

Weird Tales

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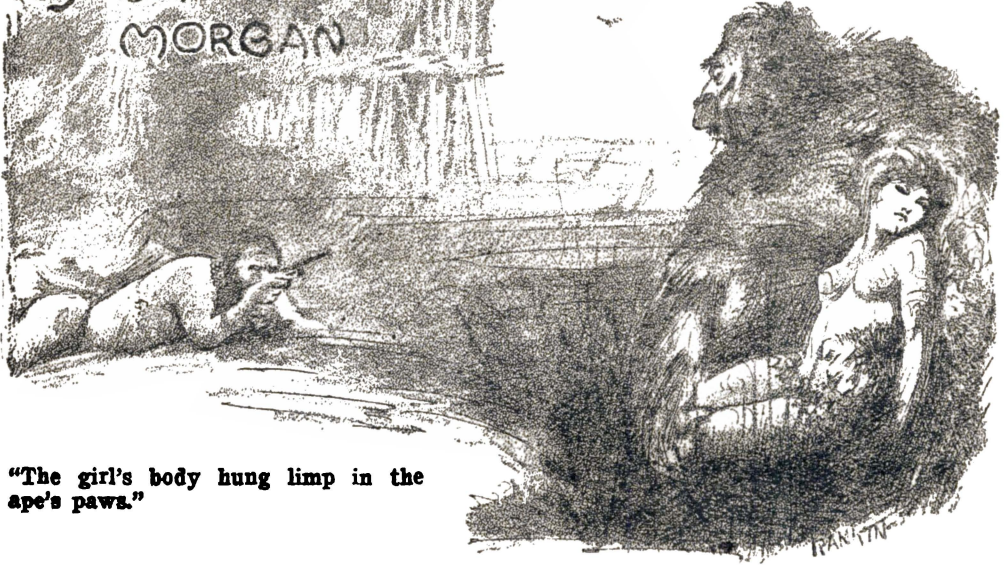
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GRAY GHOULS

by BASSETT
MORGAN



"The girl's body hung limp in the
ape's paws."

WHEN there was a job to be done, especially adventurous, entailing skilful diplomacy and undoubted peril, Tom Mansey was summoned partly because he knew Papua as well as a white man may, partly that he seemed indifferent to probable torture and death meted out by head-hunting savages to intruders in hidden empires of the hinterland.

The stout officials sat about a table viewing evidence which had promulgated fresh indignation. It had been seized from the trophies of a globe-trotting curio-hunter who parted reluctantly, indignantly from it, and spouted wrath and threats of reprisal. It was a mummied human head no larger than a man's doubled fist, beautifully cured, furnished with balls of cat's-eye chalcedony in the sockets, lips sewn in a kissing pout. The shocking feature was its abundant and flaming red hair. Nowhere

in Papuasia is red hair natural to a native. The idea of a mummied head with ruddy locks threatened the fragile foothold of white civilization on those dark flanks of a land as treacherous as the panther it most resembles.

Mansey added the final note of nausea to the assemblage.

"A woman's head, I should say. Whether a white woman or not I don't know. The curing might brown the skin. This hair is silky, rather fine and waved, certainly not bleached. By the manner of lip-sewing I should say it comes from the north-shore people. I never saw nicer work."

It was uncanny, horrid, weird, to hear him enthuse over the craft of cannibalistic savages, but his remarks were crisp when they asked him to investigate the source of supply, take feasible measures to halt barter in heads, intimate to the most indom-

itable, hellishly cunning race of blacks that earth endures, that selling human heads to tourists was indelicate, inadvisable and immoral.

"I'd suggest right here that you'd better stop tourists buying heads. So long as they pay big money for them, the heads will be forthcoming, and since heads with Nordic-colored hair bring fatter prices, the natives will swoop down on the ports and clean out our little intrusion of white exploiters in one whirlwind of savagery run amuck. However, I'm interested. Using cat's-eye quartz for eyes is a new wrinkle that shows intelligent progress in art."

Mansey crossed the room in a weighted silence and traced a forefinger on a wall-map, traversing from the Curlews south of Sarong, then to the great island of Papua marked on the north New Guinea.

"What white men or women have gone into here in the last decade and who's missing?" he asked of the company's clerk who had said least and done most to assist in the investigation. The clerk flipped pages of a book and wrote rapidly on slips of paper which he gave to Mansey.

With these data, Mansey set out with a power launch and a flock of Tonga boys in small outrigger proas hollowed from hardwood in a manner that has not changed since the sea spewed forth the South Sea Islands. Mansey was lightly armed. Weapons are small insurance against the peril of penetrating tribal villages of treacherous Papuan black men, and he knew that where that ruddy-haired head was cured and fitted with quartz eyes, were intelligence and barbed cunning.

He had little information on which to base conjecture. Official files mentioned a Scotchman, Andrew Keith, who had gone native thirty years before, taken to the hinterland and never reappeared. Besides Andrew Keith, one other white man was in

that locality to which Mansey was bound. His name was Homer Mullet, he had been a surgeon in London, got into disrepute and after a brief attempt to establish himself in Port Moresby, went north, evidently had luck with the natives and sent down frequently for drugs of surgical nature and new cases of instruments. His latest order was not more than six months old. With this meager information on possible sources of red hair Tom Mansey navigated the treacherous tide rips and cross currents and after weeks of tentative questioning located the lagoon where Homer Mullet was reported to have established himself as a sorcerer of greater magic than any native chieftain.

LEAVING his Tonga boys and their proas outside, Mansey and a native launch man entered the reef jaws of white coral just when dawn turned the world pearl and the sea was shimmering opal. Across the lagoon were the triangular huts fringed with tinkling shells, a fire burning on the beach, cooking pots steaming over it and the flower-decorated savages who shouted yowls of welcome. His launch churned bubbles in water clear as air, shining like green flame. Beneath were sea-gardens indescribably beautiful and menacing, tinted coral, waving fern weeds, wide-open flanges of tridacnas that can take off a man's foot if he steps into one, pretty little fish clustering and scattering like particles of an exploding glass ball. The air was hot and moist, perfumed by flowers, thick with the stench of rotting river swamp, pungent with sea-tang, the mingled scents of Papua's breasts teeming with desire, unforgettable as the hells it transcended.

With a feeling of high adventure, Mansey sent the launch close to a crude causeway jutting between the nipa-thatched huts, knowing the

yelps of painted, spear-pronged savages might change at a breath to cries of blood-lust and battle. His heart pounded with the spice of the thing and another discovery. Sitting in state near the fire, remaining seated while the savages danced and leaped in childlike frenzy, was the white man he sought.

A dozen black hands reached to help him to the landing stage. The center of a swarm of rowdy young warriors hideously glorious in necklaces of human knuckle-bones, shark's teeth, crests of Paradise plumes, he was led to the fire and an avenue cleared down which he walked to the white man who was distinctively unornamented except by flower garlands, a collar of many strands of pearls, and pearl strings looped to his midriff.

"I'm Tom Mansey," he said, "and I suppose your name is Homer Mullet. I've been a month or two finding you to have a little talk."

"Mansey," commented Mullet without rising or offering his hand, "seems to me I've seen your name on the company's notations. Sit in for breakfast and make yourself comfortable. I'm pretty chief here, and as long as we agree you can sleep easy. There's turtle stewing and they've learned to cook it white-man fashion. It's good to hear English again. You haven't by any possibility some recent gramophone records, have you?"

Mansey had. He breakfasted on scraped coconut cream and turtle stew, a little fruit and remarkably good coffee and was patient while Mullet pumped and probed him for world news and port gossip.

He and Mullet ate alone. The crowd had dispersed to a farther fire and cooking pot. The women were invisible in the huts. Mansey had opportunity to observe many things, a garden of sorts for that wilderness, an almost new *laji-laji* house for the

men, and that Mullet's abundant hair curled to his shoulders but was so dark brown as to be almost black. Otherwise the renegade surgeon was a giant in stature, growing too fat and slightly insane, which Mansey expected. No white man can fight Papua. The land gets under his skull and behind his eyes. It drugs and stultifies his morale and finally kills his soul. That had evidently happened to Mullet. But his talk was rational. Mansey saw the slender, tapering fingers always playing nervously with the pearl strands, and the shifting prominent eyes. He had been a man of character and personality, a brainy intelligence, sensual-mouthed, and his good looks spoiled by a flattened nose and indulgence which over-hampered his body.

"You'll stay a few days?" he asked.

"I'd like to," Mansey told him.

"You can have a house. Anything else?" Mullet's smile was suggestive and Mansey shook his head.

"The fact is I came for your help in halting the sale of heads to white tourists, if possible." Mansey told in detail the new menace which had leaped to formidable proportions and of the one ruddy-haired head which had started the rumpus.

"So you, knowing something of heads," said Mullet, "recognized the lip-sewing and came north. They know that I'm here, and that Sandy Keith left his red-headed offspring in these hills, eh?"

"I suspected something of the sort. I suspected you."

This man was clever, also friendly. Mansey wanted that amiable feeling to continue and he had no hope of fooling Homer Mullet about his mission. Frankness might serve where guile would antagonize.

"You flatter me," said Mullet, laughing. "I start no line of devils down here, my friend. Besides, my hair isn't red."

"But the heads——" began Mansey. Mullet silenced him.

"I've no doubt my fellows do trade heads. They cure them. I can't stop that, but I have managed to put the fear o' God into them enough to confine their head-gathering to enemies and killing them outright before they begin. One thing I'll admit: there isn't a fresh one in the village. Look at the houses."

They strolled abroad and Mansey saw that the heads on display were old, rather green and misted with mold. Wooden figures carved grotesquely were plentiful. The village was clean, the houses new, there was evidence of sanitation and order unusual to natives. Yet instinct told Tom Mansey he was hot on the trail of trouble.

He was sure of it when at one hut there was a commotion and he saw a young girl struggling with older women and caught a glimpse of a head of glinting gold curled in cloudy beauty. Then amid shrieks of the women she was dragged inside and hidden. Mullet laughed.

"Bleaching a new queen," he observed. "At present I am a widower after a fashion. That shock you?"

"No." Mansey shook his head. "It isn't good for man to live alone, especially in savage lands. That new queen is a beauty."

"Six weeks in a darkened hut bleaches them like mellow ivory, and she's been kept from betel-chewing, or having her teeth filed. Making wives to order is feasible here, Mansey. Old Sandy Keith knew that."

"He is dead?" asked Mansey quickly.

"He is dead, and I inherited a lot of his troubles along with his trained apes. Sandy was quite a scientist. He was bent on learning the language of orang-outangs and had a flock of them. I have them now, nicely trained. You'll see."

Mansey was relieved at the conversational change, and puzzled. The orang-outang is a formidable simian, and he knew little about them except that they would clear the jungle in their vicinity of smaller monkeys and birds on sight. Mullet's laugh was unpleasant, yet Mansey fancied it sounded strange because laughter was not often loosed in that place. He sensed a sinister secret behind this bland talk of Mullet, and he knew instinctively that he was being entertained nicely to hide that secret, as well as Mullet's almost pathetic joy in companionship of his own race and kind.

THAT night he watched a dance at the *lagi-lagi* house and the ritual of initiation of young men ripe for manhood—the ritual that would enable them to take wives and heads. It was not new to Mansey, but he hated the evident relish of Homer Mullet over the stoicism of young men enduring greatly. He watched through a haze of the final orgy, until satiated with strong drink and blood-lust they finally dropped inert and lay like a strange harvest^o of death as dawn flowed over the hills and blazed on the sea.

He went to the hut they had given him, but did not sleep. The settlement was lifeless at that hour except for a few older women at their house-keeping and cooking. He thought of the girl in the bleaching hut who would be Mullet's queen, and was sorry for her, needlessly. He remembered that Mullet had said he was a widower at present, and during the dance in the *lagi-lagi* house he had confided drunken details of his rule and the reign of Sandy Keith.

"He lorded it, Mansey. Had several wives, and I married one of his daughters, a red-headed she-devil. She had all the beauty you'd ever find in a woman, but she was worse than native. She tried to kill me a

dozen times, knives, poison, sorcery, until——”

Mullet had laughed horridly. Tom Mansey had no doubt in the world that the red-headed wife of Homer Mullet was killed, probably murdered. It was not his concern, but it sickened him. He knew that he was on the track of that forbidden traffic in heads, yet no nearer a solution of the puzzle would be presented if he tried to halt it.

That day he slept fitfully and awoke after the noon heat to find Homer Mullet astir. Hearing his voice, Mansey looked from the hut door and saw Mullet coming down the trail of white crushed coral followed closely by a huge gray shape that loped along in the way of the great apes, paws trailing at its knees, and Mullet was talking to the creature, which seemingly answered by uncouth guttural sounds.

He hailed Mansey. “Going to take a look-see at my queen. Come along?”

It seemed diplomatic to go along and Mansey came down the notched log a little on guard because of the great ape.

“Sheba won’t bother you,” said Homer Mullet. “She’s jealous of women but not men. I’ve got to get her acquainted with this girl, whom, by the way, I’ve named Cleo, short for Cleopatra.” Mullet enjoyed the joke loudly, and the great ape showed her big teeth in a wide-mouthed grin and an uncanny cackle.

“Shut up!” yelled Mullet. The effect was magical. The ape’s eyes showed shame, even grief, and she hung her head, but when Mansey looked back he thought she was snarling.

When they reached the hut where the potential queen was being bleached and beautified, Sheba the ape suddenly darted and swung to its roof-peak, and no commands of Mullet would make her descend.

“All right, you jealous old she-monk, take a look-see from up there and you’ll see a real beauty. Bring out the girl!” he called to the scrawny old woman who peeped from the door.

On the roof, Sheba chattered angrily as Mullet repeated the command in native. To Mansey the experiment seemed considerable of a risk. As the child appeared in the hut doorway, Sheba showed jealousy. The girl was the prettiest Mansey had ever seen, her rounded body outlined in scarlet stain, her only covering a waist fringe of red and white blossoms.

Homer Mullet glanced at her, then beckoned to the ape on the hut roof and commanded in lurid curses, which Sheba not only ignored but chattered back her raging resentment.

“Look here,” howled Mullet, “you’ll come down and behave or I’ll get the whip. This girl is your master-lady, hear what I say? You’ll treat her nicely and none of your tricks like last time. You had your chance, you she-devil! And you made hell for everybody. You know what happened to you then, and it’ll be worse next time. I’ll make a crocodile of you—understand? You know how you hate water and the muggers. Well, you behave or your next incarnation will be a mugger. Now come down and kowtow.”

Mansey listened in astonishment and something of fear. The she-ape was powerful enough to tear a man limb from limb, and she was roused to fury. Her eyes shot green fire, her teeth flashed and ground on themselves. The pretty little bride was gray-skinned with terror and dropped to the ground, her golden eyes a wild appeal. Mullet had been drinking heavily all night and was still drunk. His face grew purple-red, his eyes were bloodshot, the veins on his neck stood out and throbbed. But the ape

defied him and in the end he snarled a command to take the girl inside, and strode off beckoning Mansey to follow to a couch by a shaded nook at the jungle edge.

There he imbibed more fermented coconut juice and gradually calmed to coherency which was no less frightful in its revelations than his exhibition of rage.

"That ape is near human. I'd say she is human. Old Keith made a study of them. I went him one better. I gave them brains. You saw that she was jealous, didn't you? Well, I'm afraid of her. Six months ago she killed my bride, another red-headed beauty like this one. I've got to prevent that, Mansey. Somehow I've got to keep her from this girl."

"Why not do away with the ape?" asked Mansey, more because some reply was expected than as a suggestion.

"I dare not. I've got seven of them trained, equipped with brains, thinking brains. They're my bodyguard. Without them I wouldn't last here. Oh, I know these blacks don't love me! I'm not that great a fool that I'd feel safe long. The she-apes are always near. You don't see them, but they don't let me out of their sight. I made a mistake with Sheba, though. Sheba was the name of that red-haired she-devil of a wife that tried to do me in. I remember telling you about her last night. Well, Sheba loved her red hair and beauty. She loved me too damn well. And God, how she hates being a monkey! But that was no idle threat about the muggers. I've never tried that, but I will. I'll make a crocodile of Sheba, so help me God, if she touches this new girl."

"Mullet, you're about as drunk as I've seen a man. Better quit that stuff or you'll be seeing monkeys," said Mansey.

Homer Mullet laughed long and loud.

"You don't believe that, eh? Well, I don't blame you. But didn't you hear why they did for me in London? No? Well, I'll tell you. I took the brain of a boy dying with consumption and transplanted it to the head of a half-wit homicide. And by God, I made a success of it! And did they hail me as the discoverer of a new trail in surgery, and see as I saw, a way to empty our asylums and make use of incurables? They did not. They said I was crazy, they disgraced me. I barely escaped an asylum myself. That's why I came out here and kept my hand in. And I've done it time and time again. There was plenty of opportunity. The battles gave me subjects for experiment, and many a head is mummied and sold whose brain is still doing excellent service in a strange body. That's what I've done."

Mansey was staring at Mullet the surgeon, who gloated over his own skill. It was unbelievable, yet except the wrath which shone in his eyes, Mullet's appearance was convincing.

"But trying the ape business was new. And possibly it was immoral. Sheba tried so many times to kill me, and one night when I was sleeping she almost got me. I struck in self-defense, stunned her and saw-myself as a murderer. You may think murder a small thing to a man like me. It isn't. I've never killed. I didn't kill then. The she-ape that Keith had trained and which liked me was tearing the hut to pieces when she heard the row inside, and before I could get a gun she had snatched the body of my insensible Sheba. You won't care for details of what happened. I hadn't a weapon and I grabbed a bottle of chloroform which was handy and tried to brain the ape. The bottle broke and she was deluged. It

acts quickly on them, Mansey. And something seemed to crack in my brain as I saw the unconscious ape and the dying woman. Well, the ape is Sheba. Now you know. I'm a fool not to kill her, but it's gone farther than that with me. I liked Sheba. And she cared enough for me to prevent my ever taking a second wife. More than that, she has somehow communicated to the other orang-outangs her jealous guardianship.

"I can't slaughter all the apes in the jungle, and they haunt me. Sheba has managed to people the land with gray ghouls who watch me night and day. Dante never conceived the hell of torture that I'm living through, Mansey."

IN THE tropic heat, Homer Mullet shivered and sweat broke cold on the forehead of Tom Mansey. Through terrific repulsion overwhelming him, he found himself sorry for the man who had made his own hell with more ingenious cunning than cannibal head-hunters could have devised for him.

"Mansey, if you could tell me a way out, I'd hang these pearls on your arm. An emperor's ransom, Mansey, for a plan to rid myself of this hell and live in peace."

Mansey was silent. The avalanche of horror had come so suddenly he could not yet grasp the thing. He assured himself it was the talk of a maniac, wildly horrible, yet in spite of reason he was convinced. And sifting through the horror was the fact of those red-haired heads drifting down to be bartered. If what Mullet said should be true, he was no nearer accomplishing what he had come to do. The authorities would not believe this tale nor could he halt the barter and trade.

"What became of the—the head—of Sheba?" he asked, licking dry lips with the tip of his tongue.

"They stole it from me. And I had made a job of that head, was rolling drunk when I did most of it. I put eyes——"

"Cat's-eye quartz?" asked Mansey. Mullet nodded.

"I've got it in the boat," said Mansey. "That was the one that caused the trouble. It was nicely finished."

Mullet stared at him.

"For God's sake, hide it, Mansey. Perhaps Sheba——"

He did not finish, for swinging down from tree branches overhead, the great she-ape stood before them.

Mullet ripped out an oath and added, "You heard what I was saying, you——"

Mansey fancied he heard the sound of a guttural word of speech and he leaped to his feet, ready to run for cover. The ape regarded him a moment with her alert gaze, then reached a paw, caught his shoulder and flung him, as if he were a child, at Mullet's feet.

"Better behave, Mansey," commented Mullet. "She's heard what I said. She was old Keith's daughter, remember, and he taught all of them his own tongue. If you speak French now, we might manage——"

He looked at Mansey enquiringly. Mansey shook his head.

"Very little. I do comprehend '*sauve qui peut*,' however, and it seems appropriate to this situation."

"A fine chance," snarled Mullet, as he looked about him. Mansey's gaze followed that survey and again he felt the chill of fear. In the thick tangle of lianas and jungle growth he caught glimpses of gray shapes watching them, swinging in grotesquely airy flight from tree to tree, a company of gray apes, the formidable "men of the woods" known to the world as orang-outangs.

"My harem," was hissed from Mullet's lips. "Each one equipped

with the brains of a woman I selected as a wife, sealing her doom at the hands of this she——” The epithets he applied to Sheba were unspeakably vile. Mansey looked in apprehension at Sheba, but her eyes had not changed expression. Evidently there were a good many curses of port dives and docks not included in her knowledge of English. In place of anger, the eyes held something of the love-loyalty seen in the eyes of a faithful dog for its master. She squatted beside Mullet, took his hand and stroked it with her black paw, then held it to her cheek. Mullet jerked it away with an expression of disgust, and the great ape whimpered sorrowfully.

“You see?” snarled Mullet. “Yet we must talk. How about those gramophone records? Start a row going——”

“They’re in the launch,” said Mansey. “I’ll get them.” But when he rose, the ape caught his ankle, reaching with no apparent effort, and Mansey was jerked to the ground. Then, throwing back her head, Sheba displayed her fangs in a wide-mouthed and unmistakable grin. Mansey realized that he had walked into a trap, that only by cunning could he escape from the dread company of gray ghouls which Mullet the surgeon loosed in that jungle. Now for the first time he faced greater peril than head-hunting savages seeking trophies or glutting their unquenchable blood-lust against white intruders.

“Wait,” said Mullet, then addressed the ape. “You savvy music records?” He made a circular motion with his hand and hummed a scrap of tune. “You fetchem white man proa ’longside. Savvy?”

Sheba uttered a sound from her throat and swung in swift flight through the trees. Mansey immediately scrambled to his feet and Mullet rose, but before they could take

a step there was a circle of great apes hemming them in effectively. They made no attempt to touch either man, but formed a ring and marched about the two prisoners in what might have seemed a ludicrously humorous array if it had not been menacing and sinister.

“Mansey, I’m going out with you. I’ve got to go. God knows there isn’t any other place for me—in white settlements, I mean—but I’ll get to another island. They can’t cross water. Oh, you can speak now! These are natives, not even very good at *beche de mer* talk. It’s that devil of a Sheba who understands and communicates with the others. You heard her just now, calling them. Usually they don’t come so close, but your arrival has made her suspicious, no doubt, and she doesn’t want to lose me.”

His laughter was mirthless and uncanny, the sound of insanity cracking in his voice. Mansey did not wonder. He felt that his own reason would not long stand the strain of this sinister surveillance. Yet what reasoning power was still uncluttered by the impasse in which he found himself, cautioned him against attempting to assist Mullet to escape. The great ape would frustrate such an attempt, he felt sure. And there was danger in releasing a madman like Mullet on any other island, he thought. Aware that his face showed reluctance, he was again frank in speech.

“Mullet, I’m of the opinion that you can’t get away, and I must. I could bring help, perhaps. I’ll give you my word to do what I can, but for two of us to attempt escape, especially when you have such devoted followers, is utterly futile.”

“Look here, don’t you fancy for a moment you and that launch will leave this lagoon without me, Mansey. You can’t, you know, unless I am willing. Even if you got to the launch, the blacks in their canoes would

halt you at the reef entrance. I've had enough of this. Before you came I was making the best of it. I was content enough, only that I wanted a woman. Oh, it's my own doings! Don't think I'm shifting the blame, but at that it was something stronger than my will driving my hand to that delicate operation. If they'd let me alone in London, if they'd seen the marvel of what I'd accomplished, the greatest feat of surgery in this or any other age, I wouldn't be here and this wouldn't have happened. But they drove me out, my own race and kind. And you belong to them, Mansey. I've got a grudge, not against you, but all white men. Mansey"—his voice became quieter, more confidential in tone—"what if we'd take Sheba, you and I, and tour a few countries exhibiting the greatest marvel of the age? We'd need money, and we'd make it. I've lorded it here. I couldn't go back and grub and sweat again. But we could do that——"

"Mullet, either you talk rational or——"

"What will you do? What *can* you do except put a bullet through me, and you'd loose a hell-fury that would tear you bit by bit in rags. I've seen Sheba do that. Finger by finger, Mansey, toe by toe, handfuls of hair, eyelids——"

"Shut up, you beast!" cried Mansey.

"That gets you, eh? Well, it's true. And I'm your only protection. You've got to save me to escape alive."

"What about the natives?"

"Sheba is half native, remember, and she likes her own kind. They're safe. They're not only safe but invulnerable. When they go forth to take wives and heads, the gray apes go along and fight for them. It's a

shambles when they leave, Mansey. It has one kick-back, though." Mullet laughed again and Mansey liked his curses better than his laughter. "The natives don't need to fight and they will in time lose their own initiative, their courage. Some day this tribe won't exist, but that won't come in time to save us."

"Listen, Mullet, suppose I go out and bring help, a revenue cruiser that will blast this village into nothingness as has been done before now. A few shells——"

"Shells 'won't reach the apes. You'd merely murder the blacks who aren't to blame. Besides, I've no assurance that you'd come back or send them. Who'd believe your story of human apes? And where would I be when they shelled the village? If I went to the hills, the apes would go along. If I stayed here to have them killed I'd get it. What, don't you see I couldn't even kill myself if I felt like heroics to save you, because you'd have Sheba on your neck the minute I croaked? Pretty little mess, eh, Mansey? And there is no escape in the jungles or huts, none at all except to cross the water where the apes can't follow, and you're handicapped there because the natives know just what would happen to them if I'm not here to keep Sheba pacified. I did try getting away with one of my brides in a canoe and Sheba was on watch that night. She tore a *lagi-lagi* to bits, jerked the men to the shore and sent them after me in canoes. Then they gave me to understand I must not try again to escape. Oh, it's a beautiful entanglement! Here's Sheba."

THE great ape dropped from overhanging tree branches and in one arm she carried Mansey's gramophone case, without which he never traveled. It was further proof of the

uncanny intelligence of Sheba that she had understood Mullet's command and brought the case. She squatted and deftly unfastened the buckles of leather straps binding the oil-cloth cover, fitted the handle, opened a package of records and wound the machine. In another moment the wail of *She's My Baby Doll* rose in the hot silence. An instant later Mansey shrieked laughter of hysteric abandon, for the great sheape was swaying from one foot to another and gazing at Homer Mullet with the amorous leer of a love-sick crone. She put out a paw to take his hand, but Mullet jerked it aside, and kicked his bare foot at her chest. Lacking his hand to fondle, she seized his foot, precipitated him on his back and cuddled the foot to her breast, laying her cheek against it and fondling each toe as mothers the world over play with toes of their babies.

"Laugh, damn you," growled Mullet. "I'll show you." He spoke in native to Sheba, who reluctantly released his foot, caught Mansey in her arms and, despite his struggles, swung to the tree branches. For all her strength the weight of a fighting man cumbered her movements and she halted her flight to hold him by both arms and shake him until his teeth rattled. Then swinging farther aloft she flung him over the crotch of a branch and dropped to earth.

From below, Mansey heard Mullet's shrieks of mirth. At that elevation he could see the village huts, the lagoon and his launch, the long reef-jaws, and ascending far down the outer beach, the smokes of fires where his Tonga boys cooked their meal. About him were the palms glittering like sabers in the sun, but the jungle was silent, bereft of the gorgeous birds of Paradise, the lorries and parakeets, the little chattering harmless

monkeys. Where the great apes held court, no other jungle life lingered.

Mansey straddled the limb and considered in frantic dismay the situation in which he was placed. Reluctantly, he accepted Mullet's logic. There seemed no escape. Watching glimpses he obtained of the lagoon through swaying palms and branch plumes, he saw a dark object floating and realized with his heart racing that it was the body of his native left in charge of the boat. Evidently he had angered Sheba and she had killed him without so much as an outcry. Mansey almost envied the dead man. For the first time in his years of Papua he admitted that there were worse things than murder: far worse than the taking and curing of human heads as trade to tourists was the fitting of beast craniums with the brains of thinking humans.

Mansey looked below. The gramophone still wailed its jazz music and foolish songs. The seven great sheapes were dancing clumsily, in contrast to their lithe grace in the trees. Mullet lay prone on the mats, his naked trunk crisscrossed by strings of pearls, his arms over his eyes. Above, Mansey racked his brain to think of a plan of escape. Far off, the black crouching hills quivered in the heat, which was affecting Mansey in spite of a breeze at that elevation which did not penetrate below. He felt thirsty and faint and he knew if he should lose his grip of the tree bole, he would fall to death. His heart and blood began to pound, a throbbing which presently drummed in his ears. Then, suddenly, Tom Mansey knew he heard drums, far off, faint, inaudible to Mullet because of the grinding gramophone diligently kept going by Sheba.

Mansey knew the meaning of the drum-song of Papua, rising, falling, sinister, maddening, the voice coaxed by bare hands from bladderskins

stretched over human skulls, and a new fear swooped and rode his shoulders. That drum-song meant savages on the march, and it was coming nearer. He looked below and saw that the she-apes had ceased dancing and stood as if listening through the blatant jazz music to the voice of approaching peril.

In another moment, Sheba had clutched Mullet and shot him to his feet and was chattering a warning. The gramophone record died with a moan, and the drum-song rose insistent as the drone of bees, palpitant as the quivering hills. It roused sleeping natives and the huts belched savages. They poured from the *lagi-lagi* where they had been sleeping off the night potations, arranging their plume crests as they leaped to earth, young men greedy for battle, eager for slaughter, grimly meticulous over their gaudy ornaments, proud of the fine blue lace of tattooing and blistered cicatrices obtained in agony.

Mullet looked up to where Mansey was hidden in the tree.

"Need help to get down?" he called. "Sheba will fetch you."

Mansey yelled a refusal and began to scramble down, but the great ape swung aloft before he had compassed more than a few feet of the descent. She caught the branch on which he was perched and bent it double, plucked him from his vantage and let the branch go. The crash as it flew back proved the tremendous strength of the beast-woman, and Mansey's heart missed a beat as he was swung in flying leaps and dropped on the mats, unhurt.

"Hear those drums?" began Mullet. "That means reprisal. Now Sheba and her sisters can help my fellows defend the village." He looked at Mansey, and in the blood-shot eyes of Mullet there was a meaning Mansey tried to read because neither dared utter his thoughts in

the uncanny hearing of Sheba. Mullet turned to the ape.

"Good Sheba, pretty Sheba. Go after the drums, Sheba. Show the Kauloo warriors they can't fight our fellows. Take the other girls and have a good fight, old girl." He patted her shoulder, and at that careless caress the great ape fawned on him like a grateful cur that has known only kicks and abus

THE warriors were dressing for battle in frenzied haste. They scorned to go forth to fight or die in aught but gorgeous array. And a drum-song of their own arose, one drum after another, purling the blood-rousing tempo that stirs the heart and soul of a man, tingles in his flesh, prickles on his scalp, the primal quickening call to war. Looking at Mullet, Tom Mansey saw hope born in his eyes and thought he understood. They would be rid of the apes for a time. His own thoughts darted to the launch in the lagoon, the Tonga flotilla on the beach outside. Then as he looked seaward Mansey cursed. The Tonga boys had heard that drum-song and understood its meaning. They had no courage. They had launched their canoes, which ranged like slim dark beetles on the sun-glitter of the sea, ready to dart like arrows to safety far beyond. They hovered about the lagoon entrance evidently waiting a hail or sign from Mansey, and he was powerless to reach them.

About the cooking fire, replenished by old men, began the war dance, and old women fetched gourds of fermented coconut wine, which was swigged by the warriors, who smacked their lips loudly and leaped into new frenzy, wild contortions, a hideous Carmagnole in which the she-apes joined, sometimes jumping to catch a tree branch and swing madly, spinning in midair like gibbet-fruit. Then at a sign from the leader, the dancers

fled into the jungle, and the great apes leaped to the trees. Where had been a ferocious swarm of painted savages was only the scattered fire embers and the women gathering the empty gourds.

"Now," said Mullet, "now is our chance. We've got the luck of fools. Get to the launch and start it, Mansey, and I'll get the girl. By God, I'd have given Sheba credit for more brains than she showed this time, but the gods are with us."

"Look here, you leave that girl behind, Mullet." Mansey's voice was stern.

"To be killed by the she-ape? What d'you take me for? Not much! I know what'll happen to every living human left in this village when Sheba comes home and finds me gone. There won't be a village. There won't be anything, Mansey, but rubbish, blood-soaked earth and bits of flesh. That girl comes. And there's no time to argue. . ."

It was the one outstanding fact; they must hasten and get away. Mansey turned and ran to the landing stage where he had been swung from the launch yesterday. He shortened her painter, dropped in and whirled the wheel. Then his heart sank. The engine was dead and a glance showed him the cunning of Sheba, for she had unscrewed every nut and bolt she could find and emptied his spare gasoline. The cans glittered at the bottom of the lagoon when Mansey looked overside. The ape had taken time to sink them, sink every spare tool and all loose gear she could find. She had even thrust the oars, carried for emergency, into the open jaws of tridacnas, which closed on them. He leaned over, and reaching into the water, wrenched on one, but not all his strength released it. His efforts broke the blade tip and the maimed oar came up in his hands. The second one was beyond his reach.

Some minutes had elapsed in his cursory examination of the launch, but his brain was never so alert before. He thought he might use the maimed oar to scull the unwieldy craft, and stood up to summon the Tonga proas from beyond the reef, for the old men and women of the village were watching him covertly and muttering among themselves. Mansey remembered they did not want Mullet to escape for fear of the great apes' wrath. But they would probably not interfere with him. He faced a decision of saving his own life and leaving Mullet to a hell he had made for himself, or risking death in the attempt to release Mullet from horror. The choice was wrenched from him when he saw Mullet leap from the bleaching hut to the ground with the girl on his shoulder, and Mullet's free hand clutched a big navy revolver.

Mansey saw the reason for the gun at once, and his own small automatics were in his hands. For when they saw their erstwhile white master running like a deer for the shore, there was a piercing scream from the natives left behind the war party, and they rushed at Mullet and the girl, determined to hold him on his perilous throne.

Mansey heard the man's warning cry, then the crack of his gun as he cleared a path, shooting as he ran, crashing through the outthrust arms that would have detained him, leaving dead and dying in his wake. He had almost gained the white strip of coral beach from which the landing stage jutted over the lagoon water, when one courageous old man threw himself headlong and Mullet tripped and crashed to earth, the girl flung from his arms and curled in a heap on the coral. In another moment, Mullet was the center of a heaving, lunging mass of blacks who tried to weight him to earth.

Mansey, in the launch, heard his fists thud on flesh, heard the thud of the gun-butt used as a club, saw black and white arms threshing like flails, then with a mighty heave Mullet was free. A triumphant yell burst from his throat and he had leaped toward the shining head of the girl who lay on the sand as she had fallen, evidently knocked unconscious. That yell died in Mullet's throat and Mansey's heart missed a beat, then raced painfully. For from the quivering plumes of trees dropped a gray ghoul shape, screaming horribly in rage, and she flung herself at the white man and sent him spinning with a sweep of her long arm. It was Sheba!

With his brain in a whirl, Mansey realized that if he was ever to get away, it was the crucial moment. Yet, loosing the launch painter, he hesitated. Mullet lay prone on the glistening coral sand, and after a glance at him, Sheba had turned to the girl whose shining brush of curls turned slightly as if consciousness was just returning. One awful scream burst from her throat as the hand of Sheba encircled her throat, then Mansey saw her bright hair through a red mist, for he realized what was going to happen, and saw from his eye corners that Mullet had rolled to his belly on the coral and was taking aim with his gun. Mansey's thoughts darted in wild speculation. Mullet would shoot Sheba, and he need not aim for the girl unless Mullet missed the ape. Otherwise—he shuddered with horror of what would happen in another moment as the hammer of Mullet's gun clicked uselessly, and Sheba, snarling horribly, picked up the girl as if she were a rag doll.

Mansey's gun cracked twice. He felt sick, revolting with nausea, for the girl's body hung limp in the ape's paws, and on her golden skin two bright soft ribbons spurted and

flowed. She was beyond pain. But Mullet was creeping soundlessly, cautiously on his belly over the coral, making for the landing stage.

MANSEY loosed the painter, held the launch by his clutch of the nearest post, kept his gun aimed at the head of Sheba, trying in spite of the red mist over his sight to point for the base of her brain, afraid to risk a shot lest he should miss and she would be upon them with lightning speed.

He had time to think how marvelously the rapid-fire passing of events had shaped for this get-away. Without the sudden arrival of Sheba, the natives would have prevented their escape; and if Mansey had not insisted on bringing the girl, Sheba's attention would never have been distracted by this opportunity to glut jealous rage on her rival in the affections of Mullet. The great ape was extremely, dreadfully engrossed. Mansey tried not to see what she did, tried to believe it was a rag doll in the hands of a mischievous pet. He was bracing himself with all his will to override the violent upheaval that swept to his eyes and brain, while Mullet crept toward the launch.

Far off the drum-song was muffled, like the croon of surf on coral. Beyond the reef his Tonga boys waited. Another two minutes and Mullet would tumble into the craft. Already Mansey had braced the broken oar-tip against the planks to shove out. They must widen the water between themselves and Sheba. Mansey wondered, in a vague, darting thought, if orang-outangs could not swim, and remembered that before this trans-ementation the human body of Sheba was probably adept and strong in the water.

Mullet was on the landing stage. Mansey heard the planks creak, but Sheba seemed to hear nothing but her

own animal snarling at the dreadful task presented her. She was almost finished. Her arm swept out and held aloft something pitiful with long bright hair which she played with and stroked. Then from far out beyond the reef one of Mansey's boys hailed his master. Mansey's whole body jerked as if his nerves were strings of a puppet snatched by a crude hand.

"Marster, Marster!"

Mullet lunged as Sheba was on her feet. The launch careened crazily as he plunged in and Mansey heaved on the oar, then tried to propel the craft from the stern. One wild screech of baffled rage rang and echoed between the jungle-clad reef-prongs, and swinging the head by its long hair, Sheba sailed through the air, flung herself from the landing stage into the water and swam after the boat.

Mullet was yelling and chattering like a madman. His gun was gone and he had seized Mansey's automatics and sent a sharp fusillade at the swimming ape. If Sheba was hit, the lead pellets did not halt her. Mansey, sculling frantically at the stern, saw her fangs bared, heard her snarls, stared in horror as his muscles cracked with the strain of propelling the tubby launch, at the long, gray, hairy ghoul which gained on them so rapidly that the boat might have been anchored for all headway they seemed to make.

A mighty lunge, and Sheba's paw caught the stern, seized the oar with which he tried to batter her off, and wrenched it from his grasp. Then Mansey threw himself on the combing as the ape's weight almost swamped them. Mullet was screaming, fighting, kicking as the paws seized him, dragged him from his clutch of the planks and hauled him, still struggling, into the sea.

For a moment there was a wild upheaval, and the clear lagoon water

churned in foam that was blood-streaked. Mullet's shots had hit the she-ape, but that great body had the strength and endurance of an elephant. Yet in another moment, Mansey saw that Sheba was badly wounded, for her lips dripped redly and her eyes showed glassy.

Mullet was clasped in one arm and she tried to swim with the other. Beside the body of Mullet trailed a head with bright hair, and Mansey, helpless to avert further tragedy, sick with the shock of dread, clung to the launch combing, watching Sheba suddenly cease swimming, and sink beneath the lagoon water, with Mullet in her grasp.

The ripples spread in rings, the bubbles broke. Through water clear as air, Mansey saw the gray ghoul go down, feet first, with the white man still struggling futilely. Then as the hairy gray shape parted sea-fern fronds until her foot touched a vantage by which she might have shot her body to the surface, there was a further commotion in the sea-gardens, a violent upheaval writhing below, a line of bubbles ascending, breaking soundlessly as the souls of man and she-ape escaped.

Mansey stared. He knew. Sheba's foot had touched the tinted flesh flanges of a giant tridacna and it had closed like a steel trap. Not even in the death agony had she released her embrace of the man whom in human shape she had loved so fiercely that she took him with her to a transelementation far removed from reach of those bunglers who trifle with the doors of life and death.

THE hot sun blazed down on a man inert, limp as a rag, lying on the launch bottom, and presently the Tonga boys who saw the launch put out, came to investigate.

They were some weeks towing the
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Gray Ghouls

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disabled launch to port, and during that time Tom Mansey recovered from a siege of sub-consciousness and fever in which he raved and fought a nightmare jungle peopled with gray ghouls. And when some time later he made a report to the authorities, it contained prophecy and prediction.

“It is fairly well established that wherever the white man goes, it means elimination of the savage, not by slaughter, of course. We have subtler ways. And the higher type of skill and brains you send in, the quicker you set the death-dealing forces to work among the natives. Compared with one courageous, brainy white man, cobras, crocodiles, tigers, any of the jungle terrors are simple and innocuous. I know. As regards moneyed idiots who were promoting head barter, fine them enough and jail them. Cut off the demand and you kill the supply.”

They rewarded Mansey rather well for that investigation, although in the launch bottom the Tonga boys gathered a king's ransom in pearls from strands which broke as Mullet struggled to escape death. They were rather honest Tonga boys and only thieved half of the pearls to divide among themselves, but Mansey is barrased. Pearls belong to throats of pretty women, but those pearls held memories too horrid to give to a nice girl, so he is waiting to trade them to curio-hunters disappointed at lack of mummied human heads.

“*The Devils of Po Sung,*” another powerful weird story of the South Seas by Bassett Morgan, a tale of creeping horror, will appear soon in WEIRD TALES. Watch for it.