

Weird Tales

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Author of "The Ghost of Silent Smith," etc.

THE elemental love of a man for his family will take queer turns at times, but for sheer horror none of the famous tragedies of history can equal the warped affection which forms the basis of the incident I am about to narrate. It happened in the heart of that vast uninhabited country drained by the upper Congo, some two hundred miles from civilization's nearest outpost.

As a member of the Denckla geographic expedition, I had spent nearly a year in the wild interior, collecting a mass of scientific data for the society we represented. While the task at hand had been a fascinating one, I could feel myself growing dull and sluggish, mentally as well as physically, under the devitalizing rays of the African sun.

My note-book recalls the date as June 14, 1890, when we emerged from the swamp-infested inland, and again set eyes on the sullen waters of the dominating Congo. The sight was a welcome one. To us it meant but a five days' journey to the comfort and contentment of a white man's home.

We pitched our tents on the angle of land formed by a tiny rivulet and the growing expanse of the master stream. The sun had dipped far down

behind the towering trees to the west by the time our camp chores were completed, and the comparative coolness of early evening had sprung up.

Wearied by the arduous tasks of the day, I indulged in a leisurely pipe and prepared to retire immediately. Upon entering my tent I discovered, with wondering eyes, a long, gaping rent in the canvas opposite—clean-cut and new. From outside there sounded the soft thud of flying feet. I plunged through the opening in time to see a dim figure disappear into the tangled undergrowth of the darkening jungle.

Investigation developed that a rifle, several boxes of cartridges and two scientific books, which we carried for reference, were missing. Apparently nothing else had been tampered with.

A guard was mounted on the encampment that night, but the mysterious marauder never returned.

Stretched out on my cot, I pondered over the puzzling occurrence for some time. That the theft had been perpetrated by a white man, I knew. The form which had scurried into the leafy cover of the jungle was not that of a dark-skinned native. This was a riddle in itself, for the men who penetrate any distance into the wilds of

the world are men of purpose who find no time for petty thievery. But the nature of the loot was as much of a wonder as the race of the man. Apparently no food had been sought; and why the books? Why—the—books? I could frame no satisfactory answer and fell asleep presently with that query weaving monotonously through my brain.

HIGH noon of our third day in that locality found me some distance inland on a little hunting excursion of my own. I had about decided to retrace my steps back to camp when I brought up suddenly in astonishment. That this section of the dark continent should harbor any civilized inhabitants was beyond belief, but away to my left, cunningly hidden behind the dense foliage of the matted trees, stood a cabin.

There was no sign of human life about the place, not even the semblance of a pathway; but the very existence of a permanent, man-made shack so far removed from any settlement was mystery enough to stir the blood of any adventurous soul. I started forward slowly with the vague idea of unearthing some strange jungle secret and emerged presently upon a little clearing, from where I surveyed the place with doubtful eyes.

Few tools and very little skill had been utilized in the erection of that cabin. There were no windows; the wall logs were undaubed and irregular, some of them jutting far out at the corners, while the ill-fitting door sagging pathetically upon rope hinges gave to the whole a grotesque appearance.

But it was not so much the appearance of the place as the intangible atmosphere of horror enveloping it which held me. Instinctively I distrusted that abandoned silence which seemed to beckon so innocently. Some brooding evil lay hidden there waiting with cunning patience for the

springing of a trap; but like the venturesome fool I was, I approached and laid my weight cautiously against the door. To my surprize it resisted, and for a moment I speculated as to the wisdom of indulging my curiosity any further. That barred door indicated the presence of some one. Even as I hesitated a man's soft-drawling voice sounded from within, holding me rigid with amazement.

"Ah'll paddle down to the settlement next week, honey, and see if Ah can't pick up some new books for you. Reckon daughter can attend you satisfactorily until Ah return. Now try to sleep," soothingly. "You'll feel better in a little while."

Women—living in this God-forsaken spot! And a man of breeding, if I were any judge! The whole thing was preposterous, but such was the evidence my ears had gathered.

Thinking that I could possibly be of some service in case of illness, I raised the butt-end of my rifle and rapped. A deep silence followed. For a moment I experienced that unpleasant sensation of being passed upon by hidden eyes, and then the door was slowly opened.

Involuntarily I recoiled a step, scarcely knowing what to expect. A tall, broad shouldered man appeared. There was in his carriage a certain flash of dignity which could not be concealed by the tattered garments he wore. His hair was gray and fell in wild disorder to his shoulders, framing a countenance seamed by years of suffering. For a moment he regarded me with deep-set, weary eyes. Then:—

"You are welcome, sah," he said quietly, in the same soft-toned drawl, and stood aside for me to enter. I did so, feeling vaguely that the whole occurrence was a fragment of some senseless dream.

The interior was fitfully illumined by the daylight which filtered in between the undaubed logs, revealing a

picture of strange barrenness. Except for a few sawed-off logs evidently serving as chairs, and a large up-turned box in the center, the room was bare of furnishings. Across one end of the structure was draped a long, black cloth, which no doubt concealed the women.

My strange host closed the door without barring it and when I turned I found his eyes searching me with an unfathomable expression which was decidedly unpleasant.

"You'll pardon my intrusion," I said, a bit awkwardly. "I spied your cabin on my way back to camp and thought I could be of some service. My name is Brent."

"Glad to meet you, suh," he answered. "Visitors are a rare luxury with us. Mah name is Warner—Colonel Warner of Kentucky."

There was a surprising power in his hand-clasp.

"Unfortunately the women are somewhat indisposed at present, but Ah'll tell them you called, Mr. Brent. Won't you be seated, suh?"

I sank down upon the nearest log, a highly perplexed man. The formality of it all would have been laughable were it not for the serious dignity of this surprising colonel. So far as he was concerned we might have met in the drawing-room of some Southern mansion. As for myself, I could not throw off the sense of tragedy which seemed to lurk beneath the surface. Visibly there was nothing to fear, but the events of the last few minutes were too unnatural to put me at ease.

Of a sudden my roving eyes settled on the familiar outlines of a pair of shabby-looking books resting on the box close by. I stared, and the colonel, evidently noticing my gaze, took up one of the volumes.

"An excellent discourse, suh," said he, proffering me the volume, "but highly technical. Have you ever read it?"

I thumbed the well-known cover. On the fly-leaf, in my own handwriting, appeared my scrawly signature: "James W. Brent."

"One of the best treatises on the subject in existence," I declared.

"Decidedly! Ah got it only a few days ago for Mrs. Warner. She loves books, but finds reading a hardship. Her sight is dim. So Ah read things aloud to her. We found that very interesting, suh!"

With a sigh, which was half moan, he subsided upon a log near the opposite wall, and I returned the book to its companion. Undoubtedly it was my own, but I found it difficult to believe that this well-bred gentleman, however peculiar, had committed the theft.

I gazed at him curiously and found him staring vacantly into space with sagging jaw. Finally he spoke in a queer, detached manner.

"Colonel Warner! It seems like ages since I've heard that name. . . . The mad colonel! That's what they call me." Then suddenly: "Have you ever heard them tell of the mad colonel?"

I had not.

"No matter!" And he waved his hand in dismissal of the thought. "You would not feel so secure in my presence with their wild tales running through your brain. . . . Ah am not mad!" In his tone was a shade of wonder. "Only the victim of a terrible vengeance. . . . Do you see those pictures, Mr. Brent?"

I had overlooked them before—two small photographs framed in black hanging on the wall behind me; one of an elderly lady, beautiful beyond a doubt, the other of a captivating youngster.

"My family, Mr. Brent!"

His eyes fairly glowed with the pleasure of the telling, but promptly recovered their weary expression.

"We were happy once—back in Kentucky. A rich family, and well-

known. But disaster overtook us in the shape of a hopeless maniac—Andrew Lang."

For a moment he was silent, staring down at the floor with bent head, his gray hair falling about his face. I glanced around, trying to conjure up some excuse for leaving. I had no desire to probe into his family secrets; besides, that tense atmosphere of horror that overhung the place was anything but reassuring. I wanted to be gone. Rather the wild things of the jungle than to be cooped up with—what? I did not know. But I could sense some hidden terror, and involuntarily my eyes wandered to that crape-like drapery which divided the cabin.

I started to speak, but his soft voice interrupted, ignoring me completely.

"Ah was telling you of Andrew Lang, the madman. Ah trusted him like a brother and thought he was grateful until Ah discovered his perfidy. Lies and soft-tongued entreaties were his stock in trade. It was Mrs. Warner he wanted, suh. Cunning indeed were his methods . . . Ah—killed him!"

I could scarcely repress a shudder. The whole thing was beginning to get on my nerves; but I could not stay his soft-toned drawl.

"Insanity had been the family blight of Andrew Lang. All four of his sons were afflicted. For years they hounded me from place to place, vowing to avenge their father's death with cruel torture. But I felt justified. The honor of the Warner name—my wife's happiness—my little Helen . . ."

His voice trembled. Tears started to his eyes. Then he drew himself erect with military dignity.

"Legally Ah was a murderer, suh, and the law would not protect me from those four warped brains. I fled the country with my little family and took refuge here in the heart of the jungle, where I thought I would be safe; but those cunning brains found me—at last."

His shoulders drooped and his form relaxed into the very picture of despair. When he again spoke, his voice was dull, expressionless.

"First one came—and then another, disguised; but Ah knew them . . . And in self-defense Ah—killed them!"

For a moment I thought the man was mad. His tale was fantastic enough. But one look at his forlorn figure seemed to reassure me; sorrow and suffering were all that the picture held.

I WAS about to utter some words of sympathy when the door of the shack flew open and a harsh voice intruded. I started erect with quickened pulse. Framed in the door-way was a man clad in the khaki of the border rangers. One hand was poised lightly on the automatic in his belt. His eyes burned with triumph as they rested on the bent figure of the colonel, who had scarcely moved.

"So we've got you at last," grimly. "At last," echoed the colonel, dully.

"And a hell of a chase it was. Two others were not so successful. You have no idea what happened to them?"

It was more of an accusation than a question.

"Ah killed them—as Ah will you," was the colonel's toneless reply.

"Why, damn your mad hide," exploded the stranger, wrathfully, "I'll—"

"Mad? Mad?"

The colonel was on his feet with wildly glaring eyes, his hands working spasmodically.

"You—call me—mad!"

Suddenly he leaped forward and one powerful arm shot out. Recoiling a step the stranger whipped out his automatic. Simultaneously I brought the butt of my rifle down on his arm. Something cracked; a low moan escaped his lips and his weapon clattered to the floor.

Then the colonel was upon him, his powerful hands clutched in a death grip on the stranger's throat. I tried to pull him off. It was useless. The stranger's face turned purple and his body sagged. Then the colonel's rage subsided and with a hissing intake of breath he let his victim slip through his hands into a lifeless heap on the floor.

A sickening nausea swept me at the hideous sight. I shuddered and turned away. The colonel seized my hand in his and I could feel him tremble.

"Thank you, suh," he whispered. "God knows what would have become of my family. . . . He was the—third!"

His voice faltered and my heart went out to him in pity in spite of the murder just committed. Then with a sudden movement he turned and bent over the dead body of his enemy.

Grasping the limp form beneath the arm-pits he started to drag it across the rough boards of the cabin and presently disappeared behind that mysterious barrier of black without a backward glance. A gruesome object to lay before the eyes of that unseen family of his!

I studied that swaying curtain with puzzled eyes, trying to penetrate its secret, and gradually grew conscious of a thin stream of red slowly oozing from beneath its low-hanging folds. I stared, motionless, my brain beset with wild imaginings. Surely that slowly creeping line of red was—blood! What thing of evil had I stumbled upon? What horror did that sable cloth conceal?

I tiptoed across the floor and gently pulled back the curtain at one side. A weird sight met my eyes.

The colonel was kneeling before an upturned box, his body bent like a worshiper before a shrine. Beside him where he knelt, rested three shaggy, human heads, one still wet with blood, while a decapitated form in blood-stained khaki lay huddled in a far corner. I heard the colonel speak—a horribly elated whisper.

"You're safe, honey! He'll never get you. He can't. We'll fool them all—all!"

And he laughed.

I stared with something akin to fascination at the repulsive sight. Suddenly he turned, sensing my presence.

"Come in, suh," he cried. "Come in and meet the family—Mrs. Warner and little Helen!"

I saw that his eyes were bulging and his face working in a frenzy of maniacal emotion. With a cat-like movement he sprang to his feet, disclosing the idols of his worship—his family—resting sphinx-like on the box before him. Two empty, grinning skulls!

A terrible weakness assailed me as I staggered away from that place of madness into the sanity of broad daylight.

FIVE days later, on arriving at the settlement down-stream, I learned that three rangers had been sent out after "the mad colonel" somewhere up the river and that none had returned.

I held my peace.

