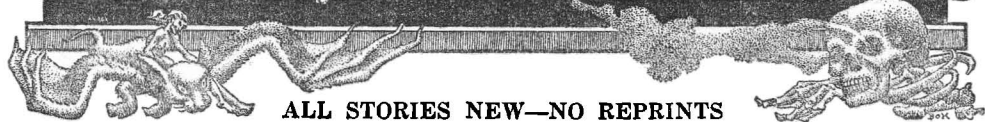


Weird Tales



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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

The Enchanted River

By DOROTHY QUICK

*A delightful, very exciting tale . . . about the Great White Lord of Ceylon—
two lovers—and a certain very useful old legend!*

THE magic of Ceylon took complete possession of Wells Barrington before he had been a day in Colombo.

He let the big ship sail without him and hired a guide to take him into the interior.

For a month he explored the jungle, revelled in the rich vegetation and let the country grow dearer to his heart with each breath he took of the scented air.

When his wanderings brought him to a tiny native village tucked far away out of the tourist path he fell completely under the tropical spell and decided to make his home there.

After a great deal of talk with the head man of the village, he succeeded in acquiring a tract of land with a native house. Then he dismissed his guide and sent him back to Colombo with a wire to be sent to his partners saying that he had decided to stay in Ceylon, they were to sell his interest in the firm, invest the money and remit monthly payments of interest to him.

He hired a couple of men from the village, sent for stores, and proceeded to make his house comfortable so far as modern conveniences went. About it he planted a garden of rich tropical flowers. As the principal industry of Ceylon was tea growing, and he had an eye to the future, he also planted tea.

In the course of time he received letters from an outraged aunt and his partners begging him to come home, but the words rolled off his back like water from a duck's

For the first time in his life Wells Barrington was content.

He got on well with the natives, instinctively, he seemed to know what to do and say. He made them little gifts which pleased them, and learned their language with astonishing rapidity. When he shot a tiger that had been menacing the village for weeks, they called him the Great White Lord, and accorded him a deference and worship that pleased him intensely. This pleasant state of affairs might have gone on indefinitely if Wells had never seen Ara.

It was by the river that he first glimpsed her. He liked to walk there in the cool of the evening. Ara was bathing. The last rays of the dying sun reflected rosy tints on her bronze skin. Her hair was blacker than the jungle in the deepest night, her eyes like deep unfathomable pools, her lips were full and red. Wells Barrington's heart skipped a beat and he suddenly recollected the saying that it is not good for man to live alone.

Ara grasped her sarong and wrapped it around her. She at once recognized the Great White Lord and asked why he had come to the enchanted river.

"I didn't know it was enchanted," Wells replied.

Then Ara told him the story of the princess who, being thwarted in her love, had prayed that all lovers who bathed in the river would have their wishes granted, and then had drowned herself.

Wells looked at the slender girl and hesitated before he spoke, for suddenly he

Ara wrapped her sarong around her — then asked Barrington why he had come to the enchanted river. . . .



knew that the question he was about to ask was momentous. Finally he broke the silence. "Did you come to wish?"

Ara answered him simply, "Of course. I came to wish for a handsome husband."

Wells Barrington breathed easier. He wasn't exactly handsome; but he was tall and straight and had brown hair that glistened gold in the sunlight, and had a smile that usually got him what he wanted. He used it now.

"Suppose the river sent me to you?"

Ara put her slim hand in Wells' firm

one, and said, "No greater thing could the river give me than the love of the Great White Lord. For weeks I have seen you in the day, and for weeks I have dreamed of you at night."

Despite her words she drew back when Wells tried to take her in his arms.

"Not yet," she whispered. "Not ever, unless the river is powerful and the prayer the princess made works well."

"What do you mean?"

Ara sighed. "Who I love is my own affair and you are the man I have chosen;

but he to whom I give myself is not of my choosing. That lies in the hands of the high priest."

"I understand," Wells told her. He had seen enough of village affairs to know that wives were bought, sometimes with silver, more often with a cow or some animal or article the parents coveted. "I will pay your father silver for you, or gold."

Sadly Ara shook her head: "I am not an ordinary maid, my lord. From my birth I have been dedicated to be the bride of whoever the high priest chooses. Unless he freely gave me to you, it would bring famine and desolation on the village. Whereas if I marry where he chooses, we will have plenty."

"That is ridiculous," Wells slipped back into the New York way of speaking.

"I do not know what you mean—rid—ridic—but I do know that the priest may give me to Singh, a horrid old man who has much wealth. That is why I came to the river to pray, for, rather than be given to Singh, I would kill myself."

"You shall not be given to Singh," Wells Barrington said firmly, in her own language. "I will see the priest myself tomorrow. I will offer him much gold for his temple and you shall be mine."

After that forthright statement he took her in his arms and this time she did not draw back.

THE next morning Wells, with a handful of gold pieces in his pocket, went to the high priest, jangled them eloquently and talked of love. He offered to marry Ara according to the rites of her own religion, but the high priest shook his head.

"No," he said firmly, "a maid dedicated to the God cannot wed with a foreigner, even though he be the Great White Lord, who has saved many of our lives by shooting the tiger-that-stole-into-the-village-by-night."

Wells drew the gold out of his pocket

letting it slip from hand to hand. He would pay many of these for Ara, he said, watching the cupidity in the old priest's eye.

He waited for a response. When the priest said nothing, he added to his plea, "I will become one of you. Her religion shall be mine."

Once more the priest shook his head.

"That you cannot do. Besides even if I were to initiate you into our rites, it is too late. The maid Ara has been promised to the highest man of all—Prince Shani."

Wells had had to be passed upon by His Highness before he could purchase his land. The prince was a suave young man who had been educated in England, and had not forgotten the manners he had acquired there. He had brought them all out for Wells Barrington, but Wells knew that in Ceylon the Prince had reverted to type. He had seen the grilled windows of the women's quarters and noticed the many guards around the building at the time of his visit.

He had, however, been more fascinated by the elegance with which the prince housed his herd of elephants, for they lived in what was practically a marble palace, each elephant had his own stall and a trainer and boy in attendance.

The prince had been very affable, but Wells had not liked him. His lips were thick, and there was a cruel streak in his face. Wells remembering it exclaimed, "You cannot give Ara to him!"

"The Great White Lord may command in his own country, here it is different," the priest said firmly. "To go to the house of the prince is an honor. He has gold, which will please the god. If you care to make a gift, I am sure the god would bring prosperity to you, and perhaps someone else to love."

Wells talked much longer but he got nowhere. Dejectedly he returned to his

house minus several gold pieces. As far as the priest was concerned there was no help to be expected, and as for Prince Shani, he knew there would be no hope there. The only thing for him to do was to persuade Ara to go away with him.

He sat on the veranda and gazed out over the broad acres he had come to love, saw the flowers, heard the monkeys chattering in the trees, but for the first time felt no sense of well-being. As soon as the evening hour came, he started toward the river in search of Ara.

She was not there. He couldn't find her that day, or the next, either at the river or in the village.

The morning of the third day he was awakened by a funny noise of something hitting his window. At first he thought it was one of the monkeys amusing itself, and paid no attention to it.

When it persisted he got up to see what it was.

Outside the window, framed in the brilliant red flowers that grew around it, stood Ara—a very different Ara than when he had seen her last. She was weeping and the tears rolled unheeded down her cheek as she stretched out her hands to him.

"Oh, my lord," she sobbed, "I have just heard that I am to be given to the prince, and if Singh, the merchant, was awful, Prince Shani is more terrible. I have heard tales of what happens to his women. I would rather die than go to his palace!"

Wells leaped through the window and in one second had her in his arms.

"You shall not. I have been twice to the river to tell you so. We will leave this place together—you and I—and go over the seas to my own land."

"No," Ara sadly shook her head. "It cannot be. The God's curse would follow us forever. Rather than become the prince's bride I will kill myself. I have come to ask you to do something for me—

such a little thing. Promise me that you will."

"I would give my life for you," Wells said simply.

"Then go to the river in the dusk of this evening. Go and bathe in it and pray that somehow, somehow, the prayers of the princess will work a magic for us. Pray that it work quickly for tomorrow night I am to be sent to the prince."

Wells remonstrated with her, pointed out how stupid it was to waste time, that all they had to do was to leave the country. But Ara was steeped in the tradition and religion of her land and her fear was so great that despite her love for him, he could do nothing with her.

Eventually he promised to bathe in the river and make the wish, and begged her to come again that night so he could tell her what happened. He didn't really expect anything to happen, but the desire to see her again was overwhelming. She said she would come and then, tears still streaming from her lovely eyes, slipped away.

AT DUSK Wells Barrington went to the river. He threw aside his clothes and plunged in. He dove down through the clear water, and made the wish as he had promised Ara. When he struck bottom his fingers caught on something hard. Unconsciously he grasped it so that he came to the surface with it still clasped in his hand. Once more on the land he investigated his find.

It was a bell, a strangely shaped bell with a little knob on the top to hold it by. It curved downward like an apple. Half of it was solid but the bottom part was hollow and curved inward. Inside hung the clapper. It was apparently very ancient and had carvings which at present were hidden by the accumulated mud of the river. From all indications it must have lain there for years.

Wells held it up to the light and dimly

thought he had seen something somewhere that resembled it. He shook it and despite the river's mud it gave forth a lovely sound like fascinating music. He rang it again, and once more his nerves thrilled to the sheer melody of it. He put it down for a second while he got into his clothes. He started back to his home with it in his hand; and as he walked along it chimed rhythmically with each step he took.

Suddenly he became conscious of a noise behind him, the heavy tread of something following him.

He looked back but there was nothing there.

He stood still and the noise ceased.

When he started to walk again he heard once more the heavy plodding sound. When he still could see nothing, he decided it must be some animal in the deep foliage alongside the path, and felt a vague sense of alarm. It was almost dark and perhaps the tiger he had killed had had a mate. The padding steps followed him, and as he went faster they increased their pace.

All at once he felt something cold and slimy slide around his neck. Wells Barrington was a brave man, but this touch filled him with terror. He screamed and put his hand to his throat only to find nothing there. He looked behind him—green foliage met his eyes. But the foliage was bent back as though some large heavy thing had passed through it. The path had been narrow—as he walked along now it was wider. He felt a clammy moisture on his forehead, and was terribly afraid.

There were things in Ceylon — dark things that he had heard whispers of. The priest might be working a magic on him, a curse for daring to aspire to the maid the god had chosen.

Still he could see nothing. He began to run as fast as he could toward the clearing where his house was; and as he ran the bell in his hand clanged furiously and the

heavy treads behind him came faster. Once more he felt the cold reptilian touch about his throat, and thought a python might have dropped from a tree. But when he put his hand up there was nothing there.

All the way home he knew something followed him, and the strange furtive touches he felt on his neck and shoulders filled him with terror. Though he could feel and hear, he could see nothing, and the weird, uncanny sensation of being followed in such a manner was worse than facing a concrete danger. The sight of a tiger would have been welcome to him, weaponless though he was.

By the time he reached his own land he was running with both hands clasped in front of him holding the bell. Without space to swing, it no longer chimed. Subconsciously, Wells missed the music.

Suddenly he realized he was no longer being followed. The animal, or whatever it was, had gone. As he went panting up the steps to his veranda, he lost entirely the sensations he had had. His fear dropped away from him. Inside his house, he was in such a state that he drank half a tumbler of whiskey straight. It wasn't until its warmth had reassured him, and made him quite positive he had been imagining things, that he looked at the bell.

As he had nothing to do until Ara came, he decided to clean it. Once slime and accumulated dirt of the river had been removed, he discovered sheer beauty, exquisite carving—bronze inlaid with color as only the Ceylonese can. He laid it on the table deciding he would give it to Ara.

BUT when Ara came the news she brought made him forget the bell.

The village was in a state of uprising against him. The news of their love and his visit to the priest had gotten about and the people were in great excitement over what they considered an insult to the god.

"You must go," she told him. "You

must go quickly. They are on their way here now and they will kill you."

"Surely," Wells protested, "you must be exaggerating."

"Oh, no," she cried and the distress on her face made him realize his danger. "They want your life for they know that, because of you, I will not wed the prince. The prince himself has helped to incite them."

"The prince!" Wells exclaimed. "I should have thought he would have protected me. He is educated, has lived in England."

Ara caught him by the arm.

"Oh, my Lord, do you not know that these things matter little here? You have offended the god, the priest says, because you have dared to love me, and I have made it worse by loving you. I spoke only to my trusted friend but her tongue was loose and she told what I said. The people come. They come with knives, with fagots! They will kill you but they will torture first. I beg of you to go!"

"I will go," Wells told her, "if you will come with me."

"I cannot come," she sobbed. "Have I not told you over and over of the curse? Have we not prayed and bathed in the river—both you and I—and nought has come of it? Leave me! I am not afraid to die, but I cannot die unless I know you are safe."

Wells Barrington took a deep breath. It didn't seem possible to him that a civilized world existed anywhere. If it did he didn't care.

"We will die together," he said.

"No, no," the girl screamed, and then with her voice pitched slightly higher, "they come! They come!"

Through the long window that opened on the verandah Wells could see a rabble of people armed with all sorts of mediaeval weapons on the edge of his clearing. They might have been a rabble from the French

Revolution or some terrible ancient revolt. They were obviously out for blood—his blood. It was too late to get away. He was caught with Ara to protect and he had no weapon. There was no time to even get his guns.

All at once his eye fell on the bell. It was round and heavy and would make a good missile. He clasped it firmly in his hand and turned to Ara.

"Stay here. I will go and meet them."

"No, no," she screamed.

"There isn't any other choice now!"

He left her and walked onto the verandah, down the steps, watching the people who were more than sixty feet away from him.

It was a mob of villagers led by the high priest and spurred on from the rear by Prince Shani. The prince rode a white horse and even over the heads of the people Wells could see the leer in his eyes. Some of the natives carried flaming torches against which everything was etched plainly. Wells had no time to think. He wasn't even afraid any more. He walked straight toward them, and as he walked the bell in his hand chimed musically. Even in that moment of horror he loved the rhythm of it.

Suddenly he heard the heavy padding treads again and felt the cold wet touch on his neck. He shuddered instinctively, but in face of the oncoming rush of hostility he was no longer terrified of what he thought must be magic.

The people yelled: "White Devil, we come to send you back to the hell where you belong!"

Wells Barrington said nothing, but in his mind thoughts whirled quickly. "At least if you do I will send one of you first." He raised his arm with the bell high in the air. It chimed louder than ever.

Then the amazing thing happened. He felt himself suddenly lifted up, high above the heads of the advancing people. One

second he was standing on the ground, the next sitting on some firm object that was moving. There was a loud trumpeting cry and heavy plodding treads echoed in his ear as he advanced toward the people. He realized that though he could see nothing he was riding an elephant. He recognized the touch of its hide, the movement of its body—an elephant which was charging into the mob. The first row went down before it, trampled under its feet, screaming as it passed over them.

Then a voice, clear and high-pitched, cried, "It's Taj—Taj come again as the god said he would and he brings to us the White Lord! Fall down upon your knees and worship so that the god be not angry, otherwise he will trample all of you to death."

At this point nothing that happened would have amazed Wells. He sat still and waited. The people fell on their knees and bowed their heads to the ground before him. Only Prince Shani remained erect upon his horse. There was fear in the prince's eyes—fear and a horrible fascination that kept him rooted where he was and prevented him from turning the white horse he sat upon in the opposite direction from the oncoming elephant.

The elephant picked his way through the people who, when they knelt, had left a road clear for him. He advanced toward the prince with Wells Barrington still on his back.

"Half my kingdom if you turn him!" cried out the prince, for one moment breaking loose from the terror that held him.

Wells could see Shani trembling as a bird shakes that is fascinated by a snake knowing the doom that awaits it, powerless to move and prevent it. Despite his hatred of the prince, pity surged up in Wells Barrington's heart.

"I'll do my best!" he cried, and tugged at the left ear of the elephant, which he was holding trying to maintain his bal-

ance. He thought perhaps he could steer it in another direction as he had seen Mahouts do.

TAJ was not to be swerved from his purpose. With a trumpeting cry, he advanced upon the prince, ignoring the efforts of Wells.

Taj gave one more cry which froze the blood of all who heard it; and then he was upon the prince and his horse. The horse Taj thrust aside catching the prince up in his great trunk, as he did so. Then he stood still, swayed his trunk to and fro almost as though he were making up his mind what to do with his victim.

Shani shrieked. Wells Barrington couldn't blame him, for that moment was fraught with things beyond description. There was terror in it, while the prince dangled in mid-air and the awe-stricken people watched silently. But there was more than terror. There was a breathless eeriness, an uncanny strangeness and a sense of ageless events culminating. Wells ceased trying to guide or restrain the elephant—he knew it was useless.

The prince screamed again.

With that Taj acted. He swung his trunk rapidly back and forth until it gained a terrific momentum. Then suddenly he threw the unfortunate prince down to the ground with full force, and, trumpeting madly, trampled the Ceylonese into the earth until, to the horrified eyes of the watching Wells there was very little left of the prince.

Only then did the elephant calm. He turned toward the people and ambled slowly through them back to the spot where he had stood before. Then he stood still and reached back with his trunk touching Wells.

For one minute Wells thought he, too, was going to meet an end like Shani's. He shut his eyes, but gradually he came to know that Taj was caressing him. The

cold scaly trunk sliding over him was evincing affection, waiting for approval of what he had done.

Almost automatically Wells touched the trunk, patting it as he would a dog's back. The elephant made no sound, but stood quietly, his trunk turned back, with the tip resting in Wells Barrington's hand.

From the group of kneeling people one man arose. In the flaring light from the torches he looked like a bronze figure come to life. It was the high priest.

"Great White Lord," he said, "I ask your pardon for me and for my people. We did not know that you were the chosen of the god. For years it has been written on our scrolls that the Sacred Elephant would return and bring with him one who was to be greatly honored in our land. You are he; and we bow before you now and forevermore. Whatever you ask for shall be yours."

Wells wasted no time in making his wishes known. "I ask for the maid Ara to be my wife."

The high priest touched his forehead. "So it shall be. Bring her to the temple tomorrow and I shall unite you. And the houses of the prince and whatever was his shall be yours. Taj has decreed that nothing can be denied you. Have we your leave to depart?"

"You have," said Wells and breathed a deep sigh of thankfulness.

He watched them go, bearing the wounded with them. Not until they had all disappeared into the shadows did he move so much as a finger. But when the clearing was empty, he brought down his arm which all this time had been upright. As he did so the bell jangled softly.

Once more he felt the cold wet trunk of the elephant wind itself about him, now he was not afraid. He let himself go in its grasp and was lifted gently to the ground. In the darkness he could distinguish nothing, but his hand caressed

the elephant's trunk. Then suddenly there was nothing beneath his fingers. The elephant had gone.

Ara came running out of the house. "Oh, my lord," she cried, "my lord! The princess! Her prayers have been granted. All is well for us. Where did you find the bell?"

Wells looked at the bell which he was still clasping in his right hand. "My fingers caught in it when I dove into the river. When I went out to face the mob I picked it up because I could see no other weapon."

Gently, reverently, Ara touched the bell. "It is *The Bell*," she said, "the bell that belonged solely to Taj. Each elephant has a bell with which he is trained. He obeys its every signal. Taj was the Sacred Elephant, the most sacred of all, hundreds of years ago in the days of the princess. The princess fed Taj herself. It was one of her sacred duties. Taj loved the princess and when she died he would not eat so he sickened and, despite all the priests did for him he went away to die.

"It was then the prophecy was written down that Taj would return bearing with him a Great Lord who would bring peace and plenty to our land. His bell was flung into the river and it was said that whoever found the bell could bring Taj back from the other world, and that he would be the Great Lord."

"You mean—but you can't mean—that Taj is a ghost!"

"Of course I do," Ara responded. "Taj has been dead thousands of years but he still knows the sound of his bell and has come to answer it, and he will come whenever you ring it. We are safe, my lord. We are safe forever, you and I."

Now Wells understood the heavy plodding treads he had heard, the cold touch upon his neck that night at the river. It had been Taj following his bell as he had been trained to do. Taj! Elephant or

ghost? Ghost Ara said but he had heard elephants lived a long long time.

"Why did Taj kill the prince?" Wells was trying to understand things that were beyond understanding.

ARA hesitated a second before she replied, "My lord, there is a belief among my people that certain ones are born again. The princess killed herself because an ancestor of Prince Shani's loved her and, had she lived, she must have been his bride.

She hated him all the more because she loved a stranger youth who had come to our island in a boat and, after being shipwrecked, found his way to the interior. The princess met him and gave him her heart."

"Then, as now, the priests were jealous. They killed the stranger youth and because of that, the princess died. But first she whispered the tale of her wrongs into the ear of Taj, the elephant, and begged him to revenge her. In that past age Taj tried to reach the prince to kill him and almost succeeded but the priests prevented him. Some of the priests Taj killed before they chained him fast. The wheel of life turns, my lord, turns endlessly, but sometimes the

wheel reaches the same place, the cycle is lived again."

"You mean this prince is the old prince come again!" Wells gasped.

Ara nodded. "I mean that, and even more, my lord. Are you not a stranger come to our land, and is it not said that I resemble the princess as no other woman of our race has done since she lived? Did we not love and did you not find the bell? No wonder the ghost of Taj returned to do what he failed to accomplish centuries ago."

Wells felt gratitude surging through him—gratitude to Taj who had saved him and opened the way to happiness for Ara and himself.

Taj—or the ghost of Taj? What did it matter. There were many things he could not understand but he knew what had happened and what was still to come. The past was finished. The cycle rounded out and the future stretched ahead gloriously.

He put the elephant's bell securely away before he took Ara in his arms. "Tomorrow you will belong to me," he cried joyously.

And as their lips met she whispered, "Tomorrow—and all time to come."



were dead. Oh, I wish we were dead!"

Jed took us into a bedroom across the hall. Ruthie Carta was lying on the floor. She was dead. There were two tiny red punctures in her skinny throat, and indented channels marked the courses of drained blood-vessels.

Through an open door I could see into the next room, and the gross, motionless body that lay there. It was Lem, and he, too, was a corpse.

Jed Carta almost screamed, "Something came and—" His face was a shaking, knotted mask of fear. "The Henshawe

vampires!" he forced out, scarcely able to articulate.

"Dog eat dog," I said. I glanced at Rosamond. She met my eyes with the shrinking revulsion I had come to know so well, and a shame-faced eagerness behind the revulsion. I knew it was time to wise-crack again—anything to get that look out of Rosamond's eyes.

"I've got a surprise for you, Jed," I said, and moved nearer to him—nearer. "I know you don't take any stock in such things, but, believe it or not, we're the Henshawe vampires."
