

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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The Tsantsa of Professor Von Rothapfel

by

Alanson Skinner



"I was startled by a touch on my arm, and turning, I beheld an armed Jivaro, naked, and hideous in his brilliant war-paint."

THE members of the Wanderer's Club leaned back from the table at the conclusion of the last speech, and soon the air was blue with tobacco smoke. Everyone was talking with the guest of the evening, a distinguished English explorer, fresh from the interior of Borneo, and full of tales of hair-breadth escapes among the head-hunting Dyaks. He was an intelligent and close observer, a *rara avis* indeed, as the anthropologist said afterward, who could give an accurate answer to the most searching question.

"I have been told," said the explorer, "that there are head-hunters of sorts in the South American wilds who disport themselves in the same jolly way that the Dyaks do—head-hunting, blow-guns, poisoned arrows and all that. Can any of you gentlemen tell me whether it is true or not?"

The anthropologist lit his corn-cob pipe with deliberation. "Yes," he answered, puffing a white cloud into the general mist, "to a certain extent that is correct. My traveling in South America has been limited—but I have had some experience with the head-hunters, and the blow-gun peoples, too. Ran across them in several

places, in fact. But nothing anywhere like the Jivaros. When it comes to collecting human heads, they are the real Mackaye, and no mistake. Nearly got mine, too."

"Oh I say, old chap, spin the yarn for us, wont you? I'm a bit fed up with my own stuff, you know," pled the guest of the evening.

"All right, then," said the anthropologist, cocking his feet up on the table. "I'm game, though when I'm through, I don't expect even one of you to believe me.

"I had been knocking round the Talamanaca Valley that extends through the mountains of southern Costa Rica for a few months, collecting specimens from the Bri-bri Indians and some of the other tribes of that region, and was just about heartily sick of my own company and the tropics, and ready to head for the North again, when I received a letter of instructions. I had a powerful hunch that they would be disagreeable, and I was right. The letter was an order from headquarters to pull out for Panama, across the Isthmus, and take the first ship that was not in too great a hurry to stop at every little dinky port, for Ecuador. There I was to proceed eastward to

the province of Oriente where I was to visit the wild Jivaros, and to stay with them long enough to make a close study of their life and customs, with special orders to learn how they prepared their famous war-trophies—human heads, which they take “on the hoof,” so to speak, and then shrink by some secret process to less than the size of a man’s fist, and yet succeed in retaining the features in recognizable form. *Tsantsas*, they call them in their own tongue.

“Well, I wont bother you with details as to how I slipped out of Central America and down the coast until I reached Ecuador. Every trip along the coast of South America in a sailing ship is about the same. Anyway, I got there in due course, and then made my way overland without much trouble to Oriente, where the Jivaros make their home. This province lies on the eastern or Atlantic side of the high Andean peaks, where the Amazon takes its rise, and the Jivaros live in the virgin forest of the headwaters of the rivers Pastaza, Morona, Upano-Santiago, and their tributaries. They are one of the most numerous tribes (or rather group of tribes, for there are no less than nine separate divisions of them) in all South America. They are supposed to number between fifteen and twenty thousand souls, and are the most warlike people on the continent. Not only are they continually fighting among themselves, but they are dangerous to outsiders. Way back in 1599 they rose against the Spaniards who had settled in their territory and virtually exterminated them, and since that time the governments of Ecuador and Peru, in whose territories the Jivaros are found, have found it best to leave them pretty much alone.

“It didn’t take me long to get in touch with the Indians. I started in by stopping for a time with one of the white traders settled near their

boundaries. There I tried to hire some of the Indians who came out to trade to take me in to their interior villages. This they readily agreed to do; but good Lord! how worried the white natives were when they found out what I was up to! They begged me, in the name of the Mother of God and at least one hundred and seven saints not to go, saying with one voice: *‘Que barbaridad, Señor! Los Jivaros son diablos todos, y por seguro le sacaran la cabeza!’* To which I replied piously, ‘As God wills, friends,’ and went.

“Of course, I did not go wholly unprepared for stormy weather. I did not, it is true, take my rifle with any intention or expectation of using it on the Jivaros. As a matter of fact, up to that time I had always found that it was a great protection to any man to go among ‘savages’ unarmed for defense; that, in a way, put them on their honor, and honor is a thing that they value more highly than many of us, I am afraid. However, this time I took an old pet of mine, a 45-90 Winchester that I am attached to in spite of its weight, because it has the great virtue of holding true and knocking down whatever it hits. It’s not such a sweet shooting gun as some of the lesser calibers, but its smashing power is tremendous, and I fancied that there might be jaguars and pumas where I was going.

“My only real precaution will make you smile. I had never seen any Jivaros before, but I did know other Indians, and so I shaved my scalp as bald as an onion, and kept it so. You see, the northern Indians, who took scalps, were not interested in short-haired enemies who yielded no trophies when slain. I have personally heard old-time Sioux warriors complain about the lack of sportsmanship on the part of the Great White Father at Washington for sending out negro troops against them. ‘Buffalo Soldiers’ they contemptuously called

them, because of their color and their woolly heads, and added that they were '*kila sicha*' or very much no good, because their scalps were not worth taking, after they, the Sioux, had gone to all the trouble of killing them. A bald-headed man would make a poor trophy for a Jivaro, thought I. But at that time I did not realize that some of the Jivaro warriors were real connoisseurs in heads, and that my shining pate was really a great temptation.

"WELL, I made the interior villages all right, and at first got along beautifully. The Jivaros don't live in villages like the other South American Indians of my acquaintance, but in great houses, occupied by several closely related families, built on the summit of a high hill or in an easily defended bend of some river, where the inhabitants are always hidden from anyone passing along the main lines of travel.

"They sow the surrounding jungle with a horrid lot of man-traps, sharp stakes in the bottom of pits, and spring-poles that they set in trails, where an unwary marauder may set off a bent sapling by tripping over a vine, and the sapling springs back and drives a set of long jagged palm-wood spikes through his vitals!

"When I was there things seemed peaceful enough for the time being. The Jivaros were not in the least agricultural, and lived by hunting, in which I often joined them. They had their long bows and arrows, and also the blow-guns which we were just talking about. The blow-gun is usually an eight or ten foot hollow tube, made of cane or some pithy wood which they split. The core is removed, and then the tube is carefully glued together again. Through this glorified putty-blower tiny darts were propelled with force, by means of the breath alone. All things considered, the distance and accuracy

with which these darts could be driven was unbelievable for anyone who has never seen it done by an expert. And let me tell you, every Jivaro male from twelve years up is an expert. The wounds inflicted by the tiny arrows would be insignificant but for the fact that the Jivaros have the unpleasant custom of dipping their tips in *curare*—a blackish, resinous extract of *Strychnos toxifera*, a plant that flourishes in those parts, the juice of which, as prepared by the Indians, is one of the quickest and most deadly poisons known to science. But it is deadly only when taken through the skin, as in a wound, when it paralyzes the motor nerves and kills through suffocation. It is perfectly possible to eat the flesh of, say, a monkey shot by a poisoned dart, as I well know, through experience. The Jivaros say that salt taken immediately is an antidote; and when they wish to save a monkey alive they hasten to put salt in its mouth. Otherwise the animal dies in two or three minutes. A man may last for five. But, strange as it may seem, the Jivaros absolutely refuse to use the blow-gun and its poisoned darts for war. Maybe there is some religious taboo about it, or maybe they think it's not quite sporting. Anyway, what they really love to use in fighting is a spear with a big, ugly, keen steel head, that will disembowel a man like a stroke of lightning. No Jivaro warrior feels dressed up without one, and the small round shield of wood or tapir hide that is carried to parry thrusts with.

"I found the natives to be a fine, handsome, clear-eyed people, and, like most of the genuine warrior tribes that I have had the fortune to be thrown in with, frank and open to their friends, and affable at all times. On the other hand, they were treacherous and underhanded in their dealings with their enemies. Neither sex was over-burdened with clothing ex-

cept on ceremonial occasions, the ordinary business suit for a man being a breech-cloth of beaten bark and a few feathers and beads, while the women covered themselves more thoroughly with a coarse woven cotton robe. This habit of going about unhampered by dress was largely responsible for the easy grace of their movements. Their limbs were beautifully proportioned.

"In Jivaria, as the country of the Jivaros is called, a man's social standing is determined by the size of his family, and so every girl of marriageable age (and in the tropics that time is reached very early) is greatly sought after. Of course the old warriors, with their prestige and collections of shrunken heads, are the ones who are regarded as the best catches, and they manage to snap up all the young girls of the home village, at least, and that would leave the younger men disconsolate, if it were not for the custom which prevails there of 'Let him take who has the power, and let him keep who can.' In other words, a young lover can do better by going out and killing the husband of the girl of his choice, annexing the girl, and, incidentally, the other supernumerary wives of the dead man, and of course, taking home his enemy's head for addition to his collection of souvenirs. Certainly, one does not steal sheep at home, so the young aspirant always goes to some other encampment, or invades the territory of some other tribe to commit his depredations. In spite of all this, or, maybe, because of it, the Jivaros are exceedingly jealous of their wives, and I might repeat here an axiom which all of you probably know, but which can not be too prominently borne in mind away from home, among all native peoples, all over the world, 'If you want to live long and eventually die in bed, *leave the women alone.*'

"Well, I hung around and made notes for a good half-year. I man-

aged to get into the confidence of the chiefs and the priests, and was hail-fellow-well-met with the warriors. My experience with the North American tribes stood me in good stead, except that I finally forgot, in my enthusiasm, that in North America we deal with Indians of a very high mental type, barbarians as distinguished from savages. These Jivaros were several steps lower in the social scale—real savages, who, when it came to a show-down, didn't care much whose heads they took, nor how.

"Things went along, as I have said, with a good degree of progress until I was reasonably well informed on everything connected with Jivaro life save the very thing that I had come down to study, the mysterious preparation of those shrunken heads. There was some sort of sacred mystery connected with that process, something that our Northern Indians would call 'Medicine.' Though several raids were made, and heads taken while I was in Jivaria, up to date I had been politely but firmly 'shooed' away from the secret spot of preparation by armed Jivaro fighting men.

"**O**NE day, as I was preparing to take my regular daily dose of quinine to mitigate my regular daily dose of malarial fever, I heard a considerable commotion at the edge of the settlement, and strolling over to the spot, I was astonished to see a small cavalcade of mules, the leading one topped by a white man, enter the clearing. To make a long story short, the newcomer was no less a person than the renowned German Professor Herr Doktor Ludwig Von Rothapfel, curator of anthropology at the Berlin Museum, personal friend of the Kaiser—oh yes, this was before the war—equal in social rank to a Prussian general, and what not. He did tell me all about it, it is true, within the first five minutes, but I

was so much more interested in the elaborate equipment he was carrying—servants, arsenal, bathtub, and the good Lord knows what else—that I didn't pay all the attention that I should have to his pompous recital. All that got to me at the time was that the mystery of the shrunken heads was about to be solved for the glory of the Kaiser, Germany, science, Herr Professor Doktor Von Rothapfel, and Gott, and I was a bit peeved.

"However, the burly old square-head was not such a bad scout to those whom he considered his equals; and, as he had read a little squib of mine concerning the life of the polar Eskimos, we got along famously. He was pleased to call me his colleague, and I offered him the hospitality of my palm-thatched shack, where I lived with a couple of wild bachelor Jivaros. But he much preferred to have a large hut built with state near the group of Jivaro house-forts—it was a mistake to build it so much bigger and better than the chief's lodge though—and there he dwelt in some magnificence, attended by quite a retinue of servants. One of them, I remember, was a German, held some rank in the old country corresponding to a sergeant in our army, I guess, and he was supplied with all manner of luxuries, such as wine.

"His methods of dealing with the natives were very different from mine. Even the chief, who was a pretty sensible and a brave fellow, he regarded as a specimen, or a sort of an insect, and he treated all the rest like so many dogs and didn't hesitate to cuff 'em or kick 'em around when he was feeling a bit off. Of course he treated his own servants, the German and all, in the same way, but then, they *were* servants, and they were paid to endure it. The Jivaros were wild men and savages, it is true, but they were free, and I scented trouble.

"*'Dot iss der trouble mit you*

American anthropologists,' said the Herr Doktor to me when I mildly suggested other means. 'You always go to gread extremes to protect der feelings of der inferior peobles, when they are nodding bud somewhat higher exambles of der lower animals. Bah, feelings such as animade der being of der civilized man dey haf nod, und id iss by eggspressing my superiority dot I shall in time der segret brocess obtain, which you have so signally failed to get by democradic methods.'

"Well, as time rocked on it certainly did seem as if his means were at least as efficacious as mine. He bullied his way into ceremonies which it had taken me long weeks of persuasion to edge into by favor of the Indians, and he did it in a few hours. It is true that the warriors did not throng his camp of an evening as they had thronged mine—up to the time that the Herr Professor had put a damper on the cordiality of all our relations with the little Red Brothers—but still he seemed to be making out famously. And then he 'spilled the beans'.

"*'Mine freund!*' said Herr Professor Doktor Von Rothapfel to me one evening, 'der Bible have said dot id iss nod good for man to lif alone, so I haf daken unto mineself eine wife.'

"Naturally I supposed that he had arranged a satisfactory union with some wealthy German lady in the old country—a duchess, or something of the kind, whatever would be considered suitable for his exalted station by his superior officers at the Museum in Berlin, or whoever regulated that part of his existence. I started to say something intended to be polite, but the Herr Professor stopped me with a wave of his hand.

'Ach nein, mine freund! Id is nod as serious as you suppose. Id iss nodding bud what der French call a *'mariage de convenance,'* eh? How

do you like dot French accent? I haf taken dot leedle *mädchen* dot iss de youngest wife of der chief, yes? You vill remember, der preddy one mid der large dark eyes?

"You could have knocked me over with a feather. 'Hell's bells, man!' I managed to blurt out, 'I wouldn't be in your shoes for all the gold in the Andes! Start a collection of pet coral-snakes if you must, but for the love of heaven, *let the women alone!*'"

"Herr Professor Doktor Von Roth-apfel laughed, and said: 'Ven in Rome do as der Romans do,' and let it go at that. Me, I started back for my hut, called Casimiro and Innocente, my pet Jivaros, and began to pack up my specimens. I can manage to see through a knothole when my eye is jammed up against it. But, even when I was packed up, there were insurmountable difficulties about getting away. I had to send back to the nearest trading post to get mules to transport the boxes and what not, to meet me at the end of canoe navigation, so the upshot of it all was that several days elapsed, and nothing happened. Probably the main reason was that the chief was off on a man-hunt at the time when the Herr Professor helped himself to the girl, and, when it came down to brass tacks, it was the chief's business, and no one's else.

"'You will see dot ven he does come back, he vill noddings do,' said the Herr Professor to me. 'Und, moreofer, if der chief so much as lifts der hand, Hans, mine orderly, hass orders to shood him on der spot, und shood to kill.'

"THAT afternoon passed without remark or happening, except that, as I was returning from a tramp down the river, I saw a Jivaro standing on the trail. I knew the man, and was surprized, because I thought he had gone on the raiding party with the chief. I wanted to talk to him

about it, and started toward him, when a movement in the brush caught my eye, and when I looked back, the man had vanished.

"Toward evening, however, just as I had finished my after-supper pipe, a shadow glided out of the jungle and stood before me. It was the warrior that I had seen in the jungle that afternoon, and now he was fully equipped with war-paint, shield, and lance. He stood still a minute, and then spoke to me in the curious pidgin Spanish, which is peculiar, so far as I know, to the Jivaros, who use the participial forms of the verbs, and make an ordinary conversation sound like a Sunday school recitation in singsong. He said something like this:

"'Capitan Americano—mi jefe Indio volvienda—cabezas sacando—mujeres teniendo—aqui estando—usted deseando—el ceremonio de las tsantsas mirando!'

"All of which you might translate as follows: 'American captain—my Indian chief returning—heads taking—women having—here being—you desiring—the ceremony of the shrunk-en heads seeing!' Which I took to be an invitation to see the rite of the head-shrinking. It was the big moment which I had so long sought! Did I go? Would a duck swim? Caution went to the winds right there and then. I didn't even stop to take my rifle. As a matter of fact, it was well for me that I didn't. All that I could think of was the chagrin that the old beast of a Herr Professor was going to feel when he heard that I had beaten him to it, and by the means which he had so despised.

"Outside my hut were lounging several particularly ferocious-looking Jivaros, armed with trade muskets, spears, and wicked-looking machetes—yes, every darned one of those machetes was made here in Connecticut, a famous brand of elongated butcher's cleaver that everybody, white, red or black, carries in the

tropics, to hew away the lianas and bushes when traveling in the jungles. The warriors grinned sweetly at me, picked up their weapons, closed in about me, and we jogged off into the underbrush.

"It was quite a distance to the place where the returning war-party had camped to prepare the heads, according to custom, and, though we kept up a swift dog-trot for the entire distance, it was nearly dark when we entered the clearing where they had their fire burning. But you can imagine how dumfounded and disgusted I was when I glanced about the company and saw Herr Professor Doktor Von Rothapfel seated with great pomp and circumstance on a large rock in the center of them all, with no less a person than the Jivaro chief squatting at his feet. Evidently Prussian force was still running neck and neck with American tact.

"Well, gentlemen, I won't bore you with the details of the ceremony, with its long-drawn-out dances and songs of victory. Nor yet with much account of the preparation of the three captured heads, since that has all burst out into print long since. Suffice it to say that a cut is made in each head through the scalp from the crown downward, and then the scalp and the skin of the face are carefully flayed from the skull, and immersed in boiling water, while the skull itself is thrown away. The skin and the flesh of the face and head which adheres to it are dipped in the juice of the huito fruit, which stains them black, and probably serves as a preservative. The shrinking is mainly accomplished by first inserting hot stones, and then hot sand, after which the trophy is slowly turned with the hands, until the sand has come in contact with every part of the inner surface of the head. This is a performance that is kept up for days, sometimes weeks, and is kept up by the warriors taking turns, as they tire.

Meantime the features are carefully molded with the hands to retain their shape. At length the ghastly object has been reduced in size to a bulk no greater than your fist. Then small wooden pins are passed through its lips, and cotton cords wound around them, so that the lips of the slain warrior are sealed, and he may not curse his captors. Curiously enough, after the ceremonies are over, the Jivaro warrior is free to dispose of the head as he will, and so many have been taken out and sold, and the demand for them among traders to sell to tourists is so great, that both Ecuador and Peru have passed laws against the practise. But who is going to enforce these laws among the Jivaros?

"Day after day we watched the ceremony of the shrinking, and learned the weird ritual of songs, prayers, and mystic formulae used to pacify the ghosts of the slain. And all this time we were virtually prisoners, the Herr Professor and I, for at our sides stalked armed Jivaros, who watched us as a jaguar watches a deer, so that escape or resistance were alike hopeless. But, if we were guarded, we were well treated, so far. Still, although the Herr Professor laughed heartily, and said that the Jivaros dared not injure us, and ascribed the close scrutiny of our Jivaro guards to their fear that we might violate the canons of Jivaro propriety by visiting the great house and talking to the people at large during the ceremony, something that the Indians themselves dared not do, I felt mighty uneasy. I couldn't forget the chief's young wife whom the Herr Professor had so callously appropriated.

"IT WAS with some relief that I received the chief in my shelter one afternoon, and learned that the ceremony would end that night. My hut was apart from the Herr Professor's, and though the chief fre-

quently visited me, he apparently never dropped in on the big German. Tonight the Indian was particularly friendly and communicative, and detailed to me in his own language much about Jivaro customs.

“‘Tomorrow you are going away,’ said he, ‘and the hearts of the Jivaros will be empty. I will tell you one more thing before you go, and maybe that you will not believe. We Jivaros are descended from the Sun, and we are a pure people. Never has our blood been defiled by admixture with that of any alien. Yet there was a prophecy that it should one day be so. Yes, a prophecy made in the days of my grandfather’s grandfather, that one day a Jivaro woman should disgrace her tribe by marriage with a person not an Indian. Many times have the Spanish rubber hunters stolen our women, and as many times those women killed themselves before they would be theirs, and always the man has died also, for we Jivaros be men and warriors, and we do not forget. Now lately, they say, one of our women has allowed herself to be taken to wife by a man of a foreign people. We Jivaros take wives from other men of our own blood by right of conquest. That does not pollute our blood. But this woman has defiled us, and tonight I have heard the big *tundays*, the log drums that hang in our encampments, talking over the forest. They say that she is dead. But the man who took her, he has made one mistake that we Jivaros do not make. He did not kill her husband, and that is well, for now no one will ever boast that he brought impurity into the race of the Children of the Sun.’

“‘That was all that the chief said, and, though his tone was as pleasant and conversational as ever, I vaguely sensed a bitter threat. But Von Rothapfel only laughed as hard as ever when I told him about it.

“‘Ach, I haf them cowed already! They dare not hurt me! Am I nod a German citizen, and a representatif of a superior race?’

“‘It seemed to me that the Kaiser and his avenging armies were a long way off from Jivaria in Oriente, but it did look as though the Herr Professor was right. Neither by sign nor word was there any hint that either Von Rothapfel or I was unwelcome among the Jivaros. The ceremonies were concluded in due form that night, and, before dawn, the chief entered my *casa ambulante*, or traveling hut of leaves, to tell me that the canoes to carry me up to the Oriente trading posts were loaded with all my packets. I was surprized, of course, though not a little relieved to find myself freed so unexpectedly, and all the drudgery accomplished for me, but I took it all as a matter of Jivaro courtesy to a departing guest, and strolled over to the Herr Professor’s camp to bid him farewell. The hut was empty, but a grinning Jivaro informed me that he had risen still earlier and left before me, ‘On a long journey going—no words leaving.’

“‘Annoyed at the lack of courtesy displayed by the burly Teuton, and feeling in my heart that he was racing to the outside world to be the first to startle science with his account of the head-shrinking secrets, I went to my canoes, and found everything ready. The chief came down to see me off, and presented me with his own spear, shield, and machete for remembrance, adding that he had once killed a woman with them, and that they were now unpleasant to his sight.

“‘*Señor Capitan Americano,*’ he addressed me, ‘you will go to the settlements by another route, not our houses passing. Deaths there occurring, people mourning for many dying. I, chief of the Jivaros, not for-

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Tsantsa of Professor Von Rothapfel

(Continued from page 100)

getting you, in a little while a real present after you send me.

“THREE weeks later I was enjoying a cup of *café del país* with Señor Don Jaime Salazar in his trading camp on the border of Oriente, while I awaited the arrival of my pack mules to carry out ~~the~~ specimens to the nearest point on the Trans-Andean railroad. The señor being called into his shop for a few minutes, I was gazing eastward over the darkling mountains and thinking of home, when I was startled by a touch on my arm, and turning, I beheld an armed Jivaro, naked, and hideous in his brilliant war-paint.

“‘Señor Capitan Americano,’ said he in his strange Spanish, ‘my Indian chief his friend not forgetting, his promise keeping, a real present sending.’ And he placed in my hand a small object wrapped in the green leaf of a wild plantain. Before I could speak he had slid like a shadow into the gathering darkness, and left me alone on the veranda.

“A premonition of evil seized me, and, shivering unaccountably, I shouted to Don Jaime to bring a light. Placing the lamp on the table, with trembling fingers I tore open the plantain leaf covering, and dropped the contents on the table in dismay.

“Hideous, shriveled, and shrunken though they were, there could be no mistake. The features were those of Herr Doktor Professor Ludwig Von Rothapfel, curator of anthropology in the Berlin Museum and personal friend of William the Second. And with them, in his formal German script, was the manuscript of the professor’s account of the secret ceremony of the *tsantsas*.”