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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Valley of Bones

By DAVID H. KELLER

What weird tragedy took place in that African spot where the bones of a murdered people were scattered?

"YOU were kind to me in England," said the Zulu.

I looked at him, and tried to remember, but I could not drag the past out of the subconscious. Not wishing to offend him, I simply said,

"It is nice to know that you have some reason to remember me."

He smiled.

"After all, you do not remember. We were in the same classes at Oxford. All the men there were courteous to me, but they never accepted me as their social equal. You had me in to tea several afternoons. We talked about psychology. You were majoring in it, and I told you some things about my people."

"I remember now!" I replied, rather sharply. "In fact, I wonder why I did not recognize you in the first place. But it was a long time ago, over thirty years. We were young then, and—now? You look young, but I know that I am nearly sixty. Yet we were interested in the same thing at that time, and I saw no real reason for not accepting you as, well, as

a brother; because, after all, there was something of kin between us. Strange that we meet after all those silent years; meet in Africa!"

"Hunting?"

"I suppose you might call it that."

"But you have not killed anything. I have been watching you for five days. Game all around you, and you do not kill."

"No. There has been enough killing. I carry a gun for protection in emergencies, but I do not kill, except when I have to."

"I remember. You used to think that animals had rights and souls. You even thought that they might live on after the first death."

"Yes," I said, laughing, "but I never have proved it, and I have not talked about that idea for a great many years. My close friends started to worry about me—thought I was insane. Are you hunting?"

"Yes; but I also hunt without a gun."

"You don't mean you use a spear?" I asked, curiously.

"At times; when I need food, but on this trip I am going to use something older than a spear. In fact, I am going to be, like you, simply an observer, of life, and death."

WE CAMPED together that night. He was alone, and I had only two porters. Before supper I suggested that we dress for the occasion.

"Two Oxford men," I remarked. "We should not omit the conventions of polite society. I came from Idaho, you from Africa. For the evening let us forget our origins and remember our cultural education."

Rather to my surprise he agreed. So, we dined according to the best traditions of Oxford. It was moonlight when we finished, and I asked him to share the camp with me that night. We even sat on camp chairs near the fire. He was silent. I tried to make conversation. At last he seemed to wake from his dreams.

"You thought animals lived after death?"

"Yes."

"Do men?"

"Perhaps."

"Should you like to be sure?"

"Delighted! I should be the first man to know it."

"Not the first. My ancestors have always known it. Often they sleep for years, perhaps for centuries. But, when they wish to, they awake and live again till their work is done. Then they sleep again."

"Tradition? Folk-lore?" I asked.

"Fact."

"Can you show me?"

"Yes. Years ago you gave me cups of tea, little cakes and some hours of your

time. You were kind to me. I said to myself that some day I would repay you. Will you leave your camp and porters here and come with me?"

"Yes."

"We will start at once."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. It is necessary. First, I will take off these clothes. For supper I was willing to wear them. Now, I am going back."

Half an hour later we left the camp, and started over the veldt. Fortunately, it was moonlight, almost as light as day.

For three days and nights we walked, with little talking. Every hour seemed to increase the moodiness of my companion.

On the evening of the third day we came to a hill. Below us was a little cup-shaped valley.

"This is the end," the Zulu said, and sat down on a stone.

I was glad to follow him. Tough as I was, the trip had taxed my endurance. For two hours we rested. Then the moon started to shine.

"Now, I will talk," said the dark man.

"I am listening," I replied, and took a deep sigh.

"The story starts when I was a boy of twelve," he said. "I was the son of the chief of a Zulu tribe. It was just a little tribe, not more than a hundred warriors, but we were rather rich. We kept our isolation, refused to become involved in the Zulu wars with the white people. Because of this reservation, we lived on. The world did not know there was such a tribe.

"One day a hunter came and found us. He said that we were friends. To show that he meant that, he said he would give us a feast. My father believed his words. All of our warriors believed him, but

there was one old man who doubted. He told me to go hunting and not to come back for three days. I did as he told me, and, when I returned, I found all of my people dead. Down in that valley that lies before us they were on the rocks, dead. All of them: the warriors, the women and the little ones. But the hunter was gone, and he had taken with him all of our wealth: the gold bracelets, the ornaments of the women, the things of gold that we had for many generations."

"Poison?" I asked.

"Yes. He fed them and killed them."

"But the old man who warned you? He must have known something."

"Perhaps, but we are fatalists. No doubt he thought that it had to happen, because it had to happen. I do not know. He was a very old and very wise man. I sat here on this very rock for two days, and then I left. After that I met another hunter. He liked me. We lived together. He took me to England. He educated me. When he died, he made me his heir. But I came back to Africa."

"And you made no effort to find the man who had killed your people?"

"Yes. I hunted him, but not with a gun. I simply kept him under observation."

"I guess it must have been the Oxford influence!"

"No. Not that. But I had an idea that when the time came my people would act."

"But you said that they were all dead?"

"Yes. They were dead. I have walked among them, year after year, and I could take you down there now and show you the bones. Some of the bones are still together; others have been torn apart by animals. But the bones are there. See that little fire over there? That is the campfire of the hunter. He has come

back, and perhaps my people knew it. I knew that he intended to."

"It is a small fire."

"That is because he is alone. He could not hire any native to come with him, but he wanted to come; so, he came alone, with a wagon and four oxen. He was after something."

"But you said that he took all the gold!"

"Yes, but that is spent. He sold many of the ornaments to museums. I have seen them. I even bought some of the duplicates. Now, he has learned that he left part of the riches behind him. The war-axes, and spears. He can sell them to the museums. Some are very old. So, he decided to come back and take the last of our treasures."

"In a way, he must be a brave man."

"Yes, but only through ignorance. He thinks that my people are dead, just so many bones. So, he camps among them, and tomorrow he will search among those bones for things that he can sell. At least, he thinks he can. Perhaps my people have other thoughts. That is why I brought you with me. Tonight I want to show you something. I want to pay you for being kind to me."

"Are you going to kill him?"

"No. I am going to sit here in the moonlight with you, and help you watch."

"It is full moon."

"Yes. We can see. It is not far to his camp; so, we can hear."

I LOOKED at my watch. It was only a little after nine. Tired as I was, I knew that I could not sleep. The Zulu sat motionless, his eyes shut. At ten I touched him.

"Do you know what is going to happen?" I asked.

"I know what should happen, but I am uncertain. You see, there are two sets of

emotions tearing at each other inside me. My Oxford education tells me that the thing is impossible and my inherited memories tell me that it has to happen. So, I am going to sit here. The old man who saved my life was a very wise man. He is down there, and, perhaps, he knows better than you or I."

Eleven o'clock came and then, finally, a quarter of twelve.

"The cattle are restless," said the Zulu, softly. "They feel something that the sleeping man cannot feel. I think that they will run away. It would be best. They have done nothing for which they should be punished."

During the next five minutes the four oxen broke. We could see them galloping across the rocks. The fire started to burn brighter, and near it we could see a man standing.

"He heard his cattle and awoke," commented my friend. "It is good that he is awake."

"There are white things moving down there!" I whispered sharply. "They all seem to be moving toward the fire."

"Yes. We see them. Now the hunter sees them. We had better flatten ourselves against the rock. He will start shooting very soon. I do not want you to be hurt."

Then those white things started to run toward the fire, and we heard the sharp explosion of a magazine rifle, followed by the staccato of two automatic revolvers. After that, the gun-fire ceased, and we heard the shrieks of a man, afraid and dying. Then came silence, and the fire was out.

"It is over!" cried the Zulu. "Now, you go to sleep, and in the morning we will see what happened to the hunter."

I tried to sleep, but I could not. Even with my eyes shut I could still see those white-lined things running toward the hunter and the fire.

Morning came at last. I turned to the Zulu. He sat there, eyes open, but, seemingly, in a dream. I shook him by the shoulder.

"The day has come!" I said.

"I know it," he replied. "Shall we go down into the valley?"

We walked down to the bottom of the cup, toward the camp of the hunter. While still a hundred yards away I saw a little hill of bones. When we came nearer, we saw that the camp, the wagon and the dead fire were covered with bones, and with the bones there were spears and battle-axes, sticking here and there among the long and rounded and whitened ivory.

The Zulu turned to me and said,

"You are a white man and the hunter was a white man. The traditions of your race should be remembered. Will you bury him? You will find him at the bottom of the bones. His skull is crushed with battle-axes; his body is pierced with a hundred lances. In his heart there is a dagger, and the handle is still held by the white hand of my father. Will you go and throw the bones to this side and that and bury your white man?"

"How do you know?" I asked, almost hysterically.

"I was there last night. I saw the hunter killed by my family, by my tribe. I sat by you while the killing was on, but my spirit was with my own people. It seems that I remember seeing my father bury his dagger."

"The hunter has dug his own grave, and your people have raised a monument above him!" I cried.

"Go back to the world and tell them what you saw."

"Never! I saw it happen, and you saw it happen, and we know, but the world would never believe."

"Oxford is, after all, very ignorant," replied the Zulu.