

Weird Tales



MAY, 1952

Cover by Virgil Finlay

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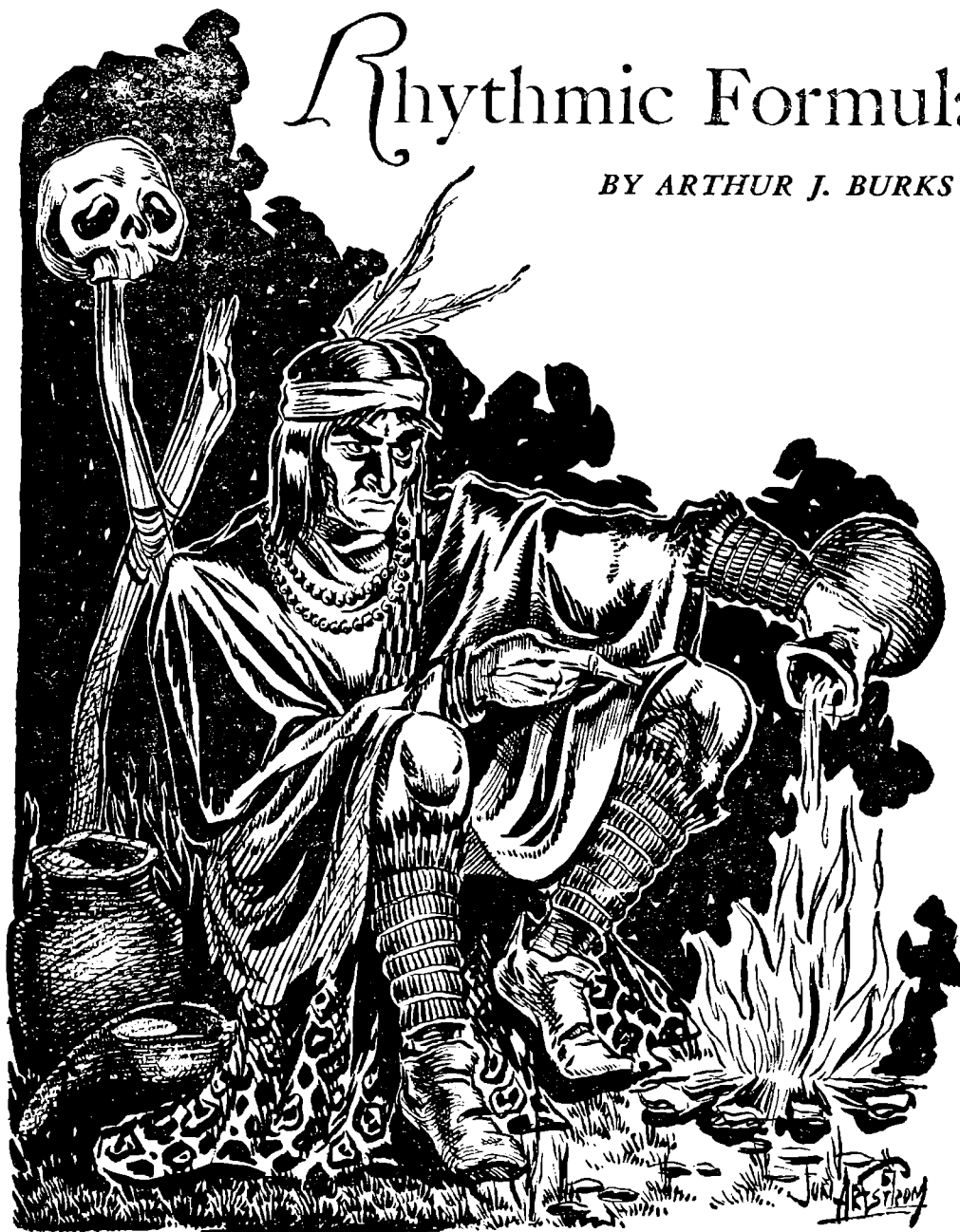
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Rhythmic Formula

BY ARTHUR J. BURKS



... a secret he brought back from the jungles.

RUSS CRAVEY had spent most of his life in the Brazilian jungles. He had worked hard at his adventures, but he had never had much money or fame, and sometimes not enough of the first to

live on, until the latter, fame, gave him luck and he married two rich women in succession. He murdered them both by the secret Mundurucu-Indian formula of *sap-kaure*. There hadn't been so much as an

eyebrow of suspicion lifted. His two wives, after giving him plenty of money outright, thus insuring him against any possible want, had made him beneficiary of whopping life insurance policies. That fact might have caused the law to take some action if medical science had not reported both death as by "heart failure." The insurance companies didn't even delay payment.

The murders had been years apart, the policies with two different companies.

He was a free man each time, independent beyond any dreams he had ever had. He could outfit and finance the biggest expedition the Amazon had ever heard of, if he felt like it.

Russ Creavey was a man of fifty, fatherly, white-haired, gentle. His name was known throughout the scientific world. As an ethnologist he was without peer. Scientific background, he discovered, was a swell screen for murder. The scientific approach also precluded anything like conscience. His two rich wives, because of their money, had tried to run him, to pin him down. They had tried especially to keep him out of the jungles.

He killed Hermine, his first wife, married when he was forty-four, then spent two joyous years in the jungles without even using up the interest on the money she had left him. It had been on the Upper Cururu, in the unexplored land of the Waiaun'en, that he had again shaken hands with Hakaiaöpömpö, medicine man, who had taught him the rhythm of *sapkaure*, the murder rhythm which the old man had discovered for himself and kept secret because with it he could kill off his enemies without anybody murdering or exiling him.

"I put oil of *chiririshep* into their coffee," he told Creavey, "or prescribe it and have their wives administer it. Then, very quietly in the night, I make use of the rhythm. One must be careful not to make a sound and get caught!"

Creavey wanted more information.

"Once your victim is asleep," said Hakaiaöpömpö, "you simply use the palm of your hand, so, lifting and lowering it in rhythm. It strikes him at *this* particular spot on the abdomen and accommodates its tempo to the heartbeat. When they are attuned you increase the rhythm of the

palm. The heart beat increases with it to the point where the heart cannot endure, and fails."

If that worked, Creavey realized, it was the proper design for the perfect murder. He didn't believe it until old Hakaiaöpömpö proved it to him, using a Gaiapo prisoner as a demonstrator.

HITHERTO, when Russ Creavey had returned to the States after some spectacular journey he had been brusque and impatient with the man-hungry women who invariably pressed around when he lectured at their clubs, or wrote him at his hotel or club. There had been several times when he could have married money. He hadn't. Now, armed with the secret rhythm of *sapkaure*, he felt himself ripe for marriage—for money. Hermine made it even easier than he had hoped; she nagged the life out of him in private, inspiring him to kill; she coddled him in public, made propaganda in the newspapers of the money she spent on him and gave to him for scientific research. She was publicity hungry, as most of the women had been who had annoyed him in the past.

Hakaiaöpömpö provided Russ Creavey with powdered bark of the *chiririshep*. He hadn't explained it to Hermine. He just dropped some of it into her tea before bedtime, waited for her to go to sleep, then began using his palm in the careful, precise rhythm of the *sapkaure*. Old Hakaiaöpömpö had been a careful teacher, insisting on perfection. It worked like a charm. He knew when the brain of Hermine came awake. He grinned at her when her eyes opened—the glazed eyes of the drugged. She didn't know, at first, what he was trying to do. The hand-patting was so much like a series of caresses, soothing, restful—until the heart picked up the beat, the beat increased, and something akin to suffocation built up in the victim until her heart stopped. It was fun to talk to Hermine while she died.

"You're dying, my love!" he told her. "It's a perfect murder, too. I got it from the Indians. Impossible to trace it. Just heart failure, my own, just heart failure. The sedative I slipped into your tea left no trace. I wonder, in the minutes you have

left, whether you regret nagging me? If you had a chance to apologize on bended knees, would you do it?"

Her eyes showed she understood. They pleaded with him. They agreed to anything. He knew better than to give her a chance. If he did she would oppose him, take away the money she had given him, cancel her life insurance policy.

He knew her closeness in money matters. She gave him thousands in public, took it back in private.

It took over an hour, during which an interruption by anybody would have spelled catastrophe—though he didn't think of that until later—for her heart to come to a dead stop, her dead body to relax, her staring eyes to cease their accusation. It was a little tiring, but the murder made him rich.

Without hesitation he called Hermine's personal physician. There were no marks on her body. He told the doctor he had sat up late, reading, while Hermine preceded him to their bedroom; how he had gone to her and found her dead.

"Heart failure," the doctor said, only he called it a high sounding name. "She was predisposed to it."

The last statement helped. He hadn't even known of the weak heart. Luck seemed to be with him throughout, after practically no financial luck at all. When he could decently get away into the wilds, after the funeral of Hermine, he went right back to the headwaters of the Cururu, to find old Hakaiapömpö still living. The old man had got away with many more murders. Russ Creavey hadn't forgotten the Mundurucu dialect. Once he had thought if he ever married it would be one of Hakaiapömpö's relatives. He had said so and the old man had been delighted. Now, grinning, Russ Creavey renewed the suggestion.

"No," said the Indian, "not now. There might be temptation to practice it, since you know the secret. One murderer in the family is enough. So far, I love my female relatives too much to see them killed!"

RUSS CREAVEY spent six months with the old one in his *maloca*, only to discover to his amazement that he missed civilization as he never had when he had spent years in the jungles before. He went home.

There was the usual publicity, round of lectures. . . .

And Karen!

There were others besides Karen, but she was the most persistent, the most interested in his work, had the most money. She told him so. His private investigations more than bore out her boasts. She had been twice married before, which didn't matter to him until, after they were married, she compared him unfavorably with both former husbands.

He began practicing the rhythm again, playing up to Karen's every whim until she got around to the insurance policy and had, besides, given him even more money than Hermine had. He told her the story of his life, spoke respectfully of his first wife—he had to speak of her since the fact of his previous marriage was a public matter and he was a public figure—gave her all the details of his expeditions she would listen to. But he did not tell her how Hermine had died, until she was dying in the same way!

He stood Karen for almost two years. Then he introduced her to the rhythm of *sapkaure*. She wakened to find she could neither move nor speak; could only hear and feel.

"I am very sick of you, darling!" Russ Creavey told her. "This is what I did to Hermine when she also became unendurable. You are the only person in the world to know."

He felt the horror in her body, saw it in her eyes, heard it in the rising thud of her heartbeats as his practiced hand, palm downward, rose and fell without sound, touching her body in the right place and always that place . . . rising . . . falling . . . tapping. . . .

Until she stiffened and died, relaxing, and he was twice as wealthy as he had been, barring such red tape as had to be unraveled. Two wives dying of heart failure, whatever technical, high-sounding name was used, might have occasioned questions if he had been less important in scientific circles. To question Russell Creavey simply wasn't done.

For the second time he got away with murder. He was "bowed down with sorrow," the newspapers said, eager only to

return to the jungles, this time to stay. Whatever he learned he would send out; whatever he collected he would ship to wherever it would benefit the world most. He would, he told himself ironically, make the deaths of Hermine and Karen mean something. No reason at all why they could not be martyrs to science, though none but himself would ever know that.

WHEN a decent time had elapsed he gave to the press details of his next expedition to the headwaters of the Cururu. He had the urge to see his murder mentor again. They were two who understood each other perfectly. There were women and girls in the tribe who were attractive. The old man would not oppose his marriage to one who was not a relative. If he tired of such a wife—he grinned to himself as the thought came—Hakaiapömpö would perhaps, for a price, take off his hands the task of erasing her. Anyway, it was something that could be talked over. This time, he told the press, he was leaving civilization for good. He would end his days in the jungles. His picture, his most distinguished poses, went around the world.

It seemed quite natural that both men and women interested in his line of endeavor should contact him. He thought nothing of it when Leslie Deane, a noted explorer in her own right, a little under forty years of age, asked for an interview. She had crossed trails with him in foreign lands, she said, without saying just where. He knew much about her. She was as famous in her way as he was in his—more, even, because she was a woman.

"She's probably jealous," he thought when he decided to see her. "Trying to cash in on my name somehow. She has a proposition of some kind to make, that's certain. Everybody in civilization has an axe to grind."

She'd be mannish, brusque, with a bone-crushing handshake, he decided. There was probably an excellent reason why she had never married, though she had been quoted as saying she was too busy hunting out the world's large and little wonders. Unquestionably she would be hard to take. One thing about her, she shared one thing with most scientists; she had scarcely enough

money to keep her fed, housed and clothed. He checked on that before he agreed to see her.

"She may want money, but no, it can't be that; she'll think I'm as poor as she is."

Reports of his inheritance had received no recent mention in the newspapers.

Leslie Deane surprised him. The second he saw her he wondered whose pictures, purporting to be hers, had been run in magazines and newspapers. She was smartly dressed, looked younger than she was, had no gray in her neat hairdo, didn't wear spectacles or look like a scientist. She was so different that he felt it necessary to check on her technical knowledge with a few questions. She qualified. Her qualifications exceeded his own.

"I'm delighted you've come to me," he told her. "I'm not even in a hurry to come to the point and ask you what you want!"

"I'll tell you anyway," she said. "I'm going back into the jungles with you!"

She didn't ask. She asserted. Before she left him, after the interview lasted for hours, he wondered how he had managed to live so many years without her. He didn't ask where she had crossed his trail before. It would never have occurred to him, for instance, that she also might have met Hakaiapömpö. If there were really no fool like an old fool, he had forgotten ever hearing any such thing. He didn't know whether he proposed marriage or she simply gathered him under her capable wing and carried him off to the license bureau.

She wanted absolutely nothing from him, she told him, save the chance to further his work, to spend the rest of her life at his side. She knew and loved the jungles—especially the African ones, though this time his destination was Venezuela—and could spend years in them without fretting.

She wanted nothing, she kept insisting, even when he put his bank accounts in her name, gave her the checkbooks, took out life insurance though the premiums at his age were *plenty*.

How in the name of time had he ever considered a Mundrucu woman for the real-for-sure, until-death-us-do-part mate?

They went by boat because it took

longer, a week. There were lazy days and nights, utterly perfect. He was mad about her.

He stayed mad about her until he got his first, and last, rude shock.

He wakened to find himself unable to move, the night of the fifth day out. He could only think, feel, hear—and what he heard was the soothing, gentle voice of Leslie Creavey.

"This will be a shock to you, Russell," she crooned. "But it was a shock to me to find the *chiririshep* powder in your duffel and to realize that the man I've looked up to for years had already murdered two wives! Did you have some reason to bring it along now, darling? Oh, of course you cannot answer me, except with your eyes! I must say, they do not look kindly!"

Outside in the night he could hear the snoring of the Atlantic past the porthole.

Usually the sound soothed him. Now it roared in his head, for the best of reasons. His Leslie continued:

"A girl in my position," she said, "has to take care of herself or she's sunk! I'll carry on with your work, of course, for more years than you would have lived anyway, old as you are! I can't say I'm sorry it's turning out this way; I think I'm beginning to be bored with marriage—to you, anyway!"

She knew the rhythm of *sapkaure* perfectly.

She talked more and he heard it all, could do nothing. Fortunately his heart could not endure as much pressure as Hermine's and Karen's had.

"Hakaiapömpö didn't mention me to you, of course," were among the last words he heard, "since I became his pupil after your time!"