

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VIII

NUMBER 2

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 408 Holliday Building, 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. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. 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. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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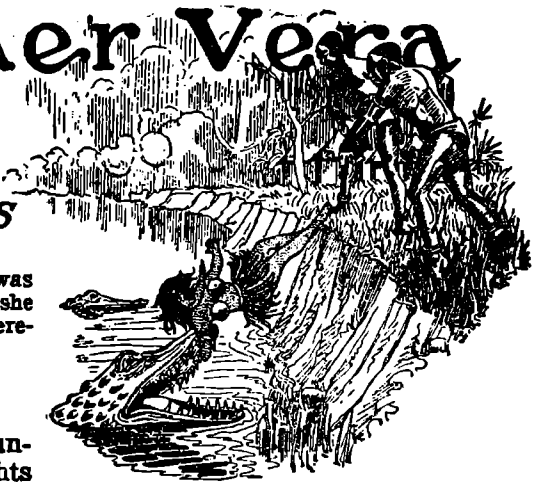
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The Other Vera

by

Willis Knapp Jones

"Obju was dead, and his wife was thrown to the alligators that she might accompany him into the hereafter."



CALMLY the girl slept, all unconscious of the electric lights glaring into her face or the celebrated specialist standing at her bedside. After studying that oval face and its bobbed brown hair tousled from sleep, he turned to her mother. "You say she's been this way ever since she was born, Mrs. Prentice. Have you noticed any other abnormality?"

"No, Dr. Stein. During the daytime, Vera is all one could wish for. That's why I asked you to come early this morning. By 6 or 7 o'clock she will awake and be like any other twenty-year-old girl. Then she'll have her interests and go and come, but about sundown she'll get drowsy and fall asleep and it's just impossible to waken her till the next morning."

The gray-haired nerve specialist touched the arm lying above the bed clothes. "You're sure this will not arouse her?"

"Nothing will. At first the doctors tried everything, shaking, electric treatment. She slept through it all."

"Her pulse is steady, but slow," he remarked.

"Yes, all the doctors said there was nothing physically the matter. They thought she would outgrow it, so after her father's death, we decided to let her grow up and see what would happen. He, poor man, worried continually. Toward the end, he was some-

what insane, I believe. He kept raving about curses and African magicians and——"

"African, eh?" The doctor pondered a moment. "Well, I'll make a thorough examination after she wakes, and if you're willing, I'd like to bring a young friend of mine, a medical missionary just returned from Africa. And it might be just as well not to say we are doctors, but simply friends."

"Yes, indeed. Why don't you come for luncheon this noon? I'll—I'll introduce you as acquaintances of Captain Prentice. Perhaps your friend knew him, for he used to make trips to Africa. He was even wrecked there, twenty-two years ago. He lived among some coast tribes for months before he was rescued."

"I'm afraid Dr. Thornton didn't know him, then. He wasn't through high school then. But I must be going. I'll find my friend and return about——"

"Twelve o'clock. We'll eat at that hour."

And so the doctor bowed himself out.

Promptly at the hour set he and another gentleman presented themselves at the door. The newcomer, whom Dr. Stein addressed as "Ted",

was about thirty. His face was dark, and creases at eyes and nose bore evidence of his life in climates where the sun glared. He was lean and his every action showed his nervous tension.

"Miss Prentice, may I present —" Dr. Stein began.

The girl's eyes widened and her face grew white, but she recovered herself. "I'm glad to meet Dr. Thornton," she said, a strange thrill and tenseness in her voice.

Mrs. Prentice wondered. She had not heard the visitor's name mentioned, yet momentarily she received the impression that the two young people had met before. There was not a sign of recognition on the tanned face of Dr. Thornton, however. His expression was that of one meeting a new and altogether charming person. So Vera's mother knew that she must have missed the introduction.

AFTER a few minutes of general conversation, the meal was announced and all four entered the dining room, Mrs. Prentice on Dr. Stein's arm and the young people together.

During the course of the luncheon, the conversation turned to Africa.

"My father was fascinated by the continent," Vera said. "Surely you must want to go back, Dr. Thornton."

"I'm not sure," he replied. "I may have to remain here because my health won't stand the climate."

"But didn't you hate to leave?"

The doctor laughed shortly. "Some of them hated to have me. In fact, some of them tied me up, so that I couldn't."

"Is this a cannibal story, Ned?" Stein interrupted.

"But there aren't cannibals in Africa now!" protested Mrs. Prentice.

"Yes, there are, mother." Vera looked bewitching in her intensity.

"What do you know about it, dear?" Mrs. Prentice's voice held a

tone with which a forward child is reproved. "When Vera was little," she explained, "she used to have the wildest dreams about Africa, till finally her father and I refused to let her read any of the captain's big library on African life and adventure."

"Well, she happens to be right about cannibals," replied Dr. Thornton, coming to her defense. "Of course, feasts of that sort are forbidden by law, but there are plenty of ways of evading the law, especially where the white man isn't very powerful."

"Don't yarn, Ted," Dr. Stein scoffed. "I read a British colonial report only last year saying that cannibalism in Africa was a thing of the past."

"Then don't believe it. I know what I'm talking about. I was slated for one of their feasts, myself."

"Tell us about it," begged Mrs. Prentice.

The medical missionary glanced over at Vera, whose cheeks were white. The nerve specialist, too, was studying her, but he nodded a slight assent.

"I'm not a story teller," Dr. Thornton apologized. "One of those writer chaps could trim my yarn up and make something out of it, but he'd have to give it an end. And it couldn't be the traditional one, either, for I didn't marry the girl who saved me."

They were all eagerness and so, after another glance around the table, he told them the story, sketching the pictures and leaving their imaginations to fill in the outline. He described his journey from the mission station toward the coast, going by a direct route against the advice of others, because he was weak and wanted to reach the seacoast to recuperate.

He made them see the trail through unfrequented country, telling how

sometimes he was so weak that he had to be carried in a traveling hammock supported by four natives. And as he told of the desertion of some of his carriers and the exciting details of a night attack by a savage tribe, Vera's eyes were dreamy, though her breath came fast.

"There I was, prisoner among a lot of black savages," he wound up. "I understood their dialect only imperfectly, but I made out enough to realize that I was being fattened up to be the guest of honor at a feast. Night and day an armed warrior guarded the circular thatched hut in which I was kept prisoner.

"They gave me all the food I wanted. The women brought me breadfruit, some sort of potatoes fried in fat, and delicious meat. And they'd see that I ate it. If I refused, there was a warrior to jab me with his spear till my appetite came back. The people were all homely enough, except one girl, as beautiful a savage as I've ever seen. She took quite a fancy to me, apparently."

Vera, whose eyes had not left his face, uttered a little expression of disgust which drew all eyes to her.

"Oh, if you'd seen her," went on the doctor quickly, "you wouldn't grunt. She was erect and cleaner than the rest. I might have suspected she had some white blood in her if there had been any chance for a white man to visit that tribe and live. She was very attractive. No wonder the chief of the tribe fell under her spell, although he already had a half-dozen or so of wives. But she is the heroine of my tale. She saved my life."

"How?" came in a chorus.

"I'm certainly not telling this story well. I should have drawn it out, told of the feeling of restlessness visible in every warrior, the rumors of the coming of an enemy, and all. But that's not my style. I can tell you only how it turned out. The warriors armed hastily and started

off for battle. If I had been fatter or if there had been time, I imagine I'd have been eaten before they started. However, they said they were saving me for the victory banquet. Anyway, they moved me to a shelter right next to the king's palace, overlooking a pool where the chief's pet alligators basked, and after they tied me, they set all the women of the tribe to watch that I stayed put."

"Couldn't you escape?" Mrs. Prentice was drinking in his words.

"The men that put the grass ropes around me knew their business. I couldn't stretch them, and I couldn't reach the knot. And I knew that the men would be back probably that night.

"Finally, about noon, when the women had gone into their huts to keep a little cool, I heard the slightest of sounds. I turned my head and there stood my black beauty with a knife in her hand."

"It was a pair of scissors." Vera spoke as assuredly as though she had heard all the details before.

"Yes, I found that out soon, but —" Thornton stopped in amazement. "I say, how did you know that?"

"I—I read it in—in—" She gave him an appealing look, like one throwing herself on his mercy.

Without knowing why, he came to her rescue. "Oh, in my article in the *World Review*? Did you see it, too, Mrs. Prentice?"

The matron shook her head.

"That's about all there was to the affair," the missionary resumed after a pause. "I thought that for some fancied slight she wanted to stab me, but she was rescuing me. She cut the ropes, gave me a package of food, and directed me to safety. I made my way as best I could to a seaport and was so run down that they shipped me home by the first boat."

"But the girl?" Mrs. Prentice wanted to know. "Did she escape?"

"That's the part that must be left to the fiction writer. I don't go any farther."

THE story caused such discussion that the meal was over before they finished. Then Dr. Stein told who he was, and Vera submitted to an examination. It was about 3 o'clock when the men left the house.

"I can not make it out," Dr. Stein confessed as they strolled together into the spring afternoon. "I couldn't find a single important abnormality."

"It's beyond me," Dr. Thornton agreed. "The thing that stumps me is how she knew that the girl who saved me carried a pair of scissors instead of a knife."

"She explained that. She had read your article."

"That's the trouble. I never wrote any article. I never even told the story before."

"Then why in the world——?"

"Why did I invent a magazine? That's what I don't know. She showed me she was in trouble about it. She's keeping something from her mother. And I'd like to know what it is."

"I'll go back tomorrow, Ted. You should have said something about it to me while we were there today."

"I didn't get a chance. But you needn't bother. I'm going to the bottom of this mystery myself. I asked for permission to call tomorrow afternoon."

"Smitten, are you, Ted?" Dr. Stein slapped his younger companion on the shoulder.

The thin man straightened up. "I don't know," he confessed. "They call women the eternal mystery; Vera's the super-mystery, and I've got to unravel it."

His attempt the next afternoon brought him little success. Vera begged him not to question her,

though promising to tell him everything sometime in the future. In every other subject, she was entirely frank, and the young doctor found her very attractive. As his missionary board had ordered him to stay in that part of California for a few weeks, he managed to preempt a fair share of her time. Finally, the day he was compelled to leave for his lecturing trip, he proposed to her.

"No, Ted, I mustn't. It isn't because I don't love you," she hastened to add, observing his gloomy expression.

"Won't you tell me the reason, dear?"

Vera shook her head.

"You know you're the only girl I ever loved."

She broke into a bewitching smile. A roguish expression came over her face. "Then you didn't love the black girl who saved your life?"

He laughed out loud.

"And you wouldn't be sorry to learn that the chief of that tribe took her as his eighth wife?"

"What do you mean, Vera?"

"She married Obju, or whatever you said the chief's name was."

"Look here, dear. Why can't you explain? I never told you the chief's name because I could not remember it. But now that you mention it, I know that they called him that. Now where do you get your information?"

"Because I—I'm—oh, I can't explain! Trust me, Ted. I'm terribly upset, but things will be arranged soon and when you come back, if I'm here—I mean, when I see you, I'll tell you everything."

That had to satisfy him because he discovered that it was time to hurry to his train. She could not accompany him, because it left shortly before 6 and she fell asleep at sunset.

FOR nearly two weeks Dr. Thornton traveled through Washington and Oregon, speaking every night.

Each day he sent Vera a letter telling of his love, and at each post-office he found a letter from her awaiting him. Then came one from her that was so weird that it upset every theory he had ever had.

"Dearest," it began. "I've got to start letting you know about myself, and I couldn't tell you. The reason I knew all the details about the African girl is that I am she and she, I. By day I live in my white body, but at night here (and day in Africa) I inhabit hers. And my thoughts are just as badly mixed. I am a wife of Obju, though because he was taken sick on his wedding day, I married him by proxy and have not seen him since. He has been sick for several weeks. If you despise me, do not come near me when you return this week. And I am afraid you will hate me—for how could you love half a person? Could you respect me when you know that there's another Vera in Africa?"

Rational thinking told him at once that the whole story was a concoction of the girl's brain. There could be no truth in it. And yet—the strange behavior at night had no normal explanation. There was the detail of the scissors, too. He had studied psychology. He knew that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde had many real life counterparts. With Dr. Prince's experiments with Miss Beauchamp he was familiar. He remembered how hypnotism had taken that woman's two selves (the real one and the dissociated one) and fused them together into a single personality that inhabited the body which previously was controlled alternately by each in turn. And as he was a student of abnormal psychology, other similar cases came thronging to his memory.

He was interrupted by the coming of the committeeman to take him to the lecture hall. "And here's a telegram that just came, Doctor," said the man. "Hope it isn't bad news."

With a foreboding of evil, Dr. Thornton tore open the flimsy manila envelope and took in the contents at a glance:

OBJU DIED LAST NIGHT. COME AT ONCE. I NEED YOU. VERA.

"When is the next train out of here?" Dr. Thornton asked.

"Tomorrow morning at 11."

"I've got to get away before that."

"Well, I can take you down to Ebersville after the lecture, if you like. There's a train out of there over the main line about midnight."

"I'd like to have you. And will you send a telegram, too, cancelling my lecture tomorrow evening?"

Dr. Thornton went on to the platform, still puzzling why the girl would telegraph him about the death of a minor African chief. But he had to put the idea aside and begin his missionary talk. He had given it so many times that the words came almost automatically. His mind was not on his subject, so that it was with a start that he heard himself informing them: "The Indian custom of *suttee*, the sacrifice of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband, has its counterpart in Africa. Some of the most powerful men decree that their wives shall be killed to accompany them into the hereafter to be ready to wait on them."

Like a flash everything became clear. The death of the chief meant his wives would be killed. If that story had a grain of truth in it, it meant that the other Vera, the African Vera, would be one of them to die. He had read of the Siamese Twins, one of whom had died and the other lasted only a few minutes. The whole enormity of the situation rushed over him. Well for him that his speech was mechanical! He cut it and slashed, finishing fully fifteen minutes early. Then he fairly dragged the committeeman to his car.

WHAT if he were too late? What if he reached Vera, the girl he loved, to find her dead?

There was no unoccupied berth in the express train when it finally arrived, but Thornton was in no mood for sleep. He sat by the window watching the train crawl along, till the east lightened. The sun came up and rose higher. It was already starting down into the Pacific when he reached his destination.

Even the automobile seemed to loiter as it carried him to Vera's home. Not till after 4 did he finally get there and see her, and then she was so changed that he scarcely recognized her. Her soft skin and delicate complexion had been wasted by fatigue and worry.

"It's too late," she moaned. "Tonight I am to be killed. It will be good-bye forever."

"But, Vera darling," he said in a tone he meant to be judicial, professional. "This is all a fancy of yours. It is impossible for one person to occupy two bodies!"

"I can't explain it, Ted. It may be impossible, but it is so. Many things in Africa are like that. Aren't they?"

Her challenge brought to his memory a demonstration he had witnessed in which a tribal magician had his ears, nose, and mouth stuffed with cotton, himself rolled in heavy blankets, and then was buried in a sand-pile for three weeks. Afterward his friends dug him up, said incantations over him, and unwrapped him. He got up and walked around and showed that he had not suffered at all by his burial.

"Yes," Thornton agreed. "But how could you, an American girl, and that African be mixed up that way?"

"My father was wrecked there. His journal is a pretty full record of what he did. Mother never saw it, and he made me promise to destroy it, but I

read it first. And the natives still remember the white man who saved the chief's life and so was protected in the village. But when he refused to worship the sacred snake, and laughed at the magicians, and even came into a gathering of all the tribal magicians, he made enemies of all the medicine men. He fell in love, they said, with the daughter of the chief of the magicians, and his desertion of my African mother was another cause of hate. After his rescue, the magicians gathered into a powwow that is still spoken of with awe in the tribe. The eleven tribal curses were put upon him and as a special incantation it was decreed that if he ever married one of his own white people, his first child should be only half a child, sharing its personality with the African baby he left behind."

Dr. Thornton said nothing. There was such conviction in the girl's voice, such sureness in her expression, that he was led to believe her story. And he knew by the way she trembled beneath his arm, that she believed in it implicitly.

"At noon all his wives are to be killed to go with Obju, and now it's—oh, Ted, it's sunrise in Africa now! Hold me. Don't let me slip away. If I leave, I'll never return." Frantically she clung to him.

"I'll protect you, sweetheart," he promised. He tightened his grip.

"Oh!" she screamed and shuddered. "I'm going. I'm——"

Her words trailed off. Her grasp relaxed, and if he had not had his arms around her, she would have fallen.

Mrs. Prentice, hastening in at the cry, found the doctor using every effort to revive her. She was not excited, however. In the occurrence she saw only the nightly episode to which she had become accustomed. "This is what I mean, doctor," she said. "I'm glad you could have seen her go to sleep. But don't look so startled.

She's all right. She'll awake in the morning."

Nothing the doctor could say would move her. In his insistence, she saw the worry which she used to have, but which she had outgrown. When he told her he must stay and watch her, she shrugged wearily and gave in finally, after sending him away while she prepared the girl for bed.

He realized that nothing would occur till midnight, but he would not lie down for rest. His weariness and lack of sleep no longer troubled him. Though he could not help the far-away girl in her fight for existence, he would be on hand at the turn. So he told Mrs. Prentice that he had a theory which would compel him to remain till after midnight. She sat with him for a time, but soon got up and left him with the sleeping girl.

THE hours ticked away. From the street came noises of modern life, automobile horns, police whistles, and the distant rumble of street cars. And on the bed Vera Prentice lay motionless. Her features were drawn with fatigue. Only a slight motion of her breast showed that she was alive.

Finally, when the clock's hands marked a quarter of 12, Dr. Thornton turned on all the lights, with a reading lamp spotting her face. In a few minutes he would know. At noon, she said, the sacrifice would take

place. And since the tribal village was on the other side of the globe, directly opposite the place where he was, it would mean that midnight would reveal whether she was to live or to die when the African Vera was thrown to the alligators.

A clock somewhere struck 12. Still the girl did not move. Five minutes passed. Ten. He felt her pulse. The slow, steady rise and fall showed that the heart was still beating. If she lasted through the night—! While he held the wrist, he felt a quiver. A shriek such as he had never heard from mortal throat made his hair stand on end. The pulse slowed, almost stopped, and then quivered and raced. There was the slightest of movements in the eyelids. Then the girl on the bed blinked in the glare of the light. She opened her eyes and saw Dr. Thornton.

In an instant his arms were around her. "My sweetheart has returned," he said.

Vera was trembling. "It's all over," she whispered. "The other me is—dead. She was thrown to the alligators to accompany Obju into the beyond."

"And the Vera that is left will marry me, won't she?"

Her "Yes" was not very loud, but it served its purpose. The other Vera had found happiness.

