

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME IX

No. 2

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' main office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.
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The HEAD

by

BASSETT MORGAN



"Her scream changed to a moan of agony."

ABOUT the stilt legs of the nipa-thatched hut, Paul Dakens looked down into a lagoon so clear that he could see the little painted fish scattering like sparks. Behind him in the hut the little brown wife of Phillips mourned her husband, whose funeral orgies were already in progress with a prodigality of feasting and ceremony accorded a white man by the Papuan blacks who had murdered him. Dakens glanced at the woman huddled on the mats. At the head of the couch, Phillips' pet monkey blinked solemnly as if he understood that his master would never return, and felt the fear which Dakens shared of those drums already tearing the forest gloom to tatters.

The untimely death of Phillips had left unfinished that work he had planned with Dakens' help of giving to the world their understanding of the natives, unless Dakens went on, and he was afraid. The blacks who feared the magic tricks of Phillips

more than the sorcery of their own magician had none of that respect for Dakens. In his heart he knew that he would in all probability be taken and tortured. Phillips' little brown wife had warned him, had even offered to guide him through the tortuous lanes of jungle trees bedded in black water, rank with the smell of walk-about grounds of crocodiles; yet in her eyes, limpid and dark as dew in the heart of a black orchid, he had read hate and a desire for vengeance toward Gwanoo, the chieftain whom Phillips had outwitted of a bride when he took the girl to his own hut.

A week before, Phillips had gone with Gwanoo on a pig-stickin' expedition. Three days, or rather nights later, Dakens had been awakened by the brown girl's Song of Mourning, nor could he laugh aside her fears. On the following morning Gwanoo returned, seated himself on the edge of this lagoon and beheaded Phillips' body, preparing the head as a decora-

tive addition to his already fine collection.

Powerless to prevent, Dakens had been ill over it, enduring three days of racking fear while the brown woman kept guard, and he slept to dream of the head of his friend, the red hair and bushy red beard. He wakened frenzied and hysteric each time, and the brown woman plied him with palm wine, a mistaken kindness, as he knew.

Drink had the effect on Dakens of leaving his body and flesh cold, his brain alert and afire, and the skill of the surgeon he had once been always turned him to his case of knives. Behind his eyelids for three days and nights the head of Phillips seemed urging him to vengeance, not to glut cruelty—Phillips was too fine a man for that—but that the fear of the white man might once more make it safe for Dakens to stay on the lagoon and finish the notes for which both men had already sacrificed years.

Palm wine, fermenting daily, had not quieted his fear, but it dulled his power to fight that mad dream of curing the head of Gwanoo as he had mummied the head of Phillips. The brown woman, little dreaming the peril she loosed, wakened and carried the jar of wine to Dakens. He tilted back his head and drank thirstily. The monkey swung across the hut and crouched at his knees, one small black paw on his wrist. Dakens patted its head, then pouring wine in his palm, he let it drink. He heard the soft cry of protest from the woman, and in sheer perversity gave the little beast a second drink of wine.

In a few minutes it was swinging all over the hut, then back to his lap, where he caught and held it, staring into its beady little eyes, and strangely enough his gaze held the creature, and between their eyes shone the dancing head of Phillips.

"If I had your agility," said Dakens whimsically, "I'd get it."

The brown woman called the monkey in vain, and she scolded Dakens in quick angry native words. He had forgotten that she was jealous of the friendship between him and Phillips, forgotten that she was a comely little primitive whose lovely brown body shaped to feet with great prehensile toes not unlike those of the monkey. She was grief-stricken as only a primitive can be, and he realized a moment later that in her resentment at his giving wine to the beast, she had suddenly cast off any feeling of allegiance for him.

A moment later she snatched the monkey and plunged into the lagoon, and was swimming through the clear water toward shore. Dakens smiled. Watching her brown body, sleek and smooth as satin in the sun-green water, he was conscious only of its symmetry, the pleasing unity of muscular strength, and the fact that she was running true to type, a daughter of the jungle, going back.

She would, he supposed, return to Gwanoo, but he thought his own chances of escape were better than her chance for life if the sorcerer took her. For her own sake, Dakens wished she had not gone, but the palm wine had cured him of the clutch and bite and twist of fear. He felt aloof, primed for contemplative interest in forthcoming events, knowing that if the black men stormed the hut he had his own gun and need not endure torture.

The girl had reached shore. There she stood on a strip of dazzling white coral beach, shining in brown loveliness against a mass of creamy hibiscus, the heart-searching perfume of which came to his nostrils with the sea-tang. The monkey was in her arms, and she whispered with red lips against its cheek, caressing it with brown hands. And at that moment the jungle drums pulsed, a quick staccato probed his brain with hot fingers of sound.

THE heat and wine had made Dakens drowsy, and again he wished the girl had not gone. He dared not sleep without her keeping guard. He was afraid of this somnolence caressing his flesh, stroking with languorous touch the strength from his body. The repeated drafts were "hitting" violently, and presently he rose, found his case of surgical knives and began polishing them, forcing his mind to memories of operations he had accomplished in days gone by. Then as he turned his gaze toward the shore whence came the palpitant drumming quivering louder and faster as the funeral orgies got under way, he saw a patch of sunlight piercing tree branches and falling in a circle of gold on the lagoon. In it, little fish swarmed to snap at insects, and Dakens seemed to see again the head of Phillips, only now the eyes were open, imploring, urging him to action. He tried to fathom the meaning, conscious that it was madness, a spot of sunlit water alive with gaudy fish, but the fantasy persisted.

He went to the door, still staring, brushing his hand across his eyes, and as wind stirred the palms, the spot of light shifted toward shore; and following it, he saw a shining topaz gleam in the jungle, the fire where hate and superstition danced in black ghoulish shapes about the bier of the dead white man. He heard the song, a savage sound of broken irritating rhythm, a song so old that not even the singers understood its full significance, a song that went with shoreless rivers and jungle trees rooted in black water stirred by scaled horrors with gaping jaws.

The brown girl was gone. Dakens shuddered to think what might be happening, unless her comeliness earned a merciful death. He turned again to the spot on the lagoon, but the sun had moved and the water was in shadow, the little fish flutter-

ing like scattered stars in a cool green sky.

Then the drum-beating was abruptly broken and a wild outcry ended the song. Two Paradise birds dancing in the tops of tall trees flew away from some disturbance. Dakens forgot his fear. He was staring at the head of Phillips hanging from a small black paw in a clump of dark foliage, its luxurious beard stirred by the wind, its lips tight-sewn but seemingly puckered in a grim smile as if their owner enjoyed the joke he had found beyond the shore of life.

Dakens wanted to laugh with the head. The monkey which had loved Phillips had stolen his head from the funeral wreaths of the village and swung through the trees. It leaped down from the branches, and the brown girl sprang up from her hiding place to catch it in her arms. There was the sharp z-z-z-z of an arrow and a cluster of falling flowers. The girl swayed a moment, then caught the monkey and raced to the lagoon and was swimming. She was almost to the hut when the jungle belched black men. Dakens snatched his gun and fired. A savage whirled and fell, his lips at the lagoon ripples.

The girl was swimming under water, a brown undulating power which Dakens longed to watch and dared not. A second and third shot cracked, and the black men halted, reluctant to change so soon their feast of flesh to an outflow of souls. The brown girl reached the hut and swarmed with incredible swiftness to its door, while the blacks chattered in consultation on shore.

Dakens felt a wild elation at the crisis hurled upon him. This was better than brooding in the hut, waiting for death. The girl was crooning over the monkey, which whined in a small squeaky voice, and caressing the head of Phillips, but Dakens saw blood on her lips and knew she was

wounded, and presently the head rolled from her grasp to the mats and lay grinning at Dakens through tight-sewn lips, as if it assured him that he was doing well.

He would have given a year of life, if he had the hope of so much, to fathom the smile of those dead lips and guess what they would have advised. He was conscious of urging Phillips to tell him what to do. He could not withstand a siege of the hut. Sooner or later they would rush him, and he needed time and bullets for the woman and himself. A grim respect for her courage thrilled him, a part of his elation over the stand she made. She deserved a heroic end, a shot that would send her soul to seek Phillips who was waiting. Dakens felt the presence of his friend. The head was no longer horrid; it was as if Phillips had come back.

Then on shore the mass of blacks parted and Gwanoo stood on the coral, a magnificent black giant, strong white teeth flashing, his head-dress surmounted with swaying plumes of Paradise, scarlet flowers encircling his oiled body. And Gwanoo boomed his parley. He demanded the head. If that were returned he would take his men away to the feast. If it were not—

The murmur of the brown girl's voice translated the promise of horror, the death by ants, by palm fiber, by slicing slowly, by being taken on the crocodile walk-about grounds.

Dakens licked his dry lips. His mind called, demanded of Phillips how he should act, if he must send on the girl Phillips had loved and follow her and leave the notes garnered at such a cost to molder in the hut.

"It's your job, Phillips," he heard himself whispering; "you would trust Gwanoo and he killed you. You trusted me and I don't know what to do, Phillips!"

He was scarcely conscious that he spoke, until the brown girl crept to

his feet and murmured, "Kill Gwanoo, Marster, kill Gwanoo as he killed my white man."

She had seized his gun, and there was a sharp volley of shots, a dozen leaping black men and three inert bodies across the twisting splendor that had been Gwanoo, then the others fled.

Dakens turned and seized the gourd, and throwing back his head emptied the wine in great gasping gurgles down his own throat. He needed it. The respite would be brief. Under cover of darkness they would return. But the moment the black men were in the jungle, the girl was in the lagoon. Dakens saw her swimming back slowly, weighted by the body of the sorcerer, which she hauled up the steps and dragged in the door, then she touched Dakens' arm and pointed. Gwanoo still lived.

In the girl's eyes was a gleam of triumph. Hating Gwanoo as she did for the murder of her white man, she showed the lust and greed of the primitive she was, at this chance of inflicting on an enemy the torture she had seen him visit on others. Dakens saw her dart to the case of knives, and seizing the largest, sit on the floor and whet its blade on the sole of her foot, then leaning toward the inert Gwanoo she lifted the knife.

Dakens leaped and caught her wrist. She was like a tiger in his grasp, and only that she had been hurt he could not have kept her from murder. She twisted with unbelievable strength, and in the end turned her ferocity on him. He never knew how it happened, but as she writhed and bit at him with her teeth, there came a cry and she went limp, the knife-blade thrust deep in her abdomen. Her scream changed to a moan of agony. Blood spurted on his hands, and he staggered with her to the heaped mats where the little monkey huddled, nursing the head of Phillips.

FROM that moment Dakens lost track of events. The wine, the strain of the last three days and nights, the frenzied elation of killing and the sight of the life-blood of the brown girl spilled on the couch, combined to wrest reason from its throne. He went temporarily mad, with a cool deadly insanity that turned from the stunned Gwanoo to the dying woman. Between them lay his case of knives. A little beyond were other precious things, among them the highly prized jars of ether and chloroform.

He worked with mad frenzy and dextrous surety of skill. The monkey fled to the farthest corner of the hut and hid. The whimpering of the little beast was the only audible sound through the afternoon. Then the fumes of palm wine left him and the ether cleared in the wind that comes at sunset, and Dakens saw and realized the work of his hands, and he wanted to imitate the monkey, crouch in utter darkness and hide.

Yet with night would come the horde of death from the jungle, and having endured so much he wanted to make a last stand, sell as dearly as he could the life of the man now roused from the mists of drink that had turned him madman.

Why he did not then turn the gun on Gwanoo, he never knew. It might have been that the monkey crept presently from the shadow and came close to Gwanoo's body, reaching a small black paw to touch the face of the black sorcerer. The little brown girl was dead, her body wrapped in the mats, but the stalwart Gwanoo showed signs of life. One black hand with its heavy wristlets was lifted to the bandage about the brows. Hearing a moan, the monkey crept close and the fumbling hand found and fondled the little beast which snuggled in the curve of Gwanoo's arm.

Dakens sat at the door of the hut, more alert than at any time since

Phillips' death, and he tried to remember what he had done. The actions of the monkey puzzled him. It had been fond of the brown girl and Phillips, never very friendly with Dakens, yet it clung to the body of the savage sorcerer. Dakens marveled at himself, wondering why he had extracted the bullet from Gwanoo's brain. It lay on the table beside a welter of something that he would not look at now that he was sober. For he had been very drunk. His hands, his body and brain had been controlled by the demon which drink roused, a demon this time that was that red-haired, red-bearded head on the mats. Dakens reached out and took it on his knees.

"What was it that you made me do, Phillips?" he demanded of it. "Why did you return from that bourne you've reached and take the girl with you?"

He realized that he talked like a maniac, but he could not stop.

"Was it for love of her, the faithful little brown beauty, or jealousy of me? You need not have feared that. There's a white girl in a white man's land, waiting for me, and now I can't go back." His voice broke. "I can't go back with blood-guilty hands. Phillips, I didn't deserve this treachery. I came with you, stayed with you. . . If only you had not gone hunting with Gwanoo we'd have come out of this and gained honor. We had accomplished much, we had sacrificed these years and our own honorable careers to catalogue these devils, and now you've spoiled the chance of ever giving the results of that research to the world . . . as I said you would do when you took the girl first."

The sun, dropping behind the dark line of palms, cast shadow over the lagoon. The thunderous sunset of Papua seemed to growl about its soft panther-hide of forest. In the jungle the drums were beating up the tempo

of that old song and Dakens was swept on that rhythm to an interlude in which the years of their lives in the jungle unfolded before his eyes, and standing out from those hot steaming months was the affection of Phillips for the brown girl. He saw it now as the one fatal mistake which would eventually destroy all they had done. Phillips had been mad about her. Dying, he would not rest until she was winging her way to his side. Dakens came to believe it in that hour. The will of the dead man had taken a tortuous way to manifest its power, but it was tangible, audible, as real to Dakens as the breath on his lips.

Reason had no power to refute the thing. He no longer fought the thought. His whole body, his mentality, felt the will of Phillips urging him to some task yet unfinished. Then, as if answering the question twisting Daken's mind, the voice of Gwanoo murmured, "Water, Marster, water."

Dakens leaped to his feet. This was no booming sound from the great throat of the sorcerer, but a woman's murmur, the crooning words of the brown girl. He reached for the gourd of boiled and cooled water, and held it to the thick lips. The eyes beneath the head bandage opened, and it seemed to Dakens they had the same soft sheen as the girl's eyes, the look of dew in the heart of a black orchid.

"Take me . . . my people . . . my jungle——" it murmured again and again.

Dakens shook himself, brushed his hand over his face, pinched the flesh of his arms. Stumbling from the restless movements of the reviving Gwanoo, his foot touched the head of Phillips, and snatching it up he would have placed it on the table, but the hands of Gwanoo reached and drew it beside him. The monkey roused and caught its claws in the

red beard. Dakens threw up a hand to his lips to throttle the scream in his throat.

The shadows deepened. The black Papuan hills smoked against the furious crimson and amber of the sky. In another few minutes the light would die and night descend; night, and the bat-winged fear that had held him prisoner for days, a worse fear than before, because the hut held unbelievable horror, the body of the brown girl in the mats and the great Gwanoo now reviving rapidly, calling incessantly for water, hugging the monkey and the head to its breast.

That voice had power to bring Dakens with the gourd, and the last of his precious brandy mixed with water. It was as if he fed magic to one of those flowers which Hindoo fakirs raise from a seed to bud and bloom in the space of a few minutes. It was like Gwanoo's own magic that plucked an orchid from the air and had it turn to a snake. The sorcerer grew strong beyond belief. With staring eyes Dakens saw him lean on one arm, then sit upright, still caressing the monkey and the head, and the affection of the little animal was the most curious thing of all. Dakens felt as if he were caught in a nightmare.

Then he was aware of the acceleration of the jungle song and drums. They were coming through the jungle, coming through the night, coming to the lagoon—and they came for him. His scalp prickled. He stood at the hut doorway dreading the darkness that held Gwanoo and the head, clutching mentally at the luminence of starlight on the lagoon water. He saw the blacks emerge, thicker shadow in the gloom, saw torches bloom and fire flash on knives and wreaths of white hibiscus splotched by scarlet flowers that looked like dried blood. The torch

flare showed their betel-stained teeth, the bracelets of bone and metal, the quivering head-plumes.

It was of no use to shoot at that mass, better to reserve his bullets and strength for their rush. He kept his revolver so that he might thrust it at any moment in his mouth, and fire. Too late, he wished he had dickered with Gwanoo to have the notes that he and Phillips had made sent out to a port. Now, they would be as much wasted as his life. The savages were in the lagoon water. On shore they had heaped their torches and the blaze lighted the clear depths where little fish flashed in scaled gold. Dakens turned to the darkness of the hut and lifted the revolver. It touched his chin, and crept toward his lips . . .

His scream startled the swimmers. From behind him, the great arms of Gwanoo caught and pinioned his wrists to his sides. He saw the torch flare from shore shining on the black face under the startling white gauze bandages, saw the soft dark eyes shining, heard the voice gentle as that of a woman; "Not kill, Marster . . . live an' go out. . ."

Frantic, frenzied, Dakens twisted in that grasp. Then the hut was filled with savages; and the voice of Gwanoo, booming with its old strength, commanded his warriors. Dakens was held in the grip of savages while Gwanoo, leaning heavily on the shoulder of two black men, looked down at an uncovered dead girl on the mats. Dakens saw. His heart pounded in his throat as he appraised the work of his hands, the neat surgery, the delicate line of stitches under her hair. What, what in heaven's name, had he done that day?

Far, far away, memory throbbed, tapped, rustled a sheaf of pictures, experiments at college, transplanting the brains of one dog to the head of another . . . he had shown skill at that . . .

His eyes turned to the table where Gwanoo was lifting and dropping his surgical instruments into the black case, closing it and gesturing to one of his men to carry it. Something else lay there. Dakens saw with a surgeon's interest paramount, the brain of Gwanoo. He knew, at least he felt the knowledge of what he had done, for his mind was dragged over a trail without his own volition.

He was scarcely aware that they swung him to their shoulders and swam with him through the lagoon. He saw on shore the giant Gwanoo still leaning on the shoulders of his men, but with the head of Phillips clutched in one arm and the monkey perched on a shoulder beside the bandaged head of the sorcerer. Then, for Dakens, the lights went out.

HE WAKENED in a hut. Dawn poured its soft light through the doorway. A soft murmur of women's voices droned through his dreams. The jungle song was stilled, the drums silent. He heard the tinkle of shells fringing the hut of a chieftain, stirred by the wind. The perfume of *ylang-ylang* wafted to his nostrils. Rousing himself, Dakens saw women weaving flower garlands in the soft green shade of a jungle clearing, and among them sat Gwanoo; but a Gwanoo subtly changed from the savage sorcerer whose look had power to waken fear. Gwanoo played with flowers. The little monkey sat on his knee. He leaned against a tree bole, and above his flower- and Paradise-plumed hair, in a wreath of fresh garlands hung Phillips' head.

Dakens looked about the hut, saw his case of surgical instruments, and the black metal box wrapped in oil-skin which held his notes. Then he tried to recall the nights in the hut, the horror of the last day, and looked again at Gwanoo. The gauze bandage was gone. There was a scar across the broad forehead disappear-

ing into the hair. The eyes were not those piercing beadlike jets. The voice held the soft woman-tone.

Dakens sat up, and his movement brought a woman into the hut. A moment later she had summoned Gwanoo, who entered and sat cross-legged beside Dakens, and handed him the box of notes.

"Marster, you sleep long time. One, two, t'ree moons you sleep. Now you go out."

Go out! Light leaped in Dakens' eyes, warmth flooded his heart. Gwanoo had given him a lease of life, of mercy, of hope.

They fed him. The women massaged his body with lemon-scented oil as they had done for many days. They imparted the strength of their hands to his flesh and healed him. Gwanoo kept guard, a Gwanoo changed, a Gwanoo woman-gentle. The village of nipa-thatched huts was strangely devoid of men. He learned from their talk that the warriors were hunting the contraband Paradise plumes and would be gone many days, and that he was to be sent out before their return. Dakens had lain for three months bereft of reason, nursed by the commands of Gwanoo, and at last he understood.

Gwanoo's brain was left in the lagoon hut. The brain of the brown girl inhabited the head of the sorcerer. Yet before he left, Dakens carried the case of knives that were the instruments of this magic, to where a long war canoe nosed the black-shadowed lianas looped above the jungle stream, and dropped it into the depths. Never again would he

use his surgeon's skill, for very fear of its cunning.

Returning, he stood before the head of Phillips and saluted. He spoke not a word. The tight-sewn lips still grinned at the joke of it all.

Dakens had one regret as he stepped into the canoe and looked for the last time on the magnificent Gwanoo with the soft eyes of the bride of Phillips, that he would never know how the thing would end; whether the warrior body of the sorcerer would in time absorb the woman-brain, or the woman weaken the warrior. It seemed a pity he could not watch that phase, but in a white man's land a white girl waited, and there were the notes to work on and give to the world, the most interesting of which could not be included in a precise and scholarly treatise such as he and Phillips had planned.

The paddles dipped. The throats of black men took up the jungle song, and floating under the dark trees, Dakens looked his last at the grinning tight-sewn lips of his friend, of Phillips who had engineered so curiously the release of Dakens. Ahead, the dark water stirred and a crocodile rose and opened wide jaws and showed its curved wicked fangs, but Dakens only smiled.

Nothing had power to startle him now. He had come through surer deaths, guarded and protected by greater power than his own, with keener cunning and more subtle wit. It was like the Phillips he had known. Phillips would have loved to tell such a tale. In the memory of Dakens, he would always be grinning, tight-lipped, a flower-wreathed, greatly prized head.

