

# Weird Tales



MAY, 1952

Cover by Virgil Finlay

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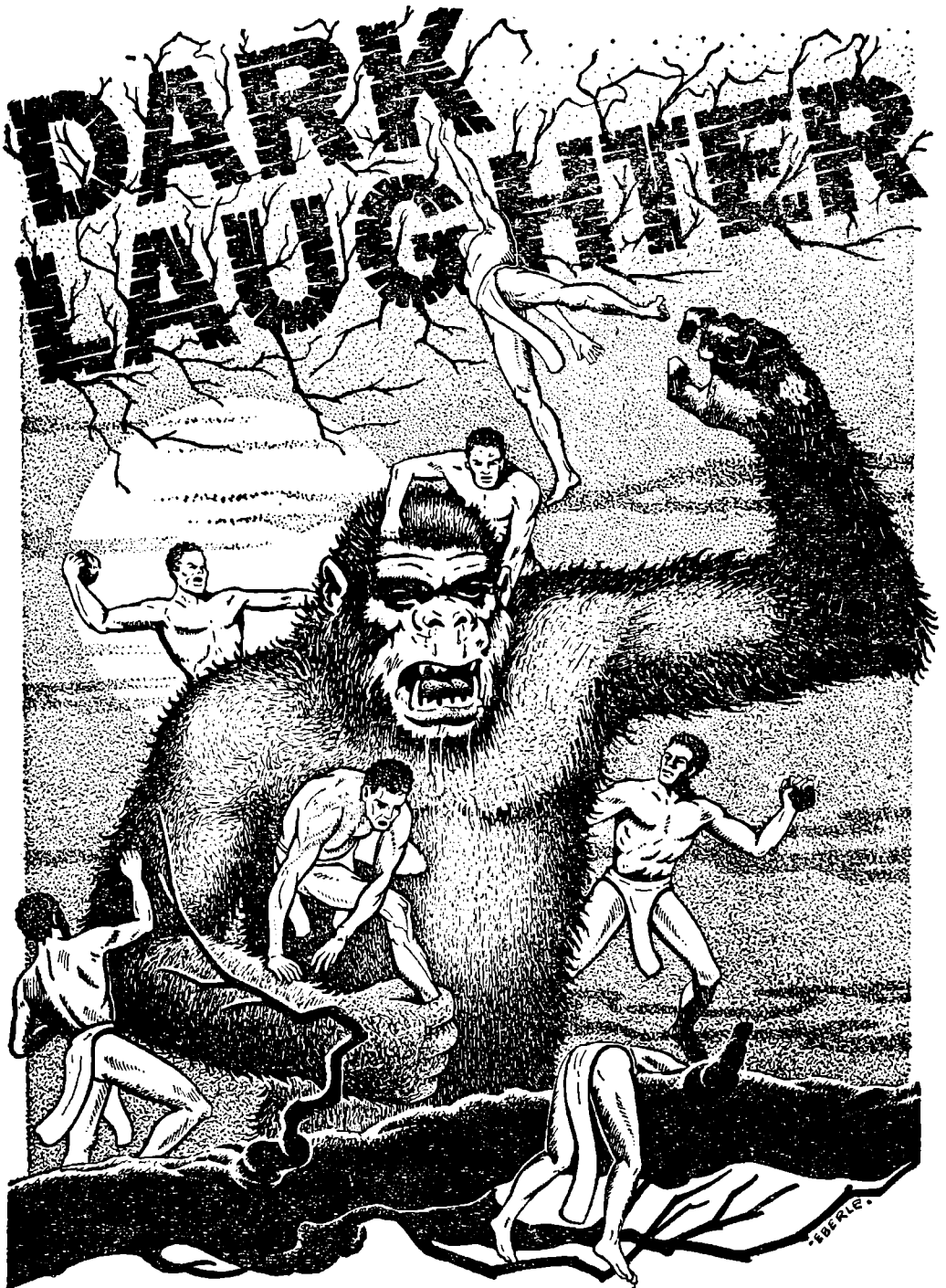
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



by Garnett Radcliffe

Heading by Joseph Eberle

*Voices more ferocious than the braying hounds rose  
from the darkness of the forest.*

---

FELTON couldn't sleep. A booming sound was keeping him awake. He couldn't decide whether it was his own blood pounding in his ears, or if it came from the earth on which he lay. Perhaps, he thought, what I hear is Africa laughing. I've heard Africa called the Continent of Dark Laughter. She mocks white men because we're not her children.

He felt afraid. He was young and this was his first trip into what men called the "Land of No-Return." They called it that because so many expeditions had failed to return. They had been swallowed by Africa and no survivor had come back to tell what had happened.

The expedition of which Felton was a member was an attempt to solve the latest mystery. The latest, but actually it was almost five years since Dr. Luke, his three companions and his ten Hausse porters, had disappeared. Almost certainly they had been murdered by one of the pigmy tribes who haunted the great stretch of forest and swamp between the River Shal and the Portuguese Range, but there was a faint chance they might be still alive. It was in that hope that Elizabeth University, of which Dr. Luke had been a principal, had financed this expedition.

They had financed previous expeditions. That they had done so was a tribute to the greatness of Dr. Luke. No one in the University who had known him could believe he was really dead. They still spoke of his wisdom, his strength, his courage and his great knowledge of Africa. Explorer, big-game hunter and scientist, he had made it his life-work to solve the mysteries of the Dark Continent.

Felton, who was a student at Elizabeth University, had been brought up in the Luke tradition. He had read the Doctor's books, had examined his trophies in the science museum and developed a sort of hero worship for the great man. When the chance had come he had begged to be allowed to join the expedition. To save his hero, or at least help to solve the mystery

of what had happened, nothing would give him greater happiness. That was his belief.

THEY were following the route Dr. Luke had planned to take from the River Shal. The country was mountainous and densely wooded. For days they had been working their way round the side of a mountain, that was not shown on any map. The heat was tremendous and they were plagued by insects. The trees grew so thickly that they walked in a sort of greenish twilight, forcing their way through scrub and creepers that seemed alive with a malicious desire to bar their progress.

Tired though he was, sleep still evaded Felton. He sat up and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was after midnight. His companions, whom he could see wrapped in blankets by the side of the smudge fire, had been asleep and snoring for hours.

They had arranged that one man must always be awake, as sentry. This was Featherstone's watch. The idea came to Felton that since he was unable to sleep himself he might as well relieve his friend.

He threw on some clothes and looked round. Where was Featherstone? There were only five men sleeping by the fire. Of the man who should have been guarding them he could see no sign.

Perhaps he'd gone across to the porter's camp about fifty yards distant. Using his torch because there was not a vestige of light under the trees he walked to where the porters were snoring as only Africans can. The light showed him the sprawling ebony bodies, the loads and the untidy remains of their supper, but no Featherstone.

Felton was puzzled. There were strict orders against anyone leaving the camp alone, and Featherstone, a solid, reliable Scotsman, would have been the last person to disobey.

Perhaps he had counted wrong and Featherstone *was* one of those sleeping by the fire! He decided to go back and make sure. If Featherstone were really missing he

would have to wake Major Andrews who was the leader of the expedition, and report his absence.

**H**E WAS halfway back when a voice speaking from the darkness made him stop.

"Come over here. I want to show you something."

It hadn't sounded like Featherstone. Felton flashed his torch in the direction, but could see nothing except creepers like huge snakes writhing between the trees.

"Featherstone? Is that you, Featherstone?"

The voice spoke again, hoarser and more indistinct.

"Yes, I'm Featherstone. Come here."

Perhaps he'd been injured! Felton left the track and began to plunge through the undergrowth.

He struggled on for about twenty yards, then he stopped again.

"Featherstone? Where the devil are you?"

Silence mocked him. He had an uncomfortable feeling he was not alone. Someone or something was watching him from beyond the radius of his torch.

Should he call out and alarm the camp? But he was loathe to be laughed at for a nervous young idiot. Jungle-nerves, that was what the old hands would say he was suffering from. Jungle-nerves, and a too vivid imagination.

As if to convince himself he wasn't really scared he went on another dozen yards. The light showed him he had reached the edge of a small clearing. Then it shone on something else—the figure of a man lying motionless on the sward.

"Featherstone?"

He ran forward and knelt beside the figure. Then he uttered a cry. The distorted face was hardly to be recognized. Featherstone was dead and his staring, glassy eyes were filled with terror.

For a minute Felton could not move. He had never seen violent death before, and the sight had shocked him into immobility.

Nausea swept over him like a cold wave. He rose blindly, and as he did so he heard something rustling behind him. Before he could turn something thin and snakelike

passed over his head and tightened itself about his neck.

The pressure was intolerable. He fought like a madman in his choking agony. There was a roaring sound like a waterfall in his ears. Breathe! If he couldn't draw breath his heart must burst.

The noose round his neck was pitiless. His strength left him, he'd a feeling he was sinking. Then at last merciful oblivion passed over him like a cloud blotting out the sun.

**H**E RECOVERED consciousness to find himself in a cave. His throat ached abominably and he could taste blood. For a period he lay still, too sick even to wonder where he was or what had happened.

The sound of someone entering the cave made him open his eyes.

What he saw made him utter a cry. The man who had come in would have been very tall, but he walked with his back bent, his arms swinging and his head thrust forward. He was naked save for a strip of bark worn as a loincloth. His skin was the color of leather from exposure to sun and wind. A mane of white hair hung over his eyes, and a great tangled white beard fell down his chest. As he approached Felton was aware of a sour animal smell that revolted him.

The creature crept into the cave. He looked cowed and furtive to a degree. He cringed and smiled, while his eyes were full of cunning like the eyes of a vicious dog.

To Felton's astonishment he spoke in English. His accent was cultured, but he spoke very slowly as if the speech machinery were rusty from long disuse.

"I trust you are feeling better now?"

Felton spoke with an effort.

"My throat hurts. I want water."

"You can have some."

He went out with bent knees, his arms dangling so that his fingers almost touched the ground. In a few moments he returned bringing the scooped-out shell of a coconut filled with water. He carried it awkwardly, holding it in his cupped hands against his chin.

Felton drank and felt better. His head was clearer now and he could think.

"Where am I? What happened?"

The timid eyes were like lizards peeping through the tangled hair. He was squatting on his heels and hugging himself with his arms.

"I don't know. You were lying unconscious when I found you. There was a noose twisted round your neck. You had been almost stangled."

"Didn't you see anyone?"

"I saw no one. Probably the pigmies had attacked you. They are like the shadows of birds in the forest. Even the Great Masters fear the pigmies."

"The Great Masters?"

"Yes, the Great Masters," his voice was reverential, his face illuminated by an ecstatic smile. "The Great Masters who are so kind to man. I will take you to the Great Masters. You mustn't be afraid. The Great Masters are just and they rule with kindness. It's only when man disobeys that the Great Masters punish him. They punished Randall and Spears because they refused to be tamed. They shrieked and fought and went mad, so the Great Masters tore them to pieces. Yes, they tore them to pieces like rag dolls. I was wiser. When I saw what had happened to Randall and Spears I was submissive and they spared my life. Remember what I've told you. Obey the Great Masters and they will treat you with love."

Felton started up. Randall and Spears? Why were the names familiar? Then he remembered and he caught the other's arm.

"Two members of Dr. Luke's last expedition were called Randall and Spears!" he cried. "Who are you?"

The caricature seemed to straighten itself. For a second it was as if the spirit of a great man had returned to its body.

"I am Dr. Luke," he said. "At least I used to be Dr. Luke before—before I was caught and tamed."

Felton fell back. His head swam so that it was almost impossible to think. He'd found Dr. Luke! Rather, the ghost of Dr. Luke. What terror had transformed the great explorer into this shambling, mindless wreck? Then blackness swept over him and he could think no more.

WHEN he opened his eyes again he found himself alone in the cave. His watch had stopped, but by the lengthened

shadows he could see through the mouth of the cave he knew the day was drawing to its close.

The sleep had done him good. He rose and walked to the cave entrance. When he looked round he could not repress a cry of wonder. Below him and all around like the sea was a panorama of forest and mountain frightening in its infinite grandeur.

He hesitated what to do. There were two alternatives and they seemed equally unpleasant. He shrank from the thought of spending a night in the cave in company with Dr. Luke. Obviously the solitude of the forest had turned that once great brain. Almost certainly he had murdered Featherstone and all but strangled himself.

He considered the other alternative—that of leaving the cave and trying to find his companions. The idea of venturing alone and unarmed into that danger-filled forest appalled him. It would be suicide. He would have as much chance as a frog crawling on the bottom of the ocean.

**T**HEN he saw something that decided him. Dr. Luke was returning. He had emerged from a clump of trees and was scrambling up the rocky hillside with amazing agility.

In a moment he had reached the cave. He was panting and his eyes were shining. Felton spoke with assumed casualness.

"I'm feeling a lot better, Doctor. What about trying to find the camp?"

"The camp?" Dr. Luke repeated.

"The expedition. They've come to search for you, you know. The whole civilized world is waiting to welcome you back."

"The civilized world!" Dr. Luke spat on the ground. "Do you think I'd leave my Master to go back to what men call civilization?"

Felton spoke as calmly as he could.

"Listen, Doctor, your friends would like to see you again. It's some years since you have been seen and talked to a white man. We all want to hear your adventures, to learn what you have discovered about this unknown part of Africa. I am a student at Elizabeth University. All I know about Africa is what I've learned from reading your books. I . . ."

Dr. Luke was paying no attention. He had turned his head as if he were listening.

**F**ELTON stopped speaking. Night was falling as if a dark veil were being drawn across the face of Africa. With the darkness the forest seemed to wake to life. A night bird uttered a mocking screech. From the forest came sullen coughing sounds suggestive of great beasts of prey seeking for their victims.

It had grown colder. Bats like black snowflakes swooped and gyrated above their heads. Again Felton seemed to hear that hollow booming sound, the dark laughter of Africa mocking the white man who would probe her secrets. Then he heard something else. A faint yelping sound as if a pack of hounds was racing through the forest.

"Ah," said the doctor. "They're coming. My brothers who serve the Great Masters are on the trail."

"Who are they?" Felton gasped. He felt himself on the edge of a horror he had not yet grasped.

The doctor spoke as if he were again on the lecture platform at Elizabeth University. "They are men who have found the ultimate happiness," he said. "The deepest human instinct is to love someone mightier than oneself whom one can serve and love. All religions are an effort to fulfil that urge. In both phenomenal and transcendental philosophies the need for subjection to a stronger being is one of the acknowledged keystones of behaviorism. Kings and dictators owe their existence to that foible. To have someone to respect and worship, to be rewarded for doing right and justly punished for doing wrong—that is the deepest desire of the human ego. . . ."

Felton was not listening. He was on his feet, his face pallid with fear.

The hellish chorus was drawing nearer. He knew now of what it was composed. Men were whooping and screaming and cheering as they raced each other through the forest.

Their voices were more blood-curdling, more ferocious than the baying of hounds. They were shrill and abandoned like the voices of escaped lunatics bent on murder, as they rose from the darkness of the forest.

Felton turned to fly. On the instant the doctor's claw-like hand grasped his arm.

"Stay here. They are tame men and they

would tear you to pieces. They hate the wild of their own species as dogs hate a wolf."

Felton would have shaken him off, but then he realized it was too late. A dozen shadowy forms had emerged from the trees and were scrambling up the hillside. As they came nearer he saw they were Negroes, but of what tribe he could not tell. They were tall and emaciated with fierce, wolfish faces. Their cries and gestures as they raced over the rocks were more animal than human.

There was hatred and fear in their eyes. He caught up a stone and braced himself for a fight to a death, but then Dr. Luke sprang in front of him. With upraised arms he shouted something in a native dialect and they stopped.

Unwillingly, so it appeared to Felton. He could see their teeth and gleaming eyes as one by one they squatted till they formed a semi-circle round the mouth of the cave. They glared at him and fierce growling sounds issued from their throats—sounds that threatened death if he tried to escape.

Dr. Luke turned.

"I have warned them of the wrath of the Great Masters if they harm you," he said. "They fear me because my master is the Chief of the Great Ones. He chose me to be his man because my skin was white and I was more intelligent. You see, my friend, a degree and a white skin carry some weight even in darkest Africa!"

Though his words sounded mad, he looked quite sane. He was actually laughing at the horror and bewilderment on Felton's face. With a kindly gesture he patted the younger man's shoulder.

"Don't be frightened. If you obey their wishes they will be very kind to you. My master allows me to sleep at his feet. Once he risked his life to save me, his man, from a hunting leopard. When he strikes me it is only in play. We are more than master and man; we are friends."

Felton shrank away from him. This is a nightmare, he was saying to himself. This is a nightmare from which I must sometime wake.

Again the doctor put his hand on his arm. The circle of wolf-visaged watchers had drawn a little closer. Their mouths

slavered and they made queer whining sounds.

"It is the only happiness," the doctor was saying, "man must have a master whom he can serve. When you have been tamed one of the Great Ones will take you for his own. He will cherish you because you have a white skin and are intelligent. The other men will be jealous, but their fear of the Great Ones . . ."

"Look out!" Felton yelled.

From the corner of his eyes he had glimpsed the rush. It was vicious and conducted as if a dam had suddenly burst.

The pack was on them before they could move. Felton struck out with the strength given by fear. The stone crashed into a hate-distorted face and the man who had leapt at his throat fell writhing.

Kicking and striking he tore himself free. The doctor seemed the main object of the pack's hatred. They had him down and were piling themselves on top, screaming like beast ravenous for blood.

Felton was forgotten. He began to run. He ran blindly with outstretched hands. Behind him was a Pit of howling horror; ahead there was . . . ???

He stared. Skipping shadows in the moonlight. Humped rocks that leapt soundlessly and with incredible speed? Great squat creatures chattered their anger as they hopped and swung themselves toward the men who fought like animals.

The sudden splendor of the African moon shining through a rift in the clouds, showed him what those monstrous shadows really were. They were gorillas, shaggy, red-eyed barrels of muscle with sloping shoulders and arms like twisted branches.

They paid no attention to Felton. The largest had reached the heap of struggling men. In the moonlight he saw the great monkey flinging Negroes right and left as contemptuously as a child might fling its dolls.

And then he saw it lift the doctor in its shaggy arms. It cradled him with great tenderness and love. He saw Dr. Luke wriggle in its embrace and raise his white head like a dog trying to lick his master's face.

And then Felton really heard the dark laughter of Africa. He rose and began to run.

AFRICA can sometimes be very kind to those who would profane her mysteries. By an amazing stroke of Providence Felton was found by his friends the following evening.

He had struggled blindly through miles of forest. His clothes were in rags, insects had bitten him and thorns had lacerated his skin. He was delirious, rambling wildly about Dr. Luke and the gorillas. Telling them again and again in a hoarse, fevered

voice that the doctors and his porters had been captured by gorillas. . . . That they had become the pets of the great simians.

"He'll never leave his master," he gasped between paroxysms of delirious laughter. "He's too faithful. . . . *He's a one-gorilla man. . . ! He's a one-gorilla man!*"

"Jungle nerves," Major Andrews diagnosed. "Being lost in the forest has upset his mind. He'll be all right when he's had a good sleep."

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