that Oberman had finished his harangue.

Tom, a strapping, light-colored negro, who the foreman said was the only one with a spoonful of brains, spoke in a vibrant undertone that sent an electric tensity through the group:

"Dyah he now," Tom said—"dyah ole Black Cunjer comin' up de road straight to 'ard dis camp! Lordy, lordy, he gwine trick us all. . . he say nobody cyant cross his threshold—he gwine cross ourn now"—his voice died in a sort of wail.

Oberman whirled round on them.

"You damned fools—what can one old half dead nigger do against all this bunch? If you just wasn't afraid of him—like me—you'd see some sense!" His voice rose boastfully. "I bet I can look at him—and he'll go where he belongs."

If the bent figure slowly approaching the shed heard these words he gave no sign. The negroes, moaning, shrank closer together. Oberman seized his chance to show them. Raising his voice, he shouted across the dim curtain of mist:

"Go on where you come from, nigger; we don't allow no tramps here!"

He came forward threateningly, as if to drive the old man away.

**I**T IS doubtful if Black Cunjer ever had the slightest intention of coming up the path from the road. Certainly he did not quicken his lagging pace, nor notice the foreman or the trembling group of negroes.

There was about his unhurried advance a certain dignity, despite his tattered garments and shuffling gait. He came straight forward until he was opposite the shed and hardly ten feet away. The firelight shone redly on his dusky features as he passed. Oberman approached swaggeringly.

Then Black Cunjer looked up, his blank eyes fixed for a moment upon the mottled countenance of the foreman. Without a word, he turned into the underbrush and headed toward the uncut woods. In another moment the night and the mist had hidden him from the straining eyes.

A breath of relief escaped the negroes, like a long-drawn sigh of the pine branches above their heads. Oberman moved nearer the fire, and gave a thick laugh.

"Now you see it's all your tom-fool notions about 'tricks' and 'cunjer.' I ain't hurt—am I?"

He rubbed his hairy hands together as if greatly elated.

"He darsn't harm none of you while you're working for me! I could twist him up like a piece of paper—that old nigger—huh—" he snapped his fingers. "He knows it, too, and if he ever gets the bunch of you locoed again—I'm going to his darn shack, you are all so afraid of—and fix him, for good!"

The negroes gazed in silent awe at the huge hands that gripped together at the last words. It was rumored among the workmen that Oberman had killed a man "out yonder" with those hands.

After some bottles were handed around a more cheerful spirit animated the group. Tom announced that he wasn't afraid of that old Cunjer, anyhow, that he'd been "puttin' on" all the while.

"Yass, niggers, I's goin' to chop down dat crap o' pines t'morrow mawnin'. Mis' Oberman is right, money look good ter me. Who gwine foller?"

Several volunteered, and Oberman promised to double every man's pay the moment they cut the last tree.

So with a general undercurrent of good-fellowship, the fire was banked, and the camp turned in for the night.

**O**BERMAN watched the woodcutters leave at dawn.

When they were out of sight he turned, a glitter in his small eyes, to Ed Parker, the white man who helped him run the sawmill.

"Niggers is just like other hands—they got to be treated rough to learn 'em sense; when they get a real man to boss 'em"—he slapped his thigh jocosely—"they'll come under all right! This hoodoo stuff"—he spat, sneering—"makes me tired."

"Well, I hopes we finish this job on time. Big money in it if we do—and hell to pay if we don't," Ed remarked.

Sundown came, without the gang. Oberman stopped work, and walked about impatiently. Presently, from the edge of the woods, he spied the two white laborers returning.

Rushing forward, he demanded, with many oaths, where the negroes were. They related briefly that while they were measuring the first lot of trees, they heard a cry from the negroes, and turned to see them running headlong from the pines. After following them to their homes miles away, the white men learned that Black Cunjer had appeared to the group and told them those were sacred trees, and if they cut down so much as one other, he would set his mark on them and their children.

Entreaties—extra money—threats proved vain. Nothing on earth could induce those negroes to return to the neighborhood of Black Cunjer.

When Oberman heard this story, even the rough laborers shrank from the blasphemy that poured from his lips. His sense of power, swollen the preceding night, his confident boasts of this very day—served to lash his fury to madness. He had been fooled, mocked at, by a miserable old scarecrow of a creature.

Well, Hock Oberman would show them—he'd give these niggers a lesson they'd never forget!

With this threat, he started off on a run toward the foot-path leading into the pines. The men began half-heartedly to follow, but they were all dead tired, and soon gave up the attempt.

Oberman ran deeper and deeper into the woods; his breath came in gasps, and sweat poured from his body. He slowed his pace to a walk, but still pushed ahead, heedless of the sheet lightning and the muttering thunder.

Just before the last bit of daylight faded, he reached the cabin, and with his clenched fist struck the sagging door.

It opened soundlessly, and like a shadow Black Cunjer rose from the threshold.

**W**ITH a volley of oaths, Oberman demanded why he had sent his workmen away—when he would get them back—and ended by threatening the old negro's life unless he had every man in place by the next morning.

During this tirade, Black Cunjer spoke not a syllable, his expressionless eyes staring into the distorted face before him with a curious, unseeing gaze. This silence and impassivity stirred Oberman's resentment as no words could have done.

As he stepped up on the log threshold, a sharp exclamation tore through his lips, and he moved aside so quickly as to lose his balance. But, recovering himself, his rage ten times greater, he seized the ancient negro by the back of his neck and shook him until the shrunken black head rolled from side to side—then released him with a cruel twist.

Black Cunjer's head struck with powerful force against the door-jamb, his thin body crumpled up, and he fell headlong across the threshold, prone at Oberman's feet.

With an ugly laugh, the foreman stepped down on the rotting log, and stirred the prostrate body with his boot. A slow purple stream was trickling from Black Cunjer's temple, and Oberman noticed the tip of his boot was wet with the dark blood.

He leaned over and felt the negro's heart. It was still.

Giving a shudder of repulsion, he scraped his boot against the log, then wiped it on the ground covered with pine needles, and turned to go back, blind fury still seething in his brain.

As Oberman hurried down the narrow path between the crowding tree trunks, his right foot felt wet, as if he had water in his boot. He tried to ignore it, but when the foot became stiff and cold, though he was panting with the heat, he stopped and, leaning against a tree, ran his fingers down the boot to investigate.

He drew them out sopping wet, and by the sheet lightning, which grew momentarily brighter, he looked at them curiously. They were covered with blood!

Trembling, terrified, he managed with difficulty to pull off the boot. The blood that soaked his foot kept welling up from some secret source, and dripping slowly on the ground.

Cold sweat stood out on Oberman's forehead as he stared down at the foot with which he had contemptuously touched Black Cunjer's body.

**F**INALLY he thrust his boot back on, and went limping with desperate haste toward the camp, calling aloud in

his fear and agony, and leaving behind him a widening crimson track.

Sometimes he tripped on the roots and stones and fell prostrate in the darkness; lank pine branches tore at his clothing; the sharp needles stung his staring eyes. Once his voice died away and gasping sobs shook his body, but he managed to stumble to his feet again and lurch shrieking through the night. At last the men came running with lanterns in their hands.

When they reached him he was no longer able to speak, but pointed to his right foot covered with blood. A few moments later, when they got him to camp, he was dead.

In that isolated community, the coroner, thirty miles down the river,

could not be reached before Oberman had to be buried. Even the men who found him were able to give small information to the neighboring farmers. They had had to cut the boot off, and in their hurry and excitement could not remember having seen any mutilation of the leather.

The search party, sent back at gray dawn to the cabin, found Black Cunjer lying where he had fallen. And Tom, who had been induced to go with them, found something else. Three broken ax blades were cunningly embedded deep in the rotting wood at the outer margin of the threshold, sharp edges uppermost, forming a triangle. In spite of Tom's warning cry, one of the men dislodged

the blades, revealing a fragment of dried snake's skin pinioned beneath each one.

The negro lifted an ashy face from his inspection.

"Dyah de Cunjer," he muttered shakenly: "three uv 'em—side by side—no man cyant cross dat do' sill—"

And with a terrified glance over his shoulder, he fled precipitously from the group gathered around the half-open door, and was soon lost to sight in the distance.

**T**HE PINES about Black Cunjer's cabin have never been cut down. No ax will ever be heard again in that forest, nor any sound but the hooting of owls, and the whirring of bats' wings, or, far overhead, the whisper of tall trees.