

Weird Tales



March, 1953

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

I stared up at a gentle, ravaged face and into the saddest pair of eyes I have ever seen.



In Camera

BY JOHN WARD

OUR co-incidental meeting in the Last Horizon Club called for a bull session. We pitched it in Pick's room, with all the liquid impedimenta. Pick had just returned from the Ankor Thom country, Guy Van Toon from the Hindu Kush. Eskimo Ike was marking time until his Arctic Diesel-schooner was equipped, and I had come ashore that morning off an American Export freighter after two years in the hell-hole of the world—Timbuktu.

The second time the steward came in to correct the cracked ice situation he handed

Pick a note on Club stationery. Pick scanned it swiftly, looked thoughtful for several ticks, stuffed it in a pocket and said, "Young Frank Simons is down in the lobby with a friend of his. Wants to know if they can join us for a while. I say it's agreeable to me—Frank's a good lad. Any objections?" As this was an impromptu free-for-all, there weren't, so Pick told the steward to fetch 'em up.

When the two unexpected but thoroughly welcome guests came into the room I got a quick impression that young Simons did

not look his usual rugged, exuberant self.

His companion was a compact, middle-aged man as British as fish and chips. Young Simons introduced him simply as, "My friend Mr. Henry Featherstone of Nairobi."

Mr. Featherstone and Van Toon bowed politely to each other. It was evident they had rubbed noses sometime in the past and were satisfied to let it go at that. As I hadn't been in British East Africa for seven years, this monocled bird was a new chum to me.

Pick greeted our youngest member with the Club's time-honored rib, "Hello, Frank, been out of town?" That's as much of a greeting a year's absence from New York rates at the Last Horizon Club.

Frank grinned and quipped back weakly, "Oh—I just ran over to Kenya for the week-end, Captain Pickering."

"It's incomprehensible to me," wheezed Van Toon in his nasty manner, "why you young squirts waste your time and other people's money puttering about Equatorial Africa. Today, it's about as mysterious or virgin as Park Avenue. It's been overdone. I did it—thoroughly. There's been nothing new come out of Africa since I left there five years ago."

As I am a very human sort of cuss, Van Toon's deliberate ignoring of the years, personal fortune and health I have given to the Dark Continent irritated me. Well, he was one man who could irritate me without half trying. He was a bulky, virilely handsome man and his world-wide reputation as an explorer was unassailable. He had brains, courage and imagination plus. On the other side of the ledger he was arrogant, jealous, inordinately vain and bad-tempered.

I winked at the youngster and said, "I'm surprised to hear such drivel from you, Van Toon. There's always something new. Everywhere. Didn't old, decrepit Pick here just uncover another hidden city in the Cambodian jungle that's been under the eyes of the French engineers since the days of Mouhot? Get anything worthwhile this trip, Frank?"

Young Simons stared at me in the oddest way. Now I knew there was something wrong with him. He was wire-drawn and

the hand that held his whiskey and shook.

"I had a marvelous run of weather, Mr. Nevers," he said, "and got some fine studies. At least I think so. One reel of film I shot is—well, really something new. As you were saying, sir, there's always the possibility that there might be something—ah—not exactly new, you understand—just hidden? Like the lost city Captain Pickering found? Sort of not visible to everyone—maybe just to someone who had the right vision—the peculiar power to see it? I'm not making myself very clear, am I?"

His grave eyes flickered over us and came to focus on Van Toon. The great man was paying no attention. He was boldly studying the face of the man from Nairobi and his puzzled expression indicated he was calling hard on his memory.

What the devil? I thought.

"Hoy!" said Pick, "the lad has stumbled on something good."

Young Simons essayed a smile at Pick but it was only a caricature of a smile. Decidedly, there was something very wrong with this young man. Something bad had happened to him on his last venture. I had seen that watchful, apprehensive look before in the eyes of men for whom the Veil had been drawn aside in some far-off place.

Eskimo Ike waved an encouraging glass and nodded. "Sure. We all understand just what you mean, Frank. What did you dig up? Can we see it? Or is it a secret?"

"Well, Mr. Morehouse it's just a roll of film but, in a way, it is a secret. I mean to say, I wouldn't show it to everyone. So far, Mr. Featherstone is the only person who's seen it. I had to show it to him. But I particularly want to show it to you four men for I have every confidence in you. I am fortunate that I found you here together tonight. That's the reason I crashed your party, Captain Pickering. To ask you all if you would be good enough to look at this film and tell me what you think of it and what should be done about the matter. It's a short reel and will only take a few minutes to run off. I will consider it a great favor. Will you do it?"

"But of course, dear boy," said Pick, matching young Simons' serious mood. "We

appreciate your thought, and I daresay we'll enjoy it. When and where? Say the word."

"Thank you Captain," said Frank. "Can you come to the projection room in fifteen minutes? I'll arrange with Janney for its use and have him see that everything is okay."

"All right with us, Frank," agreed Pick. "By the way, Janney's an expert operator. He'll be glad to run off the reel for you. Ask him."

Frank shook his head. "No, that won't do. I'll run it. I don't want anyone in there but you four men and Henry."

"Very well then. We'll see you there in fifteen minutes. Oh—pardon, fellers. I'm speaking for all of us I presume?" Pick cocked an eyebrow. Ike and I nodded.

"I have too few precious minutes left to me, to waste them being bored to death," grunted Van Toon ungraciously.

Frank started to say something to him, changed his mind, made a gesture of defeat, said, "Come along Henry" and stepped out into the corridor.

THE Last Horizon Club is very proud of its midget theatre. It was designed by an ex-Pathé newshawk and its equipment is the best. From its silver screen many remarkable pictures have been reflected. Amazing pictures. Pictures not made for profit or public entertainment—a lot of them would have laid a censor out cold—but for scientific observation and for their proper place in the archives of anthropology.

Pick's, Ike's and my eyes being all about the same age, we selected seats half-way down, on the left side of the aisle. The Featherstone bird parked himself opposite, but a row back. Young Simons started up the short, steep stair that leads to the projection booth. A smart knocking outside pulled him down. He unlocked the door and admitted the knocker. It was Van Toon. He had reversed himself. Without a word of explanation he dropped into a seat in the back row. His guttural, asthmatic breathing was painful to hear. That last trip to the Hindu Kush must have played the very devil with his heart and lungs.

Frank opened the little slide window in the front of the booth and called down to

us. "Gentlemen, just a word. I'm going to ask you again to indulge me in a whim. Much of what you are going to see is very familiar to you—old stuff, as Mr. Van Toon says. You're also going to witness something strange—inexplicable. Something so unnatural that your first impulse will be to cry out against it and demand an explanation that I'm unable to give you. Won't you please reserve all comment until the entire picture has been shown?"

"Okay Frank, we'll keep shut," sang out Ike. "Shoot."

"Thanks. It's a silent—not a sound film and I hasten to assure you no lecture goes with it. I'll merely tell you that on the morning of September Eighteenth last, taking only Mruni the headman, my Sikh gunbearer, ten black boys and two Batwa pygmies, I struck out from camp for Mount Mikeno to try for gorilla pictures. Along the way I ran into some exceptionally well posed groups of other beasties and took some short shots. The first was at a waterhole not far from camp and this is what I

The little theatre went suddenly dark and the lightbeam leaped over our heads.

In the immediate foreground, a waterhole. In the middle distance, a grove of beautiful, flat-topped mimosas. Arising from the dark mass of the jungle back of the grove, a black, sinister pyramid—Mount Mikeno, one minute sharply defined against the steel-white sky, the next, shrouded with fog. Hundreds of oryx, wildebeeste and zebra clustered around the waterhole. Some placidly grazed over the expanse of ground between the waterhole and the grove. Some stood immobile, somnolent under the feathery mimosas.

A familiar vista, but still a beautiful and heart-tingling one. Frank's photography was superb. It was almost stereoptic, so high was the relief of the living creatures and the trees against the background. Which is pretty close to a miracle of picture making in Equatorial Africa.

Pick's telescopic eye caught it first.

"What the hell is that, Walter?" he whispered in my ear.

From the dark jungle wall back of the mimosa grove, came a tiny figure, making

its way slowly but steadily toward the camera. Instinctively you knew it was not an animal. Nor a native black stalker. As it emerged from the jungle haze into the clearer light of the grove, you plainly perceived that it was a white man. On he came, head down, preoccupied; weaving through those hundreds of wild things as unconcerned as a farmer in a meadow of Jerseys. At the far edge of the waterhole he paused, lifted his face to the sky and extended his arms, palms upward, like a witch-doctor invoking the Rain God.

I don't mean to say this gave us a clean-cut view of him, or that his features were distinguishable. He was not close up enough and he was slightly blurred. This defect in otherwise superior photography puzzled me. We could see that he was a tall, frail fellow, dressed in the ragged remains of a khaki shirt, baggy breeches held up by a wide metal-studded leather belt and riding boots. A battered topee shaded the upper half of his face and his jaw was covered by a stubble of beard. He was a wretched, pathetic and at the same time, a disquieting figure.

He dropped his arms, his chin sagged on his bony breast and he slowly walked along the rim of the waterhole and out of the picture.

Pick dug his talons into my leg and indicated he was about to sound off. I discouraged him with an elbow. I knew as well as he did that we had just looked at the picture of a thing that could never had happened. Frank had prepared us for something out of the ordinary—something unnatural. This was not only unnatural, it was impossible.

For never a wild head tossed, never a questing muzzle flared, as the ragged man paced deliberately through these timorous creatures. Not the slightest indication did they give of any awareness of his presence.

It was though he had not passed that way.

The camera moved on, not dead ahead, but panorama-wise and picked up a grand herd of giraffe. Bulls, cows and tofos feeding on thorn trees. Frank had managed to get within first-rate "shooting" range of them. Even so it was necessary to maintain

distance for it's no trick at all to stampede giraffe. That's why the sight of the ragged man, arms outstretched, face uplifted, standing in the midst of these hypersensitive animals was utterly preposterous.

Again he dropped his arms and faded from sight in the thorn trees.

"It's a damned hoax, Walter," whispered Pick angrily. I paid him no attention and Ike hissed at him.

The scene switched abruptly to a big donga. It was a perfect setting; for lion; a place of tall reeds and greatrocks. Frank had caught a magnificent group of these impressive beasts. On a slightly slanting, table-topped rock stood a full-maned, prime male, as static as a figure in a museum case. Along the base of the rock lay four lovely lady lions, tolerantly watching the antics of three cubs. A few yards away, two young males were gazing with speculative eyes at the handsome older chum on the pedestal.

It was keen work on Frank's part. He had edged in very close; much closer than I would have ventured, with my life depending on the mental reactions under the dirty turban of a Sikh gun-boy. But there was someone closer to the royal family than young Simons.

Out from back of a clump of bamboo stepped the ragged man. He paused, made his familiar gesture to the heavens and walked straight to the great rock. All through the group of lions he circulated, continually crossing their line of vision and passing within inches of them. They were thoroughly aware of Frank's party and were pretending to ignore it in the lordly way they do, particularly when they have just dined well. Their awareness of it was indicated by barely perceptible movements of their heads and sly glances from their cold eyes, but the presence of the ragged man just did not register at all. To them, he simply was not there.

Ike Morehouse cleared his throat, shuffled his feet and sighed. Pick was far down in his chair, a black scowl on his puckish face. I glanced over at Featherstone and was astonished to see that he was not looking at the screen at all. He was peering back into the darkness under the small balcony where Van Toon sat alone. I could

hear Guy's steady stentorian breathing and I wondered what he was thinking.

Now we were in gorilla country. Gnarled, twisted trees festooned with moss; bamboo and giant wild celery; tall grass and scrub trees laced by creepers and rank vines into a dense mat of jungle. A muddy trail led up past a devastated area where the big apes had been feeding and through a small glade filled with their deserted nests. In the denser jungle the trail became a tunnel that led to a clearing of bamboo clumps. The shadowy forms of the feeding gorillas could be seen in every clump.

The camera stopped directly in front of a particularly thick growth and for a full fifteen seconds nothing happened. Then—very slowly—two enormous black hands parted the bamboo stalks—wider—wider—and suddenly a huge black enamelled face fringed with short black hair scowled murderously through the opening. The six hundred pound pot-bellied horror grasped some overhead creepers and arose on his stumpy legs. He opened his terrible mouth and screamed at the camera group; beat his distended chest, whirled, dropped to all fours and disappeared in the bamboo.

Another fifteen seconds and again, very slowly, two hands parted the bamboo. They were white hands. Scratched, dirty and discolored—but white.

The next instant he was standing before us, distinct and life-size and I stared up at a gentle, ravaged face and into the saddest pair of eyes I have ever seen. They went straight to my old heart and made me feel like hell. Who in the name of God was this strange—this incredible man?

A dreadful sound came from the back of the theatre, like some great animal gasping.

The house lights flashed on.

Eskimo Ike jerked his head around. "There's something wrong with Van Toon," he said.

Pick was the nearest, being on the aisle. He leaped out of his chair and sprinted up the incline. But quick as he was, the beefy Mr. Featherstone reached the stricken man before he did.

"Here fellers," called Pick, "slippy."

No good. All the haste in the world can't stay the Finger of God.

Guy Van Toon was dead.

All the years of his life he had thumbed his nose at Death in every conceivable guise and here he was, prosaically dead, in a comfortable chair in his Club after looking at a movie. Kismet.

Ike slipped out and quietly picked up the Club Manager and Janney. Somebody fetched Doctor Cornet from the taproom.

The Doc was not surprised.

"Guy was fifty years old," he said when he rose to his feet and tucked away his steth, "his heart was a hundred and fifty. I ordered him to quit three years ago. Does he do it? No. He hauls off and tries to climb to the roof of the world. The high altitudes of the Hindu Kush finished him. So it goes."

Janney rustled a camp cot from the storage room and we carried Guy Van Toon to his room and arranged him decently on his bed.

By telepathic agreement, Pick, Ike, young Simons, Featherstone and myself returned to the little theatre.

Again Pick locked the door. "We still don't want anyone else in here," he said, "until we get a few things straightened out between ourselves. Frank, who is that man?"

"I never knew him," said Frank, looking at his finger tips. This was a palpably evasive answer and Pick turned harsh.

"I never knew him," repeated Frank stubbornly. He looked a very sick boy. "There were Mruni, my Sikh gun-bearer, two pygmies, ten East Coast black boys and myself. There was no other white man in my party. There was no other safari in all that country at that time. The nearest white men were the Fathers at Lulenga Mission House. No natives we encountered ever saw that man. I never saw him."

"What do you try to tell me?" blazed Pick. "You never saw him."

Frank lowered himself into a chair and pressed his palms to his temples. "There was no such man there. I never saw him until I developed that strip of film. I almost went nuts trying to figure it out. That's why I had to show it to Henry."

After a bit Pick raised his eyes and stared bleakly at Featherstone.

"You knew him, Mr. Featherstone?"

"Yes. I knew him." The man from Nairobi's foggy voice was as impersonal as his broad face. "His name was Phillips Cord. We came out on the same boat when I was first detailed to Kenya Colony five years ago. Delightful chap. Ethnologist. He was for studying the pygmies of the Itura Forest in the Belgian Congo, so he threw in with Mr. Van Toon who was going that way after gorilla. It was Cord's first safari and his last. He tumbled into a deep, rocky donga up Mount Mikeno way and they buried him on the spot. Very regrettable business. A year ago there were rumors. A black boy got drunk in Mombasa and talked—of a quarrel one night when the camp presumably slept; of a blow with the heavy butt of a sjambok; of a slender body, already dead, being carried by a powerful man through a torrential rain and tossed into a donga. Sticky story what?"

"Powerful friends in London. Pressure applies. I was told to take over. Rather hopeless. Time lapse. Drunken blackamoor and so on. Then one day, young Frank here, turns up in Nairobi with this—uh—" he cleared his throat loudly several times, "—this infernal puzzle picture. Checked up on Mr. Van Toon's whereabouts. Found out he was due back in New York. Decided to look him up and put a few questions to him, so I came along with young Frank."

"Just who are you, Mr. Featherstone?" asked Pick.

"I take care of certain matters for Government House, Captain Pickering."

"I see. The local C. I. D." Pick sat down and grunted hopelessly. I could read his mind. A fine tradition smeared; a bronze memorial plaque with bar sinister; the miasma of scandal drifting for the first time through the corridors of the Last Horizon Club.

Silence. We all looked expectantly at the man from Nairobi, but he showed no inclination to defrost the situation and then Pick jumped to his feet, snapped his fingers irritably and jabbed at the projection booth.

"Frank, run that reel off again. Fellers, take your seats. Watch closely."

Frank went up the steps like a man in a trance.

Again the little theatre darkened and we

were back at the waterhole by the lovely mimosas. On we trekked vicariously following the camera, leaving behind the placid oryx, the wildebeeste, the zebra; past the thorn trees and the browsing giraffe; into the reedy donga, warily skirting the statuesque lions; through the matted jungle, the flattened bamboo debris, the deserted nests; up the tunnel trail to the bamboo thicket silhouetted by the feeding gorillas; and all the while a lurking fear deep in some unused compartment of my brain was emerging and pressing to the front. A primitive panic slipped the leash of civilized will-power and for the first time in my life my scalp prickled.

Not at what I saw—but at what I *didn't* see.

My runaway mind seized on a fragment of silly doggerel that fitted exactly.

"The man who wasn't there," wasn't there again.

The house lights came on and killed off the white square on the screen.

I took a quick look around. Featherstone was leaning far forward, gripping the arms of his chair. I could not see his face. Eskimo Ike looked like a gaffed fish. Pick was on his feet, fists balled up. "Now by the Ninety-nine Names of God," he roared, "what kind of monkey business is this? Frank. What's become of Phillips Cord?"

No answer. "Hoy, Frank?"

Pick grimaced and streaked it up to the projection booth. In a few seconds he slapped back the sliding panel.

"Walter, gimme a hand. He's sick."

We eased young Simons down from the booth that helped him into my room, which was nearest. Ike hustled off to the tap-room after Doc Cornet and Janney. Doc made a face when he examined the boy and told Janney to phone the garage for his car. He glared at us suspiciously. "You birds are not experimenting with any hokus-pokus in there, are you?"

We assured him we were not, but I could see that he was far from convinced. "I dunno," he said coldly, "two casualties in one party? I suggest we don't have any more."

Janney returned with Doc's bag of magic and we were run out.

Automatically we all turned back to the theatre, which by this time was definitely not my favorite spot. Pick, Ike and Featherstone stood silent under the balcony while I reeled off the bewitched film once more. Through the peep-hole I saw just what I expected to see—no more. Another movie of African wild life, exceptionally well done. No eerie, imploring figure troubled my uneasy eye.

I slipped the spool of film out of the projector, turned off the juice and came down. Before I left the booth I searched it. I did not find what I was looking for.

"Well, fellers," said Pick brusquely, "who do we talk to about all this?"

"You mean, to *whom* to we tell *what*," corrected Ike.

"Let's drop the whole ghastly business right here," I hastened to say and immediately felt like a juvenile conspirator.

Mr. Featherstone's monocle slipped out and fell to the limit of its ribbon. I'll take oath I glimpsed life in that pale eye. "Righto. Why not?" he said. "What's to be gained by surmise? I don't know what you gentlemen have in mind. I can only report to the Colonial Office that Mr. Van Toon died suddenly before I had a chance to interrogate him. I imagine that will end the matter."

Pick drew a prodigious breath, hooked Mr. Featherstone's arm in his and led off to the taproom. We got there none too soon as far as I was concerned.

The next day, Doc Cornet removed young Simons to a convalescent home near Atlantic City. "The lad's overdone it," he bulletined the Club, "he's got to take a long rest."

Several nights later we got Mr. Featherstone aboard the Queen Mary just in time. He was loaded down to the Plimsoll's mark with expensive beers, wines and liquors. He was also as sober as the Archbishop of Canterbury and as communicative as a totem pole at any mention of the weird film. And so the matter stands.

Eskimo Ike Morehouse is as superstitious as an orthodox Hindoo. He is profoundly wrought up over the affair. He accepts it as a true manifestation of the supernatural and is firmly convinced he has the right answer. A very simple one. Psychic photography.

One up for the spiritualists. He maintains that young Simons is highly psychic—maybe unconsciously so. That one day, out in that lonely, sombre country, Frank's intense occult magnetism attracted the wandering, earthbound spirit of the murdered Cord and imprisoned it in his camera. This "prisoner in the bokkis" idea is the superstition that almost cost Martin and Osa Johnson their heads in the Big Numbers country in New Guinea some years back. The narrowest escape they ever had. He says that the death of Van Toon from sheer fright cancelled the blood debt and immediately Cord's appeased spirit slipped away to some far star to begin another in carnation.

The iconoclastic Pickering is just as positive we were witnesses to an uncommonly cold-blooded and extra-legal Third Degree. A performance remotely akin to the French Sureté's grisly trick, "the reconstruction of results. In this case a fatal one. Not that the crime," and productive of the same Van Toon didn't deserve it and that it was an easy out for all concerned.

"Psychic phenomenon my foot," he shouts when the whiskey bites him, "damned hanky-panky with a camera and two rolls of film. That's what it was. All concocted and directed by that human fish Mister Henry Ruddy Featherstone with young Frank's half-hearted assistance."

When I remind him that I searched carefully and failed to find a second film and that we all knew that Frank had no such thing on his person and also that a spool of film is neither a half dollar nor the Jack of Spades, he snorts, "Walter—Houdini made an elephant disappear from the stage of the old Hippodrome. Frank had ample time in the confusion to dispose of it. Complete nervous breakdown eh? Righto."

When I try to make the point that Phillips Cord had been dead nearly five years before Frank made those pictures, he flaps an indifferent paw and says, "stand-ins—look-alikes—doubles—whatever it is they call those fellers. Done every day."

What do I think of it?

I've spent most of my life in that dark, brooding land.

I don't think I'll go on record.