

# WEIRD TALES

## THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*Crocodiles and Voodooism Play  
Important Parts in*

# Jungle Death

*By Artemus Calloway*

**T**HE very atmosphere seemed surcharged with mystery—danger—death.

Even the clear blue sky above seemed to shrink away from The Tropical Gem Plantation as from a thing accursed. Out in the muddy waters of the Ulua, apparently as lifeless as a water-soaked log, a sleepy-eyed crocodile waited—waited as if he, too, sensed impending calamity for the creatures on shore and intended being at hand to assert his rights should the threatened catastrophe bring food for his kind.

All this impressed Bart Condon, standing in the protecting shade of the softly rustling banana jungle, eyes focused on the busy scene across the river, brain busy with the disquieting events of the past few weeks.

Bart Condon was troubled. Here was something he knew not how to fight, because it was something he could not see. Until recently, he had thought himself fairly familiar with Honduras and the trials of a plantation manager there, but this was something new—something which hid in the shadows and struck when one was not looking.

First there had been the matter of the cistern water in the laborers' quarters. Some one had poisoned it—not in a manner to cause death, but illness. Condon had been mystified by the epidemic which descended upon the place until the plantation physician made an examination of the water. Then he was the more at

sea. Who could have done this—and why?

Close upon this trouble came whispers—rumors that the place was bewitched. More than a dozen of the more superstitious blacks and half blacks slipped away. And their places had been hard to fill.

Then had come the fires, starting no one knew when or how. Once a manacca shack, in which a sick man lived, burned; and he was brought out half-stifled, scorched and raving about the devils that infested the place.

Other things occurred. And there was more whispering, more dissatisfaction.

And then had come death. A partly devoured body had been found lodged against a mud bar in the river. The work of crocodiles, Condon had thought, until examination disclosed the fact that there was a bullet in the man's brain. And then he knew that the crocodiles had profited from the work of a murderer.

And now all the plantation laborers threatened to leave. Somehow Condon felt that he could not blame them, though he knew that their desertion meant his ruin.

The activity along the river bank increased. The crocodile moved slowly downstream. Simultaneously with the arrival of a noisy fruit train on Condon's side of the river, another chugged into view on the opposite shore.

As soon as the trains came to a stop

natives commenced transferring bananas from the cars to the fruit racks at the water's edge; here they would later be picked up by the river boat of the big fruit company which purchased the output of many Utua River plantations, afterward shipping the bananas to the States on its own steamers.

Condon saw George Armstrong standing to the right of the train across the river, and, for some unknown reason he disliked the man more than ever. There was no real reason why he should dislike and distrust Armstrong. Yet he did dislike him, and never, from the first moment his eyes rested upon the man, had he trusted him. For two years now Condon had known the manager of the Royal Palm Plantation Company, and for that length of time some instinct had whispered that the other would be a dangerous foe.

True, Armstrong had always evinced the greatest friendliness, frequently coming across the river, which separated the plantations, to visit Condon. And occasionally—when common courtesy demanded—Condon had returned the visits.

Bart Condon had been in Honduras one year longer than Armstrong, and this year's experience as manager of the plantation of which he was majority stockholder had taught him many things of value, which he had passed on to the newcomer. But Armstrong's company was stronger financially than Condon's, and was desirous of expanding. So, for three months now, Armstrong had been trying to buy the Tropical Gem. And for nearly that length of time the Tropical Gem had been having trouble.

**B**UT it was only this morning that Condon had first commenced wondering what connection, if any, there might be between Armstrong's desire for the Tropical Gem and the trouble which had come to that plantation.

Of course such thoughts were silly. Unworthy. He should be ashamed of himself. . . . And yet . . . .

Standing where he was, in the shelter of the tall banana plants which at a distance resembled a forest of green trees, Condon knew Armstrong had not seen him. And for some reason, which he himself did not understand, he did not want the other man to see him this morning,

Bart Condon turned and slowly made his way from the river to a trail about two hundred yards away. There he paused to watch some men cutting fruit which would be carried by mule cart to the river, the railroad being employed only for the longer hauls.

Finally he turned to his pony, fastened to a young avacado tree, mounted and rode away. Twenty minutes later he was at plantation headquarters.

An hour after reaching headquarters Condon was sitting at his office desk, a slender young native opposite him. This man—Juan Hernandez—one of Condon's foremen, possessed intelligence above the average. He was one of the very few natives of that section of Honduras who boasted pure Spanish blood, but at the same time he understood thoroughly the mixed breeds in whose veins there flowed the blood of African, Indian, Chinese and others, to say nothing of the full-blood negroes from Jamaica, Barbadoes, and elsewhere.

Once facing Hernandez, Condon lost no time in getting to the subject:

"The men—they are very much upset!"

Hernandez nodded.

"They are, Mr. Condon," he replied in perfect English, thanks to a States education. "They are whispering that there is a curse upon the plantation; that you are the cause of it; that the spirits are displeased with you, and I don't know what else. They——"

Hernandez hesitated. Then:

"Why, they are even beginning to blame you for the death of that man found in the river, although they don't know, as we do, that someone shot him."

Condon frowned. "Somehow I suspect as much. But you are sure your information—what you tell me is correct?"

Hernandez nodded. "I am positive of it. Further than that I feel that I have discovered what is behind it all. You know you told me a week ago to look into it——"

"Yes?"

"It is voodooism. A witch doctor who lives in the jungle is behind the trouble here. And a white man is behind the witch doctor!"

Condon started. "You mean——?"

For a moment Hernandez said nothing, staring at the desk before him. Then:

"Armstrong!"

Condon's hands twitched nervously. "How do you know—or suspect—this, Hernandez?"

"I am positive, Mr. Condon. I have a man working under me whom I trust implicitly. He is an Indian—one of those commonly known as a Mosquito Indian—they live down on the Mosquito Coast, you know——"

"Yes. Go on. What about him?"

"Well, he is a very intelligent fellow. Not a drop of black blood in his veins. Of course, many of the Indians in this country have their own superstitious beliefs, but not so this man. For years he has worked around foreigners—those ideas, if he ever had them, have been supplanted by those of civilization.

"This man told me that the witch doctor—an old dried-up black fellow, no telling how old he is—has been coming to the plantation. He was here the night before the water was poisoned. He has been here since. And lately the laborers have been going to see him—holding ceremonies and that sort of thing.

"And tonight——" Hernandez lowered his voice—"they go again! They are to be there at ten o'clock. The witch doctor is going to tell them that their lives are not safe on this plantation as long as you have anything to do with it. Tomorrow they will leave. And no other laborers will come here. Then—Armstrong thinks he can buy you out. You see, with Armstrong in charge, the curse will be removed."

Condon secured a box of cigars from his desk, handed it to Hernandez, found a box of matches, lighted a cigar himself.

"*Hmm!* Pretty clever scheme. But—Oh! hang it, Hernandez, do you suppose this *can* be correct?"

Hernandez regarded his cigar thoughtfully. "I know it is!"

"Well——"

"Just a moment, please, Mr. Condon. There is one chance for us—only one. That is to discredit the witch doctor. Once the superstitious mixed breeds and blacks find that he is not infallible, that there is something more powerful than he, they will lose confidence in him. They will believe nothing he has told them. But until that is done the case is hopeless. You see, many of the men working here were raised on superstition—on voodooism. The blacks brought it from Africa, and their descendants in this and the other nearby countries cling to it. And, as I have said, we have them here from many places."

"How are we to discredit the witch doctor?"

Hernandez smiled. "Armstrong visits him at eight o'clock this evening, to pay half the price for running the laborers away from here. He is to pay the other half when they are gone. Of course, he has paid something all along for the various little jobs, but this is the big one—the big money job."

"What on earth would that old fellow want with money?"

Hernandez laughed. "Square-faced gin. He stays soaked all the time. But I have a plan——"

"But how," interrupted Condon, "did your man learn all this?"

"By pretending to believe in voodooism—and by watching. He has attended the ceremonies with the others. And he has followed Armstrong there when the witch doctor was alone. That is how he learned of the poisoned water. He has heard nothing there about the murder of the native, but I am sure there is a connection there somewhere if we can find it."

Hernandez made a significant gesture.

"You don't know the confidence those people have in that old fellow. He has a pond there in front of his cave. A natural sort of pond. Been there for centuries, I suppose, and it is full of crocodiles. Sacrifices to these crocodiles have been hinted at—but of course I couldn't swear to that. I do know, however, that the laborers here are blind enough in their belief of him to do anything he might tell them."

Condon's face was wrinkled in thought. "But your plan?" Hernandez leaned nearer. "Listen. . . ."

**SEVEN-THIRTY** o'clock that evening found Bart Condon, Juan Hernandez and the Indian of whom Condon had been told concealed on the side of the little jungle hill above the witch doctor's cave. Almost at his doorway was the pond of which Hernandez had spoken. An occasional *swish* of the water told of life in it. Just in front of the cave, squatted on the ground beside a faint brush fire, was the witch doctor, an old, shriveled, dried-up, gray-headed black.

"We can hear from this place?" Condon whispered.

"Yes," replied Hernandez, "but be quiet. He might hear you."

Back in the jungle, monkeys chattered. Baboons howled nearby. A macaw set up a shrill shrieking. Once Condon heard the helpless, hopeless cry of some small animal as it met the death of the jungle. Some beast of the tropics slipped past them. Bart Condon gripped his revolver.

And then they heard somebody approaching. Down a little trail—the same trail which Condon had traveled part of the way—a man was coming. A few moments later Armstrong was standing before the witch doctor's fire.

With every nerve on edge, Condon watched. Armstrong and the witch doctor, both now seated before the blaze, wasted no time on inconsequential talk.

Armstrong was speaking in Spanish: "You understand exactly what you are to tell those people when they come here tonight."

"I do."

"Very well. Here is half the money. You will receive as much more—provided you get Condon's laborers away tomorrow—and keep them and all others away."

The witch doctor nodded. "They will be away before tomorrow. When they leave here they will be afraid to return to the man Condon's plantation."

"They won't even return for their things?"

The old man laughed shrilly. "They will believe everything on that plantation accursed when I have finished with them and will never desire to see their things again. I intended telling them that they must leave tomorrow. Now I have decided to have them leave tonight. It is better so."

Again the witch doctor laughed.

"But——" and now there was something in his voice Condon had not detected there before—"there is more money to come to me, *Senor*."

Armstrong's tone was impatient. "You get that when the laborers have quit the plantation."

The old man chuckled. "But I mean other money."

"What other money?"

"The money for keeping your secret about the man you shot!"

George Armstrong jumped to his feet. "You're crazy! I shot no man."

The witch doctor also was on his feet. "But you did, Senor, I saw you! I don't blame you for what you did. The fellow saw you coming from here and he might have been suspicious. I, also, would have killed him, but you did the job for me. And now you will pay me for keeping the secret."

The witch doctor's words seemed to madden the manager of the Royal Palm Plantation. Straight at the old man's throat he sprang. They fought like wild animals. The witch doctor, for all his frailness, possessed enormous strength.

Suddenly Hernandez caught Condon's arm: "Look! Down the trail!" he whispered.

Condon looked. Then he gasped in amazement. The trail was filled, as far as he could see, with men.

**S**UDDENLY Condon's attention was brought back to the struggle by a scream of terror, which burst from Armstrong's lips. And then, locked in embrace, the plantation manager and the witch doctor disappeared in the crocodile pool.

There was a sudden rush—horrid grunts—the crushing of bones—and Condon imagined he could see the water redden. Armstrong and the witch doctor were no more.

Then, from Condon's laborers in the trail, came cries of denunciation. "He is no witch doctor! He fought with the white man and was eaten by

crocodiles—he who told us that he could destroy white men by pointing his finger at them. He told us that the crocodiles could not harm him."

Unafraid of that which was now no mystery, some of the bolder ones advanced to the fire. One picked up some gold pieces, which the witch doctor had dropped. Another found Armstrong's purse.

They turned and rejoined their companions. Five minutes later the entire party had passed out of hearing.

Hernandez touched Condon on the shoulder. "We can go now. And our troubles are over. The men will remain on the plantation perfectly satisfied."

"But I don't understand," said Condon slowly, rising to his feet and rubbing his cramped legs, "why they came so early. I thought they were to get here at ten o'clock."

"So Armstrong and the witch doctor thought," laughed Hernandez. "But the message was carried by our friend here—and he asked my advice before delivering it. And he made the hour earlier so they would find Armstrong here. That alone would have destroyed their confidence in the witch doctor, for he is supposed to have nothing to do with white men."

Hernandez smiled.

"They were told, although this man professed not to believe it, that there was a report to the effect that Armstrong had bought the witch doctor—had paid him to betray them. That is why they understood everything so readily when they saw the end of the fight."

"Voodooism," said Condon thoughtfully, "loses its strength when it mixes up with white men."