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"There were no blows or cuts or arrow wounds."

The Thing in the Bush

By JANE SCALES

Weird death struck down the men who penetrated the bush country in search of the strange blue diamonds

NOT knowing what else to call it, we had called it "the Thing."

Anyway, that's what the natives said it was, when they looked on the man who had come down the river.

He had drifted down in a little dug-out, and he was cold, and stiff, and *blue*. That was the peculiar thing about him. He was *really blue*. The black boys who were with me when we pulled him in, sobbed and shrieked, and wouldn't touch him. When I questioned them they

shouted hysterically—"The Thing! The Thing in the Bush has got him!"

Their silly palaver irritated me and I harshly ordered them to bury him. They dug a grave and by means of poles pushed the body into it. All the time they were filling it up, they made signs and kept up their incantations till it got on my nerves, and I had to come out of my shack and make them hush.

Sometimes I wondered why we had come, for Krake and I had both held

steady and lucrative positions in the bank at Melbourne. Without a moment's hesitation we had given up our jobs and had started on this devil's quest. It was only when the fever was on me that I would realize how foolish we had been. I would curse the black beggar who had brought the diamond into the bank. One by one, the incidents of that fateful day would pass in review before my heated brain.

I had been at work at my desk on some matter of routine, when I felt, rather than heard, a commotion in the main lobby. I got up quickly and stepped out into the big room.

A cringing, leprous-looking native, with a triangular scar upon each of his bare shoulders and another deeper one upon his chest, was standing before one of the teller's cages. I recognized the fact instantly that the black man was from the north bush-country, for under rather peculiar circumstances, many years before, I had seen a native similarly marked, and I knew that a tribe who lived in that section branded their members in this strange fashion, as though they had been so many sacred pigs of the Dagepan. That this fact was not generally known, I was fairly certain.

The native was standing there, gesticulating wildly to the frustrated man in the cage, and holding out to him in his filthy, open palm, a rough stone which glittered in spots as though it had been made of fire itself.

Every man who has lived in Australia knows a diamond when he sees one, no matter how deeply the brilliancy is embedded in the rough matrix. In an instant the bank was in a furor. Men were rushing in and out of the doors, calling loudly to each other. An excited crowd had gathered round the native, and the now frightened black man was half pulled, half jostled into the street where

already men were bidding for the shining object in his hand.

At last, a rough-looking individual, holding a thick roll of bills high above his head, dashed out of the bank, through the mob and up to the native. He thrust the money into the black man's hand, and the scared, nonplussed bushman seemed only too glad to hand over the stone to him. Then, silently, with furtive looks, the native slunk through the crowd and disappeared.

For days, Melbourne was demoralized. Krake and I had left immediately. At my suggestion we had headed north, for I remembered the body-marks of the man, though I did not speak of them, even to Krake. For some unknown reason, as is often the case in such circumstances, an unauthentic rumor had started the general rush toward the East Coast.

Women, both native and white, followed the prospectors; living during the day, God knows how, and hanging at night on the outskirts of the many small camps, like vultures of the bush. In my fevered brain I would curse them as an added responsibility and danger, though, till Whitewine had joined us, we had been bothered with them little enough. Then, when the chill was over, I would forget all and my enthusiasm would return with full force.

Whitewine had come to us at Cobar. Krake and I had known the fellow in Melbourne and we both rather disliked and distrusted him. Some years previous, Whitewine had left Australia on a night-boat, and had taken up life on a small island outside the pale of law. He had carried a retinue of servants with him, and for a time had lived surrounded with the luxury of an Oriental monarch. The rumor of a new diamond-field had proved too much for his grasping soul, and at the risk of imprisonment he had returned

to Australia, and, uninvited, had attached himself to us.

At last, after weeks of hardship and toil, sickness and monotony, we had reached the Gilbert River, and we hoped, by following the stream into Queensland, to make our strike.

KRAKE and Whitewine had started out at daybreak and had been away only an hour when the blue man came. My nerves had been given a nasty twist at the sight of him, and somehow, though it was only midday, I kept wishing Krake would come in.

At last, he came. I could see that he was in a state of nervous excitement.

"Come inside," he said briskly, and we went into the shack. "We're on their stamping-ground, all right," he continued. "An arrow flew over my head this morning. It came from back of me. My guide let it fly, for he had dropped behind me, and as the arrow whizzed over my head I turned quickly and caught him with the bow in his hands and the strings still quivering. When I questioned him, he lied like a dog, and said that he was trying to bring down one of those gilt-edged parrots, which you and I know have no value to a native. Oh, no, he didn't mean to kill me," Krake added, when he saw my look of astonishment and fear. "It was a signal of some sort. You see, it was just as I found this thing."

He held out a half-dull, half-glittering stone—our first diamond. I could scarcely keep from shouting, but Krake held up a warning hand.

"They know too much already," he said, pointing toward the group of natives huddled outside our thatch.

"Where is Whitewine?" he asked.

"Whitewine has not come in," I answered.

Krake wheeled. "What!" he said

sharply. "He left me four hours ago. He said he was coming straight back here."

We stared at each other. Krake became angry.

"He's jumped us! That's what he's done! He was with me when I found this."—The diamond in his hand gleamed white and blue. Somehow the blue in it made me shudder, for I thought of the dead man.—"The nasty beast," he continued. "We might have known it."

"Never mind about Whitewine," I answered. "If he *has* jumped us, he'll regret soon enough, and if he *hasn't*, God help him!" I had been in the bush before.

Krake cooled down at my words. We hid the stone and went outside. It was then I told him about the man, how blue he had been, and how the natives had carried on about the Thing that had killed him.

Krake grew thoughtful. "It may mean more to us than we think," he said. "The man had evidently been in the region of the Upper River. That's home ground to the bushmen, and they resent strangers. You see, I found the diamond while I was scratching around in the gravel of the upper stream, and I guess I haven't been the only white man in that part. That poor devil had probably heard something that made him think the field was in the North, too, though why he didn't go to the East Coast with the rest of 'em is more than I can say."

Krake looked at me piercingly. He, also, had wanted to head east, but had given way to my insistence on taking the northern route.

"I wonder what it was that made you—" He left the sentence unfinished, and continued his theorizing about the blue man.

"Anyway, he's paid the penalty of going uninvited. Strange they didn't go

after me today," he mused. "The dickens of it is, though," he said, waking up, "how did they kill him, and what made him blue? Poison of some sort, I guess."

"Oh, he was poisoned all right," I answered. "There were not any blows or cuts, or arrow wounds. But *how* was he poisoned? No sane man would eat any of their food or drink unanalyzed water in this devil's hole, unless driven to it, and this fellow was too healthy-looking a specimen to have suffered great hunger or thirst. We'll have to accept it, Krake. The Thing got him," I said laughingly.

Krake shivered.

Already night was leaping upon us. The heavy dew dripped like rain from the vanilla vines. The chill air was tense, save when some animal cut the stillness with his unearthly cry. A small, whirring night-creature hit me in the face, and as I knocked it away, my hand shook. I wondered what Whitewine was doing—alone in that mass of horrors.

He really *had* been a beast, and though neither of us would admit it, we were not so sorry as we might have been. If some mishap had befallen him, he had had warnings enough from Krake and me, for we had both felt that his infatuation (if one could call it that) for the ugly, fat native dancer would lead to trouble. She had come to his notice after we had entered the bush. Krake and I had thought at first that she was simply a camp-follower who had strayed, somehow, away from the eastern-moving crowd; but she had not succumbed at once to Whitewine's attentions as most native women would have done under such circumstances. She had held him off with the coquetry of a brown cabaret-girl of the coast. One does not expect things like this in the interior. She had been too subtle, and I felt that it foretold no good. No one but Whitewine could have become interested in a woman like

that; though, God knows, men sometimes, through sheer and desperate loneliness, seek strange companionship.

Well, for all that, the three of us had sworn faith to each other, and as Krake and I talked on into the night, we decided that at least we must make some effort to find Whitewine, or find out what had become of him.

Suddenly, Krake dug his fingers into my arm. "Listen," he said through his teeth.

From the distance came the sound of native drums—tom-tom-tom-tom—dull, ominous. We laughed nervously, to ease the unknown dread which both of us felt and neither would own up to.

All at once from the Upper River there was a glimmer of light, not red, like fire, but *blue*—as blue and as cold as steel. Suddenly I recalled having seen that light the night before, and I wondered, as the cold sweat poured off of me, if that light had anything to do with the blue man who had come down the river.

Again came the dull, throbbing sounds, and again the hair rose on my head. Was it the Thing? And was it coming toward us? One could dodge the little feathered arrows, but the Thing! God! I think I tried to pray. Finally, there was silence, and the light was gone.

The natives, too, had seen it, and they were like frightened children. We spent half the night quieting them. Then we slept a bit, but it was the sleep of madmen. Somewhere out there in the bush was the Thing!

IT WAS noon of the next day when we found Whitewine. We stumbled over him, for already the jungle was at its work, and he was almost covered with green trailing vines and creepers. He was lying on his face, and his pick was by his side. Krake and I turned him over.

As we did so, the two black boys who were with us screamed. *He was blue!*

We quietly ordered the blacks to dig a hole. While they were at it, we kicked at the little creeping tendrils and leaves close around. Hidden under them, we found what we knew would be there—Whitewine's small leather pouch, which the avaricious man had taken the precaution to remove from his belt and hide before his fatal adventure. In it, as far as we could tell from our hurried examination, were four beautiful pieces of matrix, which looked as though they contained at least three dozen stones. I tied the pouch to my belt, making sure that the boys did not see, and then we laid the dead man in the hole.

The boys were like maniacs and refused point-blank to go on. We could have made them, but they were of no use to us in their present state of mind, so we sent them back to the clearing where we had camped the night before, and where the other natives, almost as frightened as these two lunatics, were waiting for us in abject misery.

Then we decided to go to the hill alone. We had our compasses and knew we could find our way about.

We had just started along a half-hidden trail by the river's edge, when that uncanny sixth sense told me we were being followed. I think Krake felt it at the same time, for we both wheeled suddenly, and there, standing in the path, was Whitewine's ugly dancer. Just back of her was another woman. Her aquiline features stood out in sharp contrast to the thick lips and flat nose of the ugly one. She probably was a beautiful remnant of some lost race such as one sometimes finds in the interior.

Krake and I gasped at her beauty. I think we both trembled. Men are like that when they are in the bush.

The ugly one grinned; it could not be

called a smile, for the lips were too swollen, and the teeth too decayed. She came up to us quickly and would have embraced me where I stood, but I pushed her off in disgust. She shrank back into the leaves and even her false, amorous glances could not hide the hatred that was in her eyes. She looked meaningfully at her beautiful companion. Quickly they plunged backward, and even in the light of day were lost to us as suddenly and completely as though they had never appeared.

It was like an ugly dream, offset by a glimmer of beauty, and we both tried to forget it. But forget it I could not. There was something too sinister about it. Why were they following us? What did they want? They did not, in all probability, know the value of the diamonds we were after; and, supposing they did, what could they hope to gain by this sort of thing? We were certain that they did not know about the stones in the pouch at my side. It was simply an instinctive, savage defense against intruders, I concluded. But, what would be the end? The unanswered questions beat in my brain till I thought I should go mad.

It was only when we began finding the matrix that we forgot our danger for a time. All through the afternoon, the sound of our picks resounded through the stillness, till the jungle muffled and choked it and sent it back to us like a boomerang. The water swished at our feet as if in a fury for having lost its secret, and once I heard a sound so inexplicable that I dropped my pick and hurried under cover, my hand on my gun. Krake heard it, too.

"Only an alligator calling its mate," he said, trying to make light of it, but I saw that he did not believe his own words.

In spite of all this we returned to our work, and by evening our small pouches

were full of the stones—stones precious enough to buy kingdoms and the honor of women. I wanted to go back, but Krake, adventurer that he was, prevailed against my better judgment, and we stayed on till the night.

"If I can get hold of the pretty one," he said, "I may be able to find out why the light was there, and why the man was blue."

I knew then why he had wanted to stay, and I saw that he desired the woman whom we had seen that morning more than the diamonds that were in his pouch. He was still under the spell of her beauty.

"Better go easy, Krake," I said. "You may find out to your sorrow."

Nevertheless, there we stayed like two blind fools, and I knew that with the dark would come the woman.

THE sun went down into the river with a splash. For a second, a few rays lingered, like long bony fingers pointed in mockery. Then we were alone in the tropic night. We waited for the light. It came, and it was blue—God! how blue! It came from the top of the hill.

We moved toward it in a circle, crawling on our stomachs part of the time. Nearer and nearer we went, and our blood froze as we advanced, though we did not know why. Finally, when we were close enough to see, we crept down into a little gully. There were lizards in the gully, but we didn't mind, for at least they were alive and tangible, and not like that unseen, unknown terror.

We saw that the light was coming from an altar. On the altar was a pot of burning liquid, and the flames that came from it were—blue! Presiding over this hideous fluid was a native priest. He was a devil, in truth. Into his face and into his body he had dug small holes, and the holes were filled with tufts of

wild cotton. The little patches of white stood clear on the black flesh, and formed a pattern so ghastly that my heart almost stopped beating at the sight.

In front of the altar stood a row of dancing girls, and among them we recognized the faces of the two women whom we had seen that morning. They were all swaying to some sort of chant, and then the drums began their beating rhythm. Those wild creatures, fat and squat as they were, could dance. Even the muscles of their faces twitched to the music, and their eyes gleamed with excitement.

There was a ceremony, bloody, gruesome. Even then, I did not understand to what extent its horrors would be felt. One by one the dancers came to the altar. They knelt there, each in turn, with the blue light all about. As they knelt, the priest approached them. In his hand was a sharp, thin flint-rock. With this rock he cut a hole in their flesh, so that the blood came in a stream. Then he dipped the rock into the burning blue liquid and again applied it to the sizzling wound. The smell of burning flesh reached our nostrils, and we sickened. There was no outcry from the girls. They had the fortitude of fiends.

We had seen enough. We did not understand it. Our one desire was to get away—away from the smell of blood and scorching flesh.

At the foot of the hill we breathed more freely.

"At least, they are letting us alone," said Krake.

I said nothing, but I was not so sure. Something told me that our movements had been watched, and that it was only cunning that made them wait. I thought of the Thing. . . .

Even before we got to the bush, she, the beautiful one, came toward us. My eyes telegraphed a warning to Krake, for

in the light which still flickered on the hill, I thought he could see me. But the man was all on fire with the sight of her.

"I'll find out now what it's all about," he whispered.

He looked at the girl, and his eyes answered her amorous stare.

Slowly I backed toward the bush, for I felt that something was taking place, something that I did not understand. I felt the presence of the Thing.

Krake was speaking in the native jargon. "Tell me, my pretty one, how did you get that wound upon your arm?"

And she answered in words as beautiful as Love itself—"Let me tell you—like this—"

Before my eyes, they kissed.

"Krake! Krake! Look out!" But my words were useless. Already his face was convulsed in death, and he was turning—blue!

I turned and fled. How I lived through that night of agony and horror, I do not know. Even now, the memory of it sears my soul as the burning flint-

rock scorched the flesh of the dancers. I ran, with the Thing at my heels—I crawled, with the Thing crouching over me—I screamed aloud to it to let me alone!

My only guide was the river, but somehow, I found the clearing. When I came out, I was mad—and then—I forgot. . . .

MONTHS afterward, when I could talk, I told my story. I would not have been believed if it had not been for the stones, which bore me witness with their cold, blue light. I had seen what no other man had ever lived to tell of—the deadly poison-carrier at her work. I had seen the ceremony of inoculation—a ceremony which was begun with the birth of the girl chosen as a tribal weapon, and continued at regular intervals during her life, so that eventually she reeked of the virulent poison which had been slowly injected into her veins, giving her the kiss of Death.

I had seen the Thing in the Bush!

