

# Weird Tales

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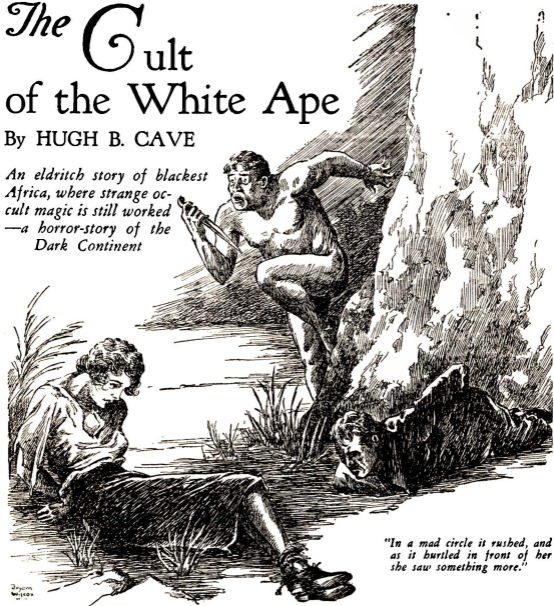
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# The Cult of the White Ape

By HUGH B. CAVE

*An eldritch story of blackest  
Africa, where strange oc-  
cult magic is still worked  
—a horror-story of the  
Dark Continent*



*"In a mad circle it rushed, and  
as it hurtled in front of her  
she saw something more."*

**T**HE hour is midnight. The oil lamp on the table before me, casting its weird glow over my face, is a feeble, inadequate thing that flickers constantly as the corrugated iron roof of the shack trembles with the throbbing beat of incessant rain. It has rained here in the village of Kodagi for the last four months—a horrible, maddening dirge that drives its way into a man's brain and undermines his reason. The M'Botto Hills of the Congo, sunk in the stinking sweat of the rain belt, are cursed with such torment.

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It was raining when Matthew Betts came here. I was outside at the time, working on the veranda inside my cage of mosquito-netting. A man must have some relief from the monotony or else go mad; and I had found, after being sent here by the Belgian government to fill the position of *chef de poste*, that my hobby of entomology was a heaven-sent blessing.

When Betts came, I was busily sorting specimens and mounting them on the little oki-wood table in my veranda laboratory. Beside me, on the stoop, squatted

old Kodagi. A cunning man, Kodagi. A wizened monkey of a man with parchment face and filed teeth and a broad grin that bespeaks much hidden knowledge. He belongs, I believe, to the Zapo Zaps—a queerly deformed race which inhabits these mysterious jungles. For years he has been the village Ngana, the witch-doctor and magician of the tribe.

Kodagi, I like to believe, is my friend. It is a peculiar half-dead friendship at most, and yet I am thankful for the little that is allotted me. There are rumors—more than rumors—that Kodagi disliked intensely the white man who held the position of *chef de poste* before me, and that this white man died a slow, unpleasant, and altogether inexplicable death. More than once I have suspected that Kodagi is one of the all-powerful members of the Bakanzenzi—the terrible, cannibalistic secret cult which even the natives of my village speak of in fearful undertones.

Kodagi was watching me astutely as I went about my work. His beady eyes followed me everywhere, saw every movement. Occasionally he muttered something to me under his breath; but the monotonous beat of the rain smothered his voice.

All at once he turned, to stare at the opposite wall of the clearing.

"Look, *Bwana!*" he pointed.

I jerked about obediently, to see the nose of a safari winding its sluggish way into our silent domain. Sloshing through the soft mud they came, with heads down and backs bowed under the weight of their burdens. At their head strode a white man—a hulking buffalo of a man with coarse red face and loose-fitting white drill which hung from him like a drenched winding-sheet. In one hand he carried a kiboko. The other hand he flung up to salute me, and shouted boisterously,

at the same time turning in his tracks to snarl at the cringing natives behind him. They were afraid of him evidently, for they cowered back in silence and huddled together in whispering groups while he strode forward to the veranda.

I watched him quietly. I thought I knew his identity, since I had been informed that certain land close to the village had been leased by the officials of a powerful rubber company. This company, the report stated, would send a chap named Betts—Matthew Betts—to the village of Kodagi, where he would experiment with various types of latex-producing trees and vines.

If this was the man they were sending, I decided instantly that I disliked him. He was drunk; and it is not good for white men to drink native rum in the sweating, fever-ridden murk of the Congo, less than five degrees from the equator. I was infinitely glad when my Jopaluo house-boy, Njo, relieved me of the task of opening the veranda door for him.

I SAW then that he was very drunk. He stumbled on the step and lurched forward. Perhaps he did not see Kodagi crouching there; perhaps he saw but did not care. At any rate, his outstretched foot entwined between Kodagi's black legs. He stumbled and caught himself on the mosquito-netting. Then, before I could prevent it, he swung upon Kodagi with a rasping snarl. His heavy boot drove into the Ngana's naked ribs. Kodagi, screaming in pain and writhing hideously, tumbled off the stoop into the mud.

The result was instantaneous. Straightening up, Betts stepped toward me with a livid grin. Two steps he took, and opened his mouth to speak. Then the grin faded with uncanny abruptness, leav-

ing an expression of unholy fear on his bloated face. I saw his eyes dilate. His features lost color. He flung himself sideways and jerked up a Luger in his fist. A sudden belch of flame seared through the muzzle; and the bullets, whining dangerously close to me, roared blindly into a patch of thick scrub beside the veranda rail.

After that there was complete silence for a moment. Betts stood rigid, trembling. Behind him, at the rim of the clearing, the porters of his safari were running madly to safety, screeching in terror. Njo, my house-boy, was down on his knees in the middle of the doorway, muttering in his native tongue. Kodagi, who had been lying prone in the mud at the foot of the stoop, had vanished!

I turned slowly, mechanically, to stare at the clump of brush which had excited Betts' drunken attention. I saw nothing—nothing at all. Frowning, I strode to Betts' side and gripped his arm.

"What the devil," I snapped, "are you doing? Are you mad?"

"Mad? *Mad!*" the words came from his dry mouth in a thick whisper. "You—you didn't see it, Varicks?"

"See what?" I said curtly.

"The—the thing—there in the reeds!" His eyes shifted furtively. Reddish brown eyes, they were, sunk in fatty pits that made them incredibly small and pointed.

"You're drunk," I shrugged. "Come inside."

"I—I saw it, Varicks," he muttered again. "An ape-thing—a *white* ape—big as a man—standing there snarling at me——"

"Come inside," I ordered, taking hold of him. Evidently he had swilled enough native rum to put a less powerful man under the ground. White apes—in the Congo! That was about the limit—the

nearest thing to D. T.'s I had seen in many months.

But he refused to be led away. He wrenched his arm from my grip and continued to stand there, staring, muttering something about not daring to turn his back. I saw that I should have to use extreme measures, or else have a raving, fever-drunk lunatic on my hands.

"You're seeing things," I said quietly. "Come on—we'll have a look. If anything was hiding in the reeds, there will be footprints in the mud. You'll see."

He went with me unwillingly, holding back so much that I was practically forced to drag him along. Together we stumped down the veranda steps and wallowed through the mud to the suspicious patch of brush. He stood beside me, uneasy and twitching, as I pushed forward and parted the high reeds with my hands.

Then, very suddenly, I froze in my tracks. My arms remained outflung, like the wings of a great bat. My groping foot stiffened in the very act of kicking the reeds aside; and there, directly beneath it, lay the soggy imprint of another foot!

Betts' eyes went horribly wide and filled with fear. His fingers dug into my forearm. He whispered something, but I did not hear, for I was already on my knees, examining the thing in front of me.

It was the mark of a man's foot—a naked, human foot. In the heel of it, where a little pool of water should have accumulated, lay a well of something else—something red and sticky that was blood.

Without a word I stood up again. Carefully, painstakingly, I examined every inch of that clump of reeds. I found nothing else—nothing but that damning, significant imprint of a human foot and the spilled human blood in the heel of it. When I finally pushed Betts toward the

shack, my fists were clenched and my mouth was screwed into a thin, troubled line. I was afraid.

ON THE veranda, inside the screen of mosquito-netting, I lowered myself heavily into a chair. Betts sat close to me, facing me, peering fearfully into my face. For an instant neither of us offered to break the silence which had crept over us. Then, leaning forward, Betts extended an unsteady hand to clutch my knee. His lips sucked open.

"What—what was it?" he whispered thickly.

I did not answer him immediately. I was thinking of Kodagi, whom he had kicked into the mud, and who had disappeared with such incredible swiftness. One moment the village sorcerer had been lying lifeless in the filth. Next moment Betts had seen that hideous apparition in the reeds, and Kodagi, all at once, had vanished.

"I don't know what it was," I said evenly, replying to Betts' query. "I only know that you've made a horrible blunder."

"A—blunder? Me?"

"In this village," I said meaningly, "one doesn't kick and beat the natives. This is deep-jungle territory. The natives are not the half-civilized, peaceful breed you're accustomed to handling. They are atavistic. Many of them are members of the *Bakanzenzi*."

"You—you mean——"

"Up here," I said quietly, "you are in the heart of strange jungles and strange people, where queer things take place. That's the best explanation I can offer you."

"But the ape——" he mumbled. "I saw——"

"This is not gorilla country, Betts. The big apes never come here. They never

leave their stamping-grounds in the Ogowwi and Kivu districts."

He blinked at me uncomprehendingly. His fat hand came up shakily to wipe the sweat from his jowls. Evidently my words had made a deep impression upon him, for his eyes were quite colorless and his mouth twitched.

"Get me—a drink, Varicks," he said gutturally. "I need it."

I hesitated. He had had enough to drink already. But one more might serve to steady his nerves and prevent a collapse. I got out of my chair to get it.

He rose with me and turned clumsily to the veranda door. Jerking it open, he looked toward the opposite end of the clearing, where his safari had first appeared.

"Lucilia!" he bellowed. "Lucilia!"

I was bewildered—even more bewildered when I followed the direction of his stare and saw what I had not noticed before. A *masheela* chair—a kind of covered hammock carried by four bearers—had been set down at the edge of the jungle. The bearers, having fled like frightened rodents at the sight of Betts' demonstration, had now returned. At the sound of the big man's voice, they lifted the *masheela* and carried it forward.

"My God!" I said thickly. "You haven't brought a woman here?"

"Why not?" Betts grumbled.

"This is no country for a white woman, Betts. You know damned well——"

"That's my business," he snapped. "She's my wife."

I choked the retort that came to my lips. Then I turned to stare at the woman who was approaching us. She was young—much younger than her bull-necked husband—hardly more than a slim, very lovely girl. When Betts spoke her name and she placed her hand in mine, I felt that I should be more than glad to endure

her husband's drunken presence during his stay in Kodagi's village. A white woman, here in this horrible place, was an angel from heaven.

**D**URING the following day I saw little of Betts and his wife. They drove their safari to the far end of the village and took possession, with their entire equipment, of a huddled group of broken-down, abandoned huts. Njo, my house-boy, brought news to me late in the afternoon, that Betts had gone alone into the jungle on a preliminary tour of inspection.

"Alone?" I frowned, peering into Njo's yellow-toothed mouth.

"Yes, *Bwana*. He is an ignorant fool!"

"Drunk?" I said curtly.

"So drunk, *Bwana*, that he can not walk straight!"

"Hmm. You think he was drunk before, when he claimed to see a white ape in the brush, Njo?" I asked meaningly.

The little Jopaluo's eyes widened in fear. He fell away from me, grimacing. I had to repeat the question before he would answer.

"Others have seen the white ape, *Bwana*," he whispered uneasily. "I myself have looked upon it one night in the jungle near the moon-tower of the Bakanzenzi; and many of the Manyimas and Zapo Zaps have seen it. It is *mafui*—the were-ape. It is not of this world, *Bwana*!"

"You are afraid, eh?"

"Afraid! Aiiiiii! The *mafui* means death!"

I glanced at him quickly. There was no doubt about the terror in his face; it was genuine and abject. With a shrug of indifference, altogether assumed to mask my own forebodings, I turned away—and then turned back again.

"Where is Kodagi?" I demanded.

"He is in his hut, *Bwana*, across the village."

"Go to him then," I ordered, "and tell him that I am sorry for what the big white man did to him. Tell him to come here and I will take the pain from his bruises."

"Yes, *Bwana*!"

Njo scurried out, leaving me alone. For some time I paced back and forth in the central room of the shack, listening to the throb of rain on the roof above me. Presently I went out on the veranda. I made sure that my revolver—a Webley forty-four—hung in its holster at my belt.

**A**N HOUR later Betts came to visit me. He came alone, wallowing and sloughing through the black mud, completely drunk and in ill temper. He fell shakily into a veranda chair beside me.

"Stinkin' weather!" he cursed. "Rain, rain——"

"You're drinking too much," I said curtly. "A man can't bloat himself with liquor up here and remain alive as well, Betts. He can't——"

"Can't!" he bellowed. "You and the rest of the fools in this country make a bloody creed out of that word. Can't do this; can't do that. They told me I can't grow rubber in the Ituri district. Well, by God, I've got the concession and I'm going to!"

I shrugged. If he wished to kill himself with native poison, that was his affair. But I thought of his girl-wife—slim, flower-faced, and so very lovely. I pitied her from the bottom of my heart.

It would be the inevitable conclusion. He would drink himself semi-insane. The rain would beat into his mind and drive out reason. He would turn on Lucilia, make life a living hell for her. From the momentary glance I had already had of

her troubled face, it was evident that the process had already begun.

"Look here," I began curtly. "You've got to send your wife out of this. You've no right to keep her here and——"

The door opened behind me. I turned quickly, to see Njo, the house-boy, scuffing toward me. He had returned from the village. He had a message for me.

Bending over, he delivered it in a whisper.

"Kodagi says, *Bwana*," he muttered, "that he will come and he thanks you. He says that you are his friend, but the red-eyed white man had better beware. That is all, *Bwana*."

Njo stepped back and vanished. With tight-pressed lips I turned back to Betts.

"There is danger here," I said grimly. "You have no right to expose your wife to it."

"No? You're gettin' pretty damned interested in her, ain't you?"

"I am doing what you are too drunk to do!" I snapped, choking back my temper. It was an effort, just then, to keep from taking his thick throat between my fingers and twisting some sense into him.

"If it's so almighty dangerous," he leered, "what are *you* stayin' here for then?"

"Because the danger does not concern me. I don't kick witch-doctors, Betts. I don't shoot at white apes. I make a point of minding my own business."

"Well?"

"My predecessor was a man of your type, Betts. He did about as he pleased. He died very slowly and unpleasantly—and mysteriously."

My words had no effect. Betts lumbered to his feet, swaying unsteadily, and grinned down at me.

"You're worse than the niggers with your damned superstitions," he scoffed.

"Me—I'm hard-headed and sensible. I'm goin' to finish what I started."

"You refuse to send Lucilia——"

"She stays right here with me. I got to have some one to pour drinks for me, Varicks. She ain't much good for anythin' else, but she'll learn."

"Have you——" I began, then caught myself. My question was too delicate.

"Wot?"

"Have you been married long?"

"About a month," he grumbled, turning away. "That's all—about a month. I'm thinkin' it was a mistake. But I reckon she'll learn. I'll teach her."

Then he groped down the steps and staggered away into the darkness.

I SAW him many times after that. He was continually under the effect of liquor, and he came to me bragging and boasting about the progress he was making. Already he had repaired his huts to withstand the hammering rain. Already he had made preparations for planting his latex-producing shrubs and vines.

His wife seldom accompanied him when he came to visit me. At first I could not understand this; but then, one night when she did come with him, I knew the reason. She was ashamed.

Her lovely throat bore indelible marks of finger-prints. Her left cheek, pallid and colorless, was scratched with a livid red welt, where he had either struck her or raked her with his fingernails. Yet, even though we met by chance occasionally when he was not about, she refrained from mentioning these things to me.

Then one night Betts said to me quizzically:

"I been lookin' at a big clearin' about a quarter of a mile back in the jungle, Varicks. What in hell is the tower affair in the middle of it?"

I knew what he meant. He had stum-

bled upon a wide amphitheater far from the village proper, where members of the secret cult of the Bakanzenzi, according to whispered rumors, were supposed to meet. As for the tower, it was a solid pillar of gleaming white stone, somewhat squat and encircled by a platform at the top, which rose, like a thing of another world, from the reeds of the clearing.

During my four months' stay in Kodagi's village, I had examined this tower many times. It was not hollow, but solid and thick; and the stones had evidently been brought from a great distance, since I could find no others like them in the surrounding district. It is my belief—and I am sure that the belief is no idle supposition—that this tower was built many hundreds of years ago by the Phœnicians. There are many such towers scattered throughout Africa's gloomy interior. They were originally erected to the Phœnician goddess, Astarte—but now, naturally enough, they are sacred to native gods and exponents of black magic and *mafui*.

I explained this, as best I could, to the man who sat before me. He shrugged at mention of Astarte; he sneered when I spoke of *mafui*.

"What is this Bakanzenzi of yours?" he grinned.

"What is it?" I said quietly. "I am not sure, Betts. For that matter, no white man is ever sure of the secret cults. The Bakanzenzi are cannibals, who are said to be able to transform themselves into animals at certain times. Kodagi has told me that the tower-glade is sacred to the Bakanzenzi. They hold their rites by the old white tower. The walls of the glade are made up of twisted, writhing-limbed okitrees, said to be magic. According to Kodagi, the penalty for disturbing the sacred amphitheater is death—horrible and certain."

"Rot," Betts grunted. "You're an old woman, Varicks."

"I have lived in these jungles long enough to be careful," I said simply.

"Yeah? Well, I've been here long enough to know that the glade is good planting-ground. Tomorrow I'm diggin' up the ground around the white tower and plantin' it with rubber vines. Tell *that* to your blasted Bakanzenzi!"

I argued with him. He told me curtly that the ground came within his jurisdiction and he intended to do as he pleased. Moreover, he did it. The following day he put his entire gang of blacks to work, planting the glade of Astarte with indigenous rubber plants and vines. He drove the natives brutally; and while they did his work for him, he sprawled in the shadow of the tower and swilled rotten whisky into his stomach.

THAT night his wife came to my shack—alone. We sat inside, out of the chill, moisture-ridden air; and I saw, as she leaned close to me in the glow of the lamp, that fresh marks of brutality were livid on her face and neck.

"I—I am afraid," she whispered tensely. "He is drinking more than ever. He has whipped some of our black boys until they can hardly walk!"

"He has also—beaten you?" I suggested softly.

She turned her face away. A dull line of crimson crept about her throat and rose higher. Reaching out, I took her hand and held it.

"There is bound to be trouble," I said bitterly. "You say he has braten the natives—and yet no natives have come to me with complaints. That is ominous. They would ordinarily bring their troubles to me, since I am in charge. This silence means that they intend to settle the score on their own account."



"You—you can do nothing?"

"I will do my best. Kodagi is coming here tomorrow, to have his wounds redressed. He was kicked brutally, severely. I am afraid there are internal injuries."

Lucilia's hand slipped unconsciously to her own side. She winced and stifled an exclamation of pain as her fingers touched some hidden bruise. I knew then that Betts had used his heavy boots on more than Kodagi; and a sullen rage found its way into my heart. God—if I ever caught him kicking her!

"Does he know you are here?" I said suddenly.

"No," she said, shaking her head heavily. "He—he has taken to going into the bush at night—alone. I do not know where he goes. He is always drunk—savage. I dare not question him."

My fists clenched. I saw that she was crying softly, and drew her close to me so that her head rested on my shoulder.

"Why does he hate you, Lucilia?" I pleaded.

"Because—because he is drunk. And because he is jealous of you. You are all that he would like to be. Clean—strong——"

"If I were strong in courage," I said bitterly, "I would take you away from him."

She raised her face slowly, almost entreatingly.

"I—wish you would—Lyle," she whispered.

Then I caught myself. She was his wife; I was a civilized white man, in spite of our surroundings. I could kill him—and would kill him—if I found him mistreating her. But I could not make love to her, in spite of my emotions. There was a difference between protection and theft.

I walked back with her, through the

rain. The hut where she lived was empty. Betts had not returned. I whispered farewell to her and returned, with slow steps and heavy heart, to my own dreary shanty on the other side of the village.

KODAGI came the next afternoon, limping painfully and supporting himself on the shoulders of two of the Zapos. I dressed his wounds with infinite care. Then, thinking to insure his friendship, I led him and his two henchmen into the rear room of the shanty. There I gave them presents of cigarettes and other valueless odds and ends which might catch their fancy. In addition, I allowed them to peer through the high-powered microscope which stood on the table—a thing which had always excited their curiosity in the past.

Kodagi bent over the instrument for many minutes, finally stepping aside to make room for one of his companions. He grinned at me gratefully. I attempted, then, to explain the secret of it to him.

"You see," I said, "the high-powered lenses make things seem larger than they really are and——"

The door slammed open behind me, drowning my words. I swung about, ready for any kind of emergency in view of what had already occurred. I found myself face to face with Betts, who stood swaying in the doorway.

He was savagely drunk—more drunk than I had ever before seen him. He lunged toward me with both hands outflung, snarling like an animal.

"So you're here, are you!" he rasped. "You——"

The curse was not pleasant. It was a livid torrent of abuse and epithet.

"What do you want?" I said crisply. Kodagi and his men had stepped away from the table and were watching me intently.

"You know damned well what I want!" he bellowed. "My wife comes here when I'm away in the jungle, does she? You and her——"

There was but one answer possible. I seized his arms and flung him away from me.

"You're drunk!" I said curtly. "If you say another word—by God, Betts, you're not fit to live with a woman. If you don't stop your infernal drinking and quit beating the natives, I'll have you sent back to the coast. You—you scum!"

He caromed across the floor like a top-heavy bullock. For thirty seconds he glared at me; and the utter hate and jealousy in his face must have been visible even to Kodagi and the Zapo Zaps. Then, with a burning oath, he clawed at the revolver in his belt.

He was drunk enough to have killed me. Luckily his fingers were clumsy, slippery with sweat. Before he could get the thing free and level it, I was upon him. My fist ground into his mouth. He jerked erect under the impetus of the blow; then, groping for support with lifeless fingers, he slumped to the floor unconscious.

Kodagi and the two natives faded silently through the open doorway. They said nothing; they departed like ghosts. I was left alone with the limp thing on the floor.

For a moment I stood stiff by the table, undecided whether to leave him there or to make some attempt to revive him. Then I considered that after all he had been drunk; he had not known what he was doing. I dropped to my knees beside him and wiped the blood from his face.

**S**OME ONE else entered the shack then. I heard the veranda door open and close, and hesitant steps crossed the outer room. I glanced up to find Lucilia standing above me, on the threshold.

"You—you have killed him?" she whispered tensely.

"No. He would have killed me."

A soft, choking exclamation came from her pale lips. She stared into Betts' face; and as she did so, the renegade's eyes twitched open.

We were silent, all three of us, for a long moment. Presently Betts groped to his feet and stood confronting us. A sneer curled his mouth.

"I suppose you're damned glad," he said gutturally, turning to his wife, "that Varicks did for me."

"Yes," she said simply. "I am."

"Yeah?" he snarled. "Well, by God, I'll change *that* before I'm done!"

He turned heavily, without a word to me, and lurched over the sill. I heard him stagger through the outer room. The veranda door thudded. Lucilia and I were alone.

"Why did you come here?" I shrugged. "You know it brings his madness to the surface."

"I had to come, Lyle. When he left me, he was insane. He—he might have killed you."

She seized my arm passionately. Her face was ghastly white.

"I'm afraid of him, Lyle!" she said fervently. "He—he is becoming an animal. At the slightest sound, he turns with horrible quickness to stare behind him, like a thing of the jungle. He walks on tiptoe and talks in a whisper when we are alone. When he thinks I am not looking, he mutters to himself and claws at the empty air, as if bats were fighting him."

"Vampire bats," I said aloud, without meaning to utter the words.

"What?" she said suddenly.

"Nothing," I mumbled. "You had better go back. It is not safe for you to excite his temper. If anything happens, come to me at once."

"I wish—oh, I wish I could stay here with you!"

"So do I," I said sincerely. "But it's impossible."

She walked out with dragging steps. I could read the anguish in her stooped shoulders and hanging head. But I could do nothing, then. I could only stare, and let her go.

When she had gone, I made an attempt to be rational. For an hour I worked over my case of entomological specimens, labelling them and separating them into their proper groups. But my mind was not on the work. My thoughts persisted in returning to her description of Betts' mysterious behavior.

I have studied medicine to some extent; and I knew that a medical diagnosis of Betts' malady was simple enough and completely devoid of mystery. The man had delirium tremens. He was on the verge of madness, brought on by an excess of native rum and bad whisky. And yet when I considered old Kodagi's sudden disappearance in that first hour of torment—when I considered the tower of Astarte and the horrible cult of the Bakanzenzi—I knew that the medical explanation was not complete. Other things—unknown, unnamed things of darkness and the jungle—had taken possession.

**A**N HOUR dragged on. It was nearly midnight when I heard the door of my shanty clatter open. I turned from the specimen table with both of my arms uplifted to defend myself—and then my arms dropped helplessly as Lucilia stumbled into the room.

"He is gone!" she said sibilantly.

"Gone?" I repeated. "Where?"

"He was in the house when I returned. I heard him pacing back and forth in his own room, mumbling and talking to himself. I sat on the stoop and waited—

waited for him to come out and—and beat me. I must have fallen asleep—from exhaustion. When I awoke, the shack was abandoned. He has gone into the jungle again, Lyle!"

I stood rigid, undecided what to do. She came closer and stared pitifully into my face.

"Lyle," she whispered, "his—his clothes are thrown on the bunk where he sleeps. He—he must be naked!"

"In the jungle—*naked*?" I said roughly. "Good God, no!"

"It is true, Lyle. He is an animal. He——"

But I thrust her aside. This ghastly affair had reached its climax, and I was determined to settle it once and for all.

"Stay here," I ordered crisply. "I intend to find him."

She slumped into a chair. I threw a coat about my shoulders and strode into the outer room, where Njo was asleep upon his bunk in the corner. I prodded him to consciousness and swore at him because he sat like a monkey on the edge of the bunk, blinking at me in bewilderment. Then, with the little Jopaluo trailing at my heels, I stepped into the night.

The clearing lay in nearly complete darkness. For once, the rain had ceased its monotonous drizzle; and the jungle was buried under a steaming mist. The sky was grayish black, void of stars. The moon, hanging in the middle of it like a blurred lantern, was blood-red.

We went straight to Betts' hut. There, with the aid of the search-lamp in my clenched fist, we found the man's spoor leading from the rear door—and the prints were those of naked feet! It was not difficult to trail that curious line of tracks into the jungle.

For twenty minutes we continued, following a well-beaten path through the jungle. In this manner we came to that

significant grove in the midst of the great trees, where the gleaming tower of Astarte stuck up from the reeds like a white tooth.

And there, at the base of the tower, we found a continuation of Betts' naked footprints. Round and round the tower they went—a circular, deep-beaten path of fresh imprints made by naked feet. And there they ended.

Confused, bewildered, not at all sure of my own sanity, I led the way back to my own shanty. For a long time I talked to Lucilia of what I had seen; and finally, mastering the fear of her heart, she returned to her hut. Far into the night I sat on the veranda of my place, smoking and waiting and wondering. It was the night before the full moon.

**I**N THE morning, Betts came to me cursing. He made no mention of the previous night. He was blind with rage because many of the euphorbias, which he had brought all the way from Madagascar and planted in the grove, had been uprooted. He demanded that I find the culprit.

I could do nothing, and I told him so. Still cursing, he slunk into the jungle.

I heard no more from him during the hours of daylight. Nor did I hear from Lucilia, who, for the sake of her own safety, refrained from coming near me. But when night came, and the moon swung into a sky of pitch, the village chief made a visit to my shanty and stood before me on the veranda.

"I come, *Bwana*," he said bitterly, "for justice. The red-eyed white man has done murder. He has killed two of the men who worked for him."

I did not bother to ask useless questions. My position of *chef de poste* demanded that I do one thing—and one thing only. Strapping a revolver holster

about my belt, I went directly to Betts' abode.

His wife opened the door to me and stared at me in consternation. She must have read the anger in my face, for I confess that I made no attempt to conceal it. Betts himself sat slumped in a chair close to the table.

I accused him outright of murdering two of the blacks. He lurched to his feet and snarled into my mouth.

"Why wouldn't I?" he rasped. "They were pullin' up my rubber plants in the grove. I caught 'em at it! By God, I'll murder the whole bloody tribe if they don't leave my plants alone!"

"You're under arrest!" I snapped. "This is my village. I won't stand for——"

He moved with such uncanny quickness that I could not prevent it. His fist hammered into my eyes, hurling me into the wall. I heard Lucilia scream as I went down. I saw Betts, running with tremendous speed and agility, swirl across the threshold and race into the jungle. Staggering up, I wiped the blood from my face and plunged after him. The jungle closed over me.

I had no flash-lamp this time. There was nothing to light the trail. The moon above the trees was full and vivid, but here it was blotted out completely by interlaced branches and creepers. I stumbled headlong, plunging into unseen thickets and strangling vines. For half an hour I groped through the bush, stopping at intervals to listen for sounds of the fugitive. Once I heard a scream—a woman's scream. At that moment I did not realize the hellish portent of it, and so I continued to fight my way forward.

Then it came. I had no defense against it, since it fell upon me from behind. As I faltered in the darkness, the underbrush broke apart behind me. I heard a

sudden terrifying suck of breath. Then something—God, I can not force myself to call it human!—something hideously powerful, stark naked, reeking with the stench of liquor, crushed me into the dank floor of the jungle. A white arm lashed about my throat. I was lifted bodily and flung over a sweat-soaked shoulder. At terrific speed I was borne through the jungle. Overhanging vines tore at my face and beat against me, filling my eyes with blood. I believe I lost consciousness.

**W**HAT happened from then on is a blur of agony. I felt the naked form beneath me heaving and panting as it raced on and on through the pitch. Then the jungle opened wide and a gleaming white glare, from the moon above, blinded me. I was carried another hundred steps, then flung to the ground. When my eyes opened, staring through a mask of blood, I found myself bound hand and foot with reed ropes and lying in a contorted position at the foot of that mysterious, curious tower of Astarte, in the center of the forbidden amphitheater of the Bakanzenzi!

Something stirred beside me. I jerked myself about fearfully, expecting anything. My eyes went wide in horror. There, flung brutally against the stone not two yards away from me, and moaning with the pain of the reeds that cut into her wrists and ankles, lay Lucilia. I can see her face a hundred times over, so deeply was it engraved with fear!

I could say nothing. My mouth welled with blood; my lips were thick and swollen. Dumbly I stared out into the clearing. The moon, hanging very low over the great ceiba silk-cotton trees and borassus palms at the rim of the amphitheater, had not yet swung deep enough to illuminate the tower. The entire cen-

ter of the clearing lay in mottled blackness, masking the tower in shadow.

But we were not alone. Out there, half hidden in the gloom, a huge white shape inhabited the shadows with us. I could see it lumbering around the tower, mumbling and wailing to itself in a guttural voice that rose, at sudden intervals, into a screaming chant. In a mad circle it rushed, and as it hurtled past in front of me I saw something more—a jet-black bat-shape flapping and fluttering about its head. I saw the flame of fireflies swirling.

Terror came to me then. I shrank close to the girl beside me, and I was mortally afraid. The thing out there was Betts. I *knew* it was Betts. Yet the thought brought no consolation, for the creature was a stark naked raving madman in the grip of some weird occult power beyond my comprehension.

I stared into Lucilia's eyes.

"How—how did you come here?" I choked. "Did he——"

"He came back as soon as you had gone, Lyle! He was naked, mad! He seized me—carried me here——"

Something in her voice gave me courage, because I knew that she needed me. It was a strange time to think of love; and yet I knew, at that mad moment, that I loved her, that she loved me in return. This ordeal had thrown us together and made us realize the truth.

I lifted my head then and shouted to the terrible thing that lumbered about us.

"Betts!" I screamed. "Betts! Get hold of yourself, man. You're mad!"

The naked thing stopped in its tracks and laughed hideously. I saw it point to the rising moon. Behind it, at the edge of the jungle, I thought I saw the massive underbrush sway and rustle with a significant, peculiar movement, as if a horde of unseen things lay in wait there.

Then, chattering frantically, the horrible mad thing continued its ceaseless circle.

Once again fear gripped me. I stared with unblinking eyes, waiting and wondering what the end would be. Somehow I knew that Betts was not alone. The Bakanzenzi—the dreaded cult which held its rites in this clearing at the height of the full moon—were somewhere about, only waiting until the moon-white should reach the sacred tower.

Then, at my feet, a shaft of moonlight fell upon the base of the column. The great white shape stopped its prowling and stepped full into the glow. I saw every detail of Betts' unclad form—a terrible naked figure covered with self-inflicted cuts and slashes.

HE APPROACHED with short, jerky steps, flinging his arms wildly.

"Betts!" I shouted. "For God's sake——"

He ignored me. In a shrill, screeching voice he began to speak, turning his bloody head in all directions as if he were addressing some immense gathering. The man was gripped with some tremendous power of hallucination. He saw things which did not exist—or perhaps they *did* exist and were beyond my human perceptions!

"The time has come!" he muttered. "The moon has risen to the sacred tower. The unbelievers must die, as it was ordained by the Goddess of the Tower! The time—is—now!"

He flung himself forward. I saw his arm lunge up. The pallid white light gleamed on the blade of a horribly long knife clenched in his fist. I closed my eyes with a shudder. Lucilia, pressed close against me, moaned softly and tried to take my hand.

But Betts did not reach us. A furious burst of sound stopped him in his tracks.

From all sides of the tower it came—the wild, thunderous beat of drums. It rose out of the jungle like the hammering of rain on a tent-top, deafening in its intensity. At the same moment a hairy arm, stark white and gleaming in the moonlight, twisted about my waist from behind and lifted me from the base of the tower. A sudden stench of rancid flesh came over me, strong enough to be nauseating. I felt myself carried, at a curious lumbering, rolling gait, through the high reeds to the jungle rim. There, in the protecting shadow of the borassus palms, I was flung down. Lucilia Betts was tossed beside me; and when I regained my senses long enough to stare about me, the monstrous hairy creature had vanished. Vanished just as Kodagi had vanished from the mud of the village floor!

Then it began in earnest.

The drums took up a wild reverberation. There was no steady beat; merely a continuous roar of noise emanating out of nothing. Betts, adding his voice to the tumult, had dropped his knife and was once more lumbering round and round the white tower, trotting with the shifting gait of a great gorilla. Beyond him, all about him, I saw native forms, glistening black in the glare of the moon. Like ants they were, crouching in the reeds; and their faces were hidden behind triangular black masks of carved wood—the sign of the Bakanzenzi!

They watched Betts with a hungry stare, as if waiting for something. He saw them. His even, rolling stride became a peculiar jumping, hopping gait, altogether erratic. But still he moved in the same mad circle!

There could be no more horror—so I thought. The only thing that kept me from going insane was the touch of Lucilia's hands on my manacled arms. Then her voice screamed beside me.

"The tower! Oh—God! Look!"

She shrank against me, trembling. But my eyes were riveted to the top of the tower, open wide in the culmination of horror. There, peering down at Betts with savage lust, hung a face—a hideous face, white and hairy and huge, with drooling fangs that glistened in the light. An ape's face—a white ape of enormous size, larger than the gorillas of the Kivu country!

The thing dropped down behind Betts. It followed him in his route about the tower, trotting clumsily behind him and making no attempt to close the intervening distance. Then Lucilia screamed again; and I saw another of those horrible white shapes appear in the top of the tower, to drop down and join in the procession. One after another they come, as if by magic, to leap into the rushing circle of monstrosities headed by Betts. When I finally closed my eyes, overcome by the horror of it, more than a score of them had joined the ring.

I think then that the moon-glow struck the tip of the tower, as a signal. A peculiar vibrating chant rose all about me, rising and falling like a tide of water. A dozen scattered fires leaped into being about the clearing, as if they had been waiting for some hidden sign. The light was blinding, bewildering. It roared and flickered and threw great blotches of sparks into the vivid sky. The Bakanzenzi were dancing—dancing and screaming and hammering on their infernal drums.

And suddenly the natives were no longer there—no longer before me. In their place appeared creatures of the jungle. I saw leopards swirling in the reeds; great rock pythons coiled in the glare of the fires, filling the night with their hissing voices; crocodiles thrashing about with open jaws; bush-pigs racing

madly! The terrible *lingas* and *dinwinti* drums roared faster and faster.

Lucilia fainted then. I pressed her close to me and stared in horror. The great apes were rumbling, hammering upon their chests as they lumbered about the tower. Their fanged mouths were open, dripping saliva. And Betts was no longer leading them in the ritual—he was racing at top speed, as fast as his sweating legs would carry him, to *escape!* His voice rose in a tortured screech, full of terror. He raised his arms to the moon, blubbering in torment.

I could not close my eyes. Every detail of that mad scene burned into my brain. The fires, already burning and waiting for their cannibalistic offering—the jungle creatures writhing and leaping about the flames—the great apes of the tower closing in on their victim with relentless certainty. God!

Then they caught him. I heard a heart-rending scream that rose in livid crescendo and was smothered at its peak. Then came a mighty crash of sound, a deafening bellow; and the giant *mafui* apes dragged their victim down. I fainted.

WHEN I opened my eyes again, I peered into the frightened face of Njo, my house-boy. I lay on the veranda of my own shanty, in the village of Kodagi, and Lucilia Betts lay ten feet distant from me, sprawled pitifully on the stoop. Njo was struggling faithfully to pour brandy between my clenched teeth.

"Who—who brought me here?" I said thickly, gripping his arm.

The Jopaluo peered into my face and shuddered.

"You were here, *Bwana*," he whispered fearfully. "I found both of you here at daylight, when the screams of leopards and the *dinwinti* drums awakened me."

I could get no more out of him, in

spite of my questioning. That was his story—he had found us there on the veranda at daylight.

When I had recovered strength I left him to care for Lucilia, while I stumbled back through the jungle to the clearing of the Bakanzenzi. I was determined to know the truth.

The amphitheater was deserted. At the base of the tower I found stains of blood and many, many footprints—*human* footprints. Side by side in the muddy ground I found two other things of mystery. One was a crescent-shaped disk of mother-of-pearl—the ancient symbol of Astarte. The other, half buried in the mud, was a gold seal ring bearing Betts' initials—and inside it, curled maliciously and staring up at me with cloudy gold eyes, lay a tiny green whip-snake—the symbol of the Bakanzenzi.

ON MY way back to the shanty, I made a visit to the hut of old Kodagi, for the purpose of asking him a single significant question. Quietly I pushed aside the reed mat that hung over the entrance; and Kodagi was sitting there on the floor, blinking at me.

"Do you know," I said simply, squatting beside him, "where Betts is?"

He peered into my face for a long time. A wealth of uncanny wisdom and knowledge was engraved in his parchment features at that particular moment.

"Last night, *Bwana*," he shrugged, "I heard the screams of the leopards and the victory cries of the great apes. It is possible that Betts was torn by the big

cats—or killed by a wandering tribe of gorillas from the Kivu."

"Apes——" I muttered. "It was an ape who carried Lucilia and me to safety under the borassus palms. An ape——"

"Perhaps, *Bwana*," Kodagi said softly, "the ape was your friend. Perhaps he saved you because you were kind to him, healing his wounds and letting him peer through your magic instruments and——"

My head came up with a jerk.

"What?" I snapped.

"Nothing, *Bwana*. I was talking to myself. I always talk to myself when it is raining, *Bwana*—and you see for yourself it is raining again."

And so I left him. And tonight, now that the ordeal is finished, I find myself unable to sleep. I am sitting here with pencil and paper in the inner room of my shanty, with the flickering lamplight playing over my shrunken face. Lucilia has gone to her own hut, with Njo to keep guard over her until morning. Then she and I, together, will depart from this strange village and leave behind us, for ever, the domain of the Bakanzenzi and the hideous region of *mafui*. We shall be married at the mission of the white fathers in the village of Bugani, twenty miles down-river, and from there we shall go directly to the coast.

There I shall make my report to the government, and in it I shall say that Betts was devoured by leopards. But Lucilia and I—and old Kodagi, who squats for ever on the floor of his hut and is wiser by far than any of us—we know better.

