

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

EDWIN BAIRD, Editor

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crowded in for good measure**

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*For a Grim Tale With a Terrifying
End We Recommend*

The SKULL

By HAROLD WARD

KIMBALL held up his hand, warningly. "Listen!" he exclaimed in a whisper.

Then he shoved the bottle back from his elbow and reached for his revolver, which hung just above the table. Buckling the belt about his waist, he leaped for the door and threw it open.

The house, raised on pile foundations a dozen feet above the ground, shook beneath the rush of retreating footsteps. With the swiftness of a wild animal, he gathered himself for the spring—and landed squarely astride the back of the last of the blacks to quit the place.

The weight of the white man brought the native to the ground. Seizing the black by the hair, he jerked him to his feet, keeping the naked body between himself and the crowd that lurked in the darkness, just beyond the ring of light that shone down through the open door.

"What name?" he demanded in the *loche-de-mer* of the Islands. "What for you come around big fella house? I knock seven bells out of you quick!"

Still grasping the man's kinky wool with his left hand, his right shot out, landing a terrific blow on the na-

tive's mouth. The black, spitting blood and broken teeth, squirmed in agony and attempted to give a side glance at his fellows. Seeing that none intended to aid him, he jerked his head to one side in an effort to escape. The white man straightened it with another blow.

"What name?" he demanded again.

"Me good fella boy," the black answered with an effort. "Me fella missionary!"

"Then you say one fella prayer damn quick!"

Kimball rained blow after blow on his face. The savage shrieked with agony. In the shadow, the blacks shuffled uneasily, like a herd of cattle ready to stampede, but the white man seemingly gave them no heed.

At last, the punishment completed, he jerked the bow and arrows from the unresisting hand of his victim and, whirling him suddenly, gave him a kick and a shove which landed him on all fours in the midst of the others. Then, turning, seemingly ignoring the thoroughly frightened blacks, he reentered the house.

Throwing the bow and arrows on the table, he poured himself a stiff drink of gin and downed it at a gulp. And

then, sitting down beside the table, he picked up the weapon and examined it gingerly.

"Poisoned!" he remarked casually to the man lying on the bed. "I knocked bloody hell out of Tulagi as a lesson to the rest of 'em. They're getting insolent, with only one of us to haulle 'em. Wish to heaven you were up and around again."

"Upon the platform, eh?" the sick man listlessly inquired.

Kimball nodded.

"They're gettin' bold," he said shortly. "Five hundred niggers are too many for one man to keep straight. It's been plain hell since you went down—and then the dog had to turn up his toes. When Donaldson comes in next week with the *Scory-Saray* we'll have to send after a new nigger-chaser. Chipin's got a couple extra ones he's been trainin' over at Berande."

The sick man rolled over with a groan.

"Thank heaven I was taken sick!" he remarked bitterly. "It's hard, God knows, but it gave me a chance to find out just what sort of a cur you are, Kimball."

Kimball scowled. He half opened his mouth as if to answer. Then, thinking better of it, he poured himself another drink and resumed his occupation of examining the weapon he had taken from the native. He swayed slightly in his chair under the load of liquor he was carrying, yet his voice was unblurred as, after a minute's silence, he looked across at the other.

"Can't you get that out of your head, Hansen?" he remarked. "I'm getting bloody well fed up on it."

Hansen raised himself on an elbow and angrily shook his fist at the other.

"Oh, you're 'getting bloody well fed up on it,' are you?" he mimicked. "I should think you would be! I suppose I'm hurtin' your delicate feelings by mentioning it to you, eh? It's nothin' a man should howl about, is it?—having one he thought was his best friend pull off a dirty stunt like that!"

Kimball poured himself another drink. His hand shook slightly as he raised the glass to his lips.

"Oh, forget it and go to sleep!" he growled.

"Yes, 'forget it,' you damned crooked, lyin', double-crosser! I'm apt t' forget how you wrote to Gladys and told her I'd taken a nigger wife! Wanted her yourself, didn't you, you low-down, gin-guzzling rat! It was just a piece of luck that I was taken sick and you had t' look after the plantation instead of goin' after th'mail last time, or I'd never have got that letter from her telling me why she'd turned me down."

"I'm telling you now, for th' last time, that I didn't write that stuff to her!" Kimball snarled back. "I'm tellin' you it's a lie. I showed you the letter I wrote to her, giving her my word of honor that somebody'd been doin' you dirt."

"Who else is there here on the Islands that knew her back home?" Hansen demanded, dropping back onto the pillows again. "And who else knew that we were engaged?"

"How in hell do I know?" Kimball answered thickly, reaching unsteadily for the bottle. "You're a sick man, Hansen, or I'd beat you up for th' way you're talkin' to me."

The sick man raised himself from the pillows again with a snort of anger, his face flushed, his eyes gleaming feverishly.

"It's a long road that's got no turn in it!" he muttered. "It's my money that's in this plantation. Kimball—my money against your experience. And keep that damned arrow pointed th' other way, you fool! You're drunk—too drunk to be monkeyin' with weapons. You'd just as soon shoot me as not: if you do, I'll get you if I have to come back from th' grave to do it! And remember this, Kimball: Soon' I'm able to be up and around again, we'll have a settlement. And out you'll go from this plantation, you—"

Whether it was an accident, or plain murder nobody knows. Kimball was drunk—heavily so. The arrow was loaded in the bow and clasped between his trembling fingers, the bow-string taut. And Hansen had annoyed him, angered him, bullied him, cursed him. At any rate, as he slumped forward in

his chair, the bow-string slipped from between his thumb and finger, and—

Hansen dropped back onto the pillows with a smothered scream, the arrow buried deep in his temple!

II.

IF WAS past midnight when Kimball awoke from his drunken stupor.

For an instant, he had no recollection of what had happened. The oil lamp still burned brightly, throwing the figure of the man on the bed in bold relief.

Kimball half arose on his tiptoes so as not to awaken Hansen. His foot touched the bow lying on the floor. Then a flood of realization swept over him. He suddenly remembered that he was a murderer.

Whether he had killed Hansen intentionally or not he was unable to recall. Memory had ceased on the second he sprawled forward, his tired brain benumbed with the liquor he had consumed during the evening. He knew that they had quarreled—that Hansen had been more abusive than usual and had cursed him.

He stepped across to the bed. A single glance at the blotted face already turning black—at the glassy eyes staring back at him fixedly—told him that his surmise had been correct: the arrow had been dipped in poison. He shuddered as he pushed the remaining arrows, which he had taken from Tulagi, to the back of the table and poured himself another drink.

He must act at once. Donaldson and the *Scary-Sunny* would arrive within a few days. And Donaldson was no fool. Nor was Srensen, his mate. Both of them knew that there was bad blood between the partners. And should one of the house boys find the body in the morning it would cause no end of talk among the niggers. Some of them would be certain to talk to Donaldson. The big trader might be able to put two and two together and take his suspicions to the authorities.

Reaching up, he pulled down his revolver and, buckling the belt around his waist, tiptoed to the door. The rain

was falling in torrents, and the sound of the surf was booming loudly. The sky was split by lightning, while the thunder rolled and grumbled.

It was a typical island squall; he knew it would last but a short time. Yet, while it lasted, the blacks would all be under cover, making him safe from spying eyes if he acted at once.

But fear—fear of he knew not what—caused him to pull down the shades until not a vestige of light showed at sides or bottom.

Then, nerving himself with another pull at the bottle, he turned down the lamp until the room was in semi-darkness. Again he stepped to the door and, holding it open an inch or two, listened.

Satisfied, he returned to the bed and picked up the dead form of Hansen and threw it across his shoulder with a mighty effort. He extinguished the lamp with a single puff as he passed the table.

Then, feeling his way carefully with his feet lest he strike against some piece of furniture in the darkness, he sought the door.

Bending his body against the force of the wind, he gained the steps and dodged around the corner of the house opposite the blacks' quarters. At the edge of the coconut grove, he again paused to listen.

Not a sound came from the direction of the black barracks. Presently, beating against the wind, he sea-sawed through the grove for a quarter of a mile.

Satisfied that he was far enough from the house, he dropped his ghastly burden to the ground and turned back. The storm would obliterate his tracks by morning. With the coming of daylight, he would give the alarm, as if he had just discovered the absence of Hansen.

He had gone over the whole thing in his mind as he struggled along. It would be easy enough to foist his story upon the simple-minded blacks. He would tell them that the sick man had gotten up in the night and wandered away. Fevers are common in the Islands; so, too, is delirium. And, when the body was found with the arrow in

the skull. they would believe that their master had fallen a victim to some wandering savage.

There were half a dozen runaways—deserters from the plantation—hiding back in the bush, afraid to go into the hills for fear of the ferocious hill men and, at the same time, fearful of the punishment certain to be meted out to them should they return to the plantation. One of them would be blamed for Hansen's death. The blacks would vouch for such a story when he told it to Donaldson and Svensen upon their arrival.

He had covered a small part of the distance back to the house, his head bent low in thought, when a rustling among the palms at his right caused him to turn suddenly. As he did so, a spear whizzed past his head, imbedding itself in the tree beside him.

Whirling, he drew his revolver and pumped the clip of shells in the direction from which the spear had been thrown. It was too dark to make for good shooting; and an instant later a flash of lightning showed him a naked figure dodging behind a tree in the distance. Too late, he realized that he had left the house without an extra clip of cartridges. Unarmed, he broke into a run, dodging here and there among the long avenues of trees until he reached the edge of the grove.

The blacks were already tumbling out of their quarters, chattering excitedly.

"Ornburi!" he snapped at one of the houseboys. "You tell 'm fella boys sick marster, him run away. Got devil-devil in head. Me go after him. Meet bad black fella. Black fella kill him mehbe You look. You catch 'm black fella, plenty kai-kai in morning, no work, plenty tobacco—plenty everything!"

As Ornburi stepped forward, proud of being singled out from among his fellows, and explained to the late comers what had happened, Kimball dashed back up the steps and into the house. Returning an instant later with his rifle and bandolier of cartridges, he found the blacks arming themselves with their native weapons, squealing and chattering their glee at the prospect of the

man-hunt and the holiday to follow in case of their success.

In spite of his efforts to maintain some semblance of order, however, assisted by the elated Ornburi, it was nearly daylight when the expedition was ready to start. The rain was nearly over, but a glance showed him that the night's downpour had completely washed out the trail he had made. Dodging here and there among the trees, savagely alert for their hidden enemies, it was almost an hour before the natives had covered the distance that Kimball, loaded down as he had been, had covered in twenty minutes.

The body of Hansen lay where he had thrown it.

But the head had been hacked off!

III.

IN HIS own mind, Kimball had no doubt as to the identity of the black who had hurled the spear at him in the darkness, for a checkup of the laborers showed Tulagi missing.

Bitter at the trouncing Kimball had administered, the native had bolted. Hiding in the darkness, nursing his anger, fate had thrown in his way the man who had whipped him. The same fate had caused him to miss his mark when he had thrown the spear.

And Tulagi was of a tribe that believed in taking heads for souvenirs.

With the coming of Donaldson and Svensen in the *Scary-Saray* three days later, giving him enough white aid to handle the plantation without fear of an uprising, Kimball renewed the search for the runaway. Tulagi, at large, would be a constant menace, not only to his own safety, but to the peace and quiet of the blacks. The runaway was a man of considerable influence among the others, and there was already too much dissatisfaction among the laborers to allow any additional trouble to creep in.

The body of the murdered Hansen had been decently buried close to the edge of the coconut grove under Kimball's direction.

Donaldson and Svensen never for a moment doubted his story, which was

corroborated by Ornburi and the blacks. Such things are not uncommon among the Islands. Both volunteered to aid him in running down the supposed murderer. For the supremacy of the white man must be maintained for the common good of all.

It was near the end of the second day that they found that for which they were searching. Beside a skeleton lay a skull, the point of an arrow driven through the temple. A great ant hill close by told a grisly story.

That one of Kimball's bullets had found its mark there was little doubt. Tulagi, wounded nigh unto death, had, nevertheless stopped long enough to hack off the ghastly souvenir, then made his way back toward the hills as best he could.

Exhausted from loss of blood, he had dropped, only to fall a victim to the ants.

IV.

AS THE three white men made their way toward the clearing, the sight of a schooner anchored close to the *Scary-Saray* met their gaze. Drawn up on the beach, close to the house, was a whale boat.

"From the looks of her, that'll be Captain Grant's *Dolphin* from Malaita." Donaldson remarked, shading his eyes from the glare of the sun. "Didn't know he ever got this far. Wonder if his daughter's with him? Ever see her, Kimball? She's a peach!"

Before Kimball, walking slightly behind the others and carrying the skull, could make a reply, a man and woman emerged from the house to meet them. Donaldson turned quickly.

"That's her!" he exclaimed. "Prettiest girl on the Islands. Hide that

damned skull, Kimball! It's no sight for a woman of her breeding to see."

They were a scant hundred yards apart now, the girl waving her handkerchief to them.

"It's a wonder you wouldn't stay at home to welcome your guests, Karl!" she called out. "And Fred Hansen—where is he?"

Kimball strode ahead of the others.

"Gladys!" he exclaimed.

"Hide that damned skull, I tell you!"

Donaldson growled in an undertone.

They were almost together now. Kimball shoved the skull under his coat. As he did so, it nearly dropped from his sweaty hands and, in an effort to hold it, his finger slid into one of the eyeless sockets.

The point of the arrow, protruding through the bone, scratched his skin. For the moment he forgot it in the happiness of meeting the woman he loved.

"Dad wanted to make a trading trip out this way, and brought me along for company," she was saying, as he stepped forward to grasp her outstretched hand. "Say that you're surprised to see me."

Before she could reach him, his legs doubled under him and he fell forward. The skull, dropping from beneath his coat, rolled and bounded half a dozen yards away, bringing up at the foot of a little hummock.

They leaped forward to catch him as he fell. But too late. With a mighty effort he raised himself to his knees.

"Hansen!" he screamed. "I killed him! He swore that he'd get even, and he has! *The—damned—thing—was poisoned!*"

He pitched forward onto his face.

At the foot of the hummock, the skull grinned sardonically.

