

JAN. 25c

Weird Tales



BLACK BAGHEELA

A thrill-tale of dark horror

By **BASSETT MORGAN**

ARLTON EADIE
SEABURY QUINN
CLARK ASHTON SMITH



RULERS OF THE FUTURE

a powerful weird-scientific novel

By **PAULERNST**



A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

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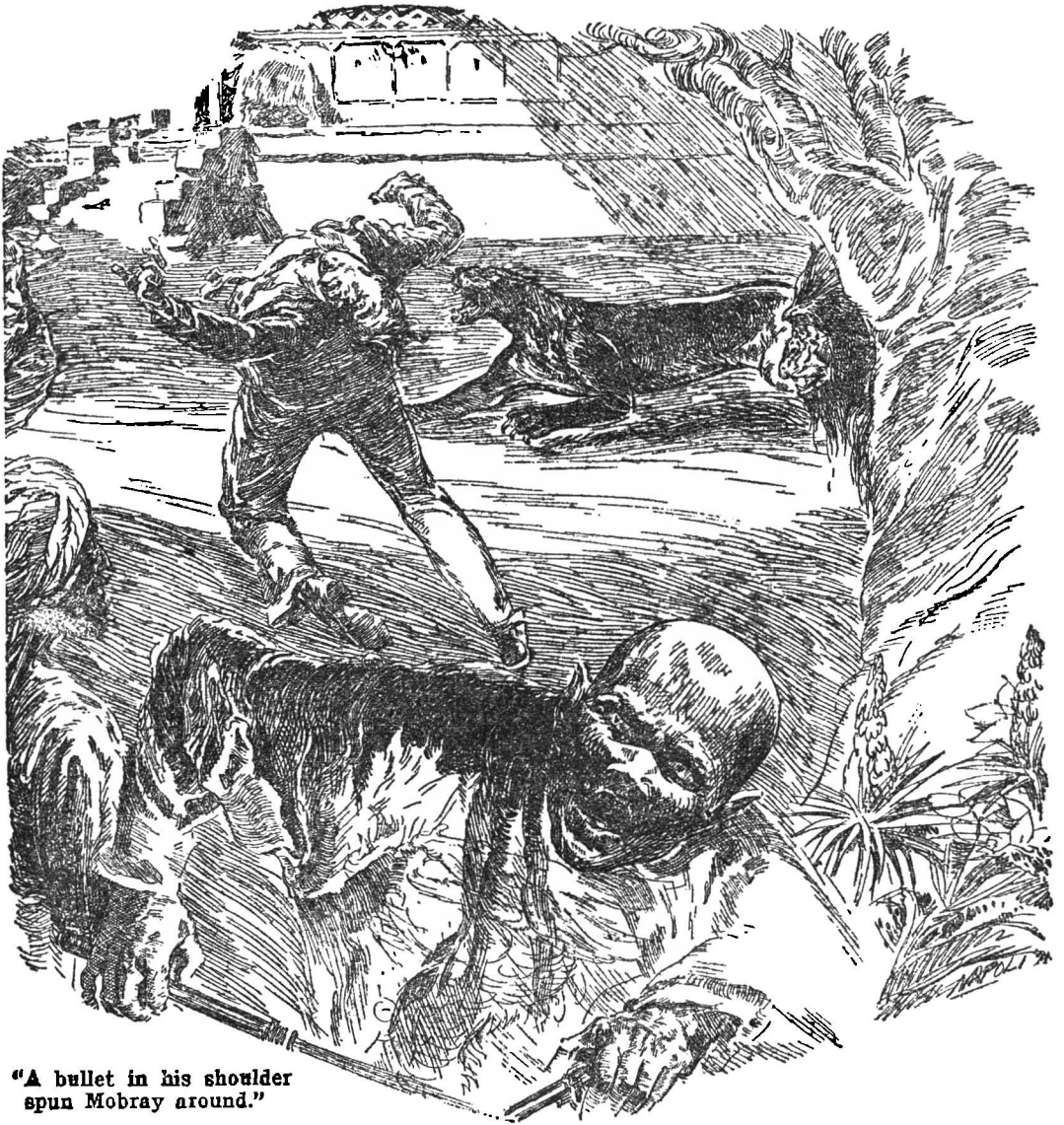
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"A bullet in his shoulder
spun Mobray around."

Black Bagheela

By BASSETT MORGAN

*A story of brain transplantation, huge apes that spoke with the voices of men,
and a swirling, dancing, black leopard-cat in the Maharajah's court*

IF THERE existed under the hard surface of Captain Daunt's not unhand-some visage an assailable weakness, or if he possessed an Achilles heel, young Mobray, late of the Royal Navy, had

failed to touch it. He tried every human means of persuasion.

"Give up the idea," said Captain Daunt.

"No. I'm finding my brother or his

remains. I hoped you would help me, but I've one more ace in the hole—Ti Fong."

"He's a very fine man to dodge," said Captain Daunt, "as your brother could tell you, maybe, if he could speak to you."

"I'm not afraid. His fast yacht has been seen in the vicinity of the Red God Island, and I've shown you the message picked up in a floating bottle and assured you I've checked the drift and the bottle could easily have come from that cursed island. I believe my brother is there. Daunt, don't you understand it's more to us than settling the estate, which can't be done until his death is proved or legally admitted? His wife and my mother are taking it hard. Nick's son, born since he disappeared."

"I know all that and I'm sorry, but there is nothing I can do about it," said Captain Daunt.

"You call at the Island of the Red God. You could get permission from Jornado to let me land and search." Captain Daunt was shaking his head when Mobray burst out, "Then I'm off to Sumatra to see Ti Fong."

"Make your will," said Captain Daunt. "Your brother tangled with that devil."

"Afraid of the Chink, Captain?"

"Enough to let you get away with that remark because I feel sorry for your mother, and your wife or sweetheart. Go along. I've warned you, and I'm busy taking two black panthers to His Highness the Maharajah of Awroot, up-country. Nice cats." He opened a door of an adjoining cabin, and Mobray saw two thicker shadows in the room corner, with blinking emeralds for eyes. One yawned, his pink throat and red muzzle set with fanged ivory.

"Beauties!" Mobray backed toward the door, however. "That mouth looked like an orchid of rare color, Captain."

"Genus 'Man-trap'," said Captain Daunt. "They roam this island you're interested in, though these were hand-raised from cubs. Listen, my lad, would a trip with me delivering these keep you from tangling with worse, which is one description of Ti Fong? Not that it matters to me what happens to you, only I hate letting him add you to his collection of odd achievements. We are foes, as you might put it politely."

"I'd like the trip with the cats, Captain Daunt." And the skipper was aware Mobray thought it might provide a chance to obtain further information in case acquaintance proved amicable.

The big chromium-plated car of the Maharajah waiting for him on the wharf with a uniformed chauffeur under the wheel was searing the eyes of all beholders in the hot Singapore sunlight. Captain Daunt exchanged his cap for a panama, whistled to the leopards, who stretched, yawned again and undulatingly slid within reach of leather collars he snapped around their necks, holding the chains in his hand.

Mobray stepped lively going to the deck. Daunt sauntered along, talking to the cats, which showed uneasiness at the crowded wharf and glittering automobile. It took soothing to keep them beside him while the car hummed through traffic and shot into the empty road down the peninsula. Mobray was ahead with the chauffeur.

THE car rolled into a walled court, and was received with some pomp. A short time later Mobray and Captain Daunt were entertained by the resplendent potentate in his best British manner, and the leopards lapped milk from a golden basin and stretched supine. Before he left, Daunt put them through a few tricks, most pleasing of which was a feline waltz

on their hind paws and leaping high to capture a flower Daunt tossed in the air. The prince was delighted and presented Captain Daunt with a black pearl in addition to the high price paid for the leopards, and after due courtesies the visitors were escorted to the car and whirled away.

"So that's part of the treasures of the Red God Island," said Mobray, "trained leopards. Why can't you trust me enough?"

"My lad, I rather like you. It isn't that. I've orders——" He interrupted himself to speak to the driver. "Put me down at Ira Singh's, the gold-beater. . . . If you want to see pretty jewelry, Mobray, come along. I'll have this pearl set for use."

In the bazar, Mobray watched Captain Daunt select a pendant setting on a chain of fine gold for his pearl, an ornament for a woman, which was boxed for him. The native said something Mobray did not understand.

"Wait outside and we'll go somewhere for dinner," said Daunt. "I'll pay for this trinket. He says I am foolish to be walking with you, Mobray, which means whoever got your brother is watching you. Ira Singh is a friend of mine."

Mobray walked down the block gazing at bazars lighted in the early darkness, looking like pirate caves of colorful loot. He walked back, up and down, and finally entered Ira Singh's bazar. Daunt-sahib was gone, said an obsequious clerk, but hard on his words came a native police officer barging into the place. The clerk yelped and took to his legs, a crowd after him. The singular occurrence alarmed Mobray. He hailed a ricksha and was driven to the wharf and Daunt's vessel. The gang-plank was drawn in, but Mobray leaped the intervening lane of water and climbed over the rail. He ran down to Daunt's cabin, which was dark. Snap-

ping a cigarette lighter, he entered. Behind him the door was banked shut and a lock grated. He was a prisoner. Beside the lock, an iron bar clanged, though he could have sworn there was none on the door when he entered that noonday.

The throb of engines jarred the vessel. There were shouts and running feet overhead, and the navy man knew they were being towed stern-first into the stream, bound God alone knew where. He took it philosophically. He wanted a trip to Daunt's source of valuable cargo, and the Asiatic trickery of unknowns had granted his wish by an odd twist of adventure. Captain Daunt would be surprized to see him, probably, if he didn't drop him at the nearest opportunity.

But Mobray was not destined to see Captain Daunt, for that cruise. He sighted landmarks through his porthole, the spire of St. Andrew's Cathedral, Tanjong Ru and Tanjong Kantong, the Straits Islands dark against a moonlighted sea, praos flitting like black moths through webbed waves and silver; and he slept soundly.

NEXT morning his door was unlocked and opened by a tall, urbane Chinese speaking excellent English, who listened to Mobray's protest.

"You came on board uninvited, Mr. Mobray. Captain Daunt is not on the vessel. He is the guest of the Lord Ti Fong."

Mobray controlled a grin of satisfaction at the joke on Daunt, who warned him about the mysterious Ti Fong.

"No need of keeping me a prisoner," he said. "I'm a navy man, quite willing for a voyage and rather anxious to meet this Ti Fong. I obtained leave of absence to search for my brother out here." The Chinese nodded.

"And a bottle was found containing a

message from him from the Island of the Red God, where we hope to land, Lieutenant Mobray."

"You know the whole story, evidently, and you're going there! Good. I'm in luck. Anything I can do?"

"In the absence of Captain Daunt, perhaps you would be willing to fill his position on the vessel."

"Look here, you've taken this craft over. Piracy. You can't expect me to head your villainy, you know. I've been abducted."

"Could you prove that statement in a court of inquiry?" asked the bland Asiatic, and Mobray considered before answering. Into a space of silence came the suave voice of the Chinese. "You are searching for Sir Nicolas Mobray who came out here to obtain a pair of Celestial Singers to adorn his fine English estate. The fame of those birds has stirred ornithologists to their lees. A pair of them among the white and purple peacocks of Athelstane would make Sir Nicolas the proudest peer in Britain."

"You know my brother is alive," shot from Mobray.

"The splendor of the Celestial Singers," went on the Chinese, "took centuries to produce, the eighteen-foot tail of the cock of Ku, the coloring of the peacock, the song of the nightingale . . . a man would commit crimes to possess them."

Mobray's throat tightened, his scalp began to prickle. Premonition crawled over his courage. Nick was in bad with these Chinks, perhaps their prisoner. Nick had the lordly scorn of white men for Asiatics and was unfamiliar with the sinister vengeance of the East.

"Who are you?" broke from him.

"Loo Yee, doctor, Lieutenant Mobray. I assure you of your brother's existence on the Island of the Red God, where no vessel may drop anchor except this schooner.

Rocks protect the island and the sea leaps like wolves on three sides, unfathomably deep. Guns guard the lagoon anchorage. But this vessel with a white man on the bridge may run in, so we are glad to have you take command and use your opportunity to search the island for your brother. And breakfast is waiting us."

Mentally limp, Mobray followed to a good meal, hearing the interesting conversation of Doctor Loo Yee on everything except the things vital to himself, while he cogitated his predicament. Trapped. Nick alive on the island where only this boat could anchor. Guilty of piracy if he accepted Loo Yee's terms. . . . Well, to hell with quibbling. He'd sail in and find Nick.

"I'm with you," he announced, interrupting politics from Loo Yee, "though Daunt will accuse me of piracy and his word is as good as mine. I can't expect my abductor to speak in my defense either, I suppose."

"You are erecting future bridges to cross. Wait for those until you have seen the Celestial Singers, and the black bageelas dancing in the jungle."

From that hour the voyage was a pleasant adventure outwardly, though Mobray knew trouble was coming. The cold black eyes of Loo Yee held the unblinking malignancy of a snake's. His brilliant conversation covered unplumbed hellery afoot. There were dark stains on deck and in the crew's quarters, never obliterated, which looked like blood and savored of wholesale slaughter of Daunt's crew when the vessel was seized.

Mobray, wearing one of Daunt's drill suits and a gold-banded cap, was a mere nautical figurehead when the vessel sighted the island. Far out in the indigo blue sea stretched a white spit on which squatted an amazing image carved of red rock from which the island was named.

Palms shimmered behind a coral beach of the lagoon. Mountains rose farther back, dark with jungle growth. The island was shaped like a severed black hand with a thumb and forefinger forming the anchorage, and on that thumb the Red God squatted.

THE throb of drums came over the sea at a great distance and grew louder, more menacing, as they approached. Doom . . . doom . . . doom . . . went a giant drum through affrighted agitation of smaller tom-toms. Behind the Red God the sun dropped in a blaze on the sea, and fires on shore winked through the palms. On the vessel, evil-looking Dyaks put on fancy sashes and wore waved knives, the formidable kriss of the race that fathered piracy. It meant slaughter, and Mobray was the traitor leading death to the island. Loathing his role, he was helpless to escape it.

"You will go ashore alone, unhampered," said Loo Yee. "They expect Captain Daunt. May your search prove profitable! Being unexpectedly detained, Captain Daunt put you in charge of his vessel."

A boat was lowered. From shore a booming voice hailed the ship. A small fire was lighted on the coral beach and Mobray's hair rose as he saw the slouching form of a great ape among natives peering over the water as he rowed the boat nearer.

"All dressed up, Daunt," came as if words zoomed from the pipes of an organ.

Mobray held the dripping oars. An ape spoke! He couldn't believe his eyes and ears. Frankly frightened, he backed the boat. A gun cracked from the ship. A bullet whined and kicked up coral dust. Natives, at a snarl from the ape, dashed into the lagoon water and seized him.

Shots came thickly from Loo Yee's men as Mobray was dragged ashore and up the coral to sheltering shrubbery.

"I'm not Daunt, of course," he panted. "Daunt disappeared. A Chinese named Loo Yee has his vessel . . . abducted me . . . forced me to land. My name is Mobray."

The paws of the ape held him, claws dug into the flesh of his shoulders, slid nearer his windpipe.

"Mobray?" boomed that incredible voice. "How do I know you aren't lying? What's your word worth?" The claws were around his throat. His hands tugged at the hairy wrists of the ape uselessly. His breath was going.

"My brother Nicolas . . . is here," he gasped. "Better fight Loo Yee . . . and his gang . . . than me. . . . Take me to . . . Jornado . . . tell him——"

Then he was flung to the natives, and the great ape was giving orders like an army captain. A howl like a beast's broke from his throat, quivered in the night above the unceasing noise of drums, echoed on distant rocks. Mobray was borne swiftly through darkness and rustling growth to lights, the sound of babbling water, the dark wall of a house, lamps, revealing a room with heavy Dutch furniture. Natives wearing only loin-rags held him, bound him to a massive chair with a high narrow back. The lashings around arms and trunk and legs held him motionless, his feet were between the lower rungs, high above the floor, and he was helpless to move anything but his head.

Turning that, he saw a divan along one wall, heaped with cushions, and on it a woman, queerly handsome, hybrid, with long-lidded eyes of a Manchu, skin of a white woman. On a taboret near by burned a flame on a small silver lamp. The peculiar odor of poppy gum transcended

flower scent coming through open doors and windows.

But Mobray's head turned again as a girl came down wide stairs, wrapped in a flowered silk sarong to her arm-pits, young, lovely, her dark eyes startled as she saw him. An instant later a cannon boomed. The lamp flame swayed. A sharp cry broke from the girl. She ran to the woman on the couch, spoke, and Mobray decided her speech was Chinese. Getting no reply she approached Mobray, gliding on bare feet, tinkling as she came shaking a circlet of golden bells on her ankles.

"English?" she asked, and as he nodded she went on. "Who are you? Where is Captain Daunt? Why are the cannons shooting?"

All hell was breaking loose in the jungle after each blast of the big gun, the trumpeting howl of great apes from near and far gathering closer, streaking past toward the lagoon shores. The girl's eyes were bright with alarm as she ran to the door and stood peering into further darkness, calling once or twice in words Mobray did not understand. Even in that tumult and the chaos of his thoughts, Mobray had eyes for her young loveliness; but he felt his hair standing on its roots when out of the night a sinuous embodiment of gloom flowed to a place beside her bright-flowered sarong and lifted its rounded head under her spread fingers. Mobray stared at those fingers with their almond-shaped nails like pink pearls rubbing the blackness of a leopard's head, as unawarely as if it had been a house dog.

A second black beast appeared. Twin emeralds glowed in pairs beyond the door, moving up and down, back and forth. Mobray counted a dozen and forgot to count because one was gliding as the clouds travel, toward the couch where the older woman lay. It took time to

bare its teeth and hiss at him, and the girl turned, leaped, caught the beast by the neck scruff and spoke sharply. To Mobray's terrific relief the leopard sat on its tail beside the couch and allowed the woman to fondle its head and seemed listening to an explanation from her regarding the man bound to the chair.

"FOR God's sake, let me loose," begged Mobray, "or call off those cats."

"You do not answer," complained the girl querulously.

"I was too scared to speak. My name is Mobray, my brother Sir Nicolas——" But she halted his words by the change of her face.

"You—you are Sir Nick's brother, come here to find him? Oh, he hoped you would come!"

"Then he is alive."

"Captain Daunt, where is he? Why don't you speak? Your tongue is not tied."

"I was taken prisoner on Daunt's vessel by Chinese. I know nothing of him except that he is the guest of Ti Fong, they said."

"Ti Fong!" cried the woman on the couch, instantly wrenched from dreaminess that not even the apes' howling had disturbed. The living gloom that slipped inside the door on feet of silence was electrified by the women's fear.

"Call off your cats," begged Mobray. "If they kill me you won't know about the danger coming with Ti Fong."

The girl whirled, spoke, beat their black muzzles with her small folded fists, drove them outside. Mobray faced the older woman whose one hand held the neck of the leopard at her side.

"Ti Fong can not come here," she said, challenging him to contradict her. "Only Daunt's vessel may enter the lagoon."

"That may be true. But they evidently

abducted Captain Daunt. Ti Fong's men are on his vessel in the lagoon now, unless they have landed. And it sounds to me as if your cannons were so busy sinking the boat they are giving Ti Fong plenty of chance to make a landing. I'm a navy man and my ideas run to nautical tactics and sea warfare. It's only a guess . . . but where is Jornado who owns and runs this island? He ought to be told. I'm no friend to Ti Fong, I assure you. I'd like to be in the fight to keep him from landing."

A quick exchange of words between the two brought action. The girl snatched a knife from somewhere and cut his bonds.

"Get me a gun and do something about the leopards."

"I go with you, *Tuan*."

"I'm not a *tuan*. Nick has the title. I'm Dick Mobray. May I ask your name? It'll be handier to know it."

"Mayala Jornado, and this is my mother."

"Jornado's daughter," Mobray said and turned to the mother. "You will not regret cutting my lashings. I'm on Jornado's side."

A moment later he realized the foolishness of his speech. The leopards trailed him and the girl as she seized his hand and ran down a jungle trail too dark for him to find a way, toward the lagoon. The worst din was over, but yowls from the trees made him aware of the great apes in those upper terraces. On shore a big fire lighted a shambles, what remained of Dyaks of the crew fallen into the apes' hands. Daunt's men were avenged, and his vessel lay shorn of her upper works after the guns finished with her. Mobray was too late to fight. The girl led him toward two huge orang-outangs at the edge of the firelight, who stared as he approached. Mobray hated

the quiver of his flesh that seemed cowardice, but the dismembered flesh of Dyaks revolted him and showed the way apes disposed of humans.

Then a cry froze his blood.

"Dick." One ape came toward him, still staring, and in those eyes he saw recognition and surprize, human attributes. "Dick . . . oh God, you don't know me . . . no wonder . . . Dicky, it's me . . . what they made of me . . . your brother Nick. . . . That devil Ti Fong . . . I tried to buy his cursed birds . . . then lost my head and tried to take them. . . . Wait till you've seen them, Dick. But I'm talking too fast . . . my brain isn't what it used to be. . . . Dick . . . you can't believe . . . no wonder." And the ape slouched away, shamed, slumping toward a palm bole, where it leaned, the great shoulders heaving in anguish, its forehead against one arm along the tree.

Mobray stood rooted to the spot with terror that he had lost his own reason, that his mind facing incredible horror had snapped. It was the girl who went and laid a hand on the arm of this monstrosity and spoke softly, that steadied his nerve.

"There seems no doubt you are Lieutenant Richard Mobray," boomed from the other ape. "Sir Nicolas recognizes you . . . and *my name once was Jornado*. Like your brother, I offended Ti Fong, who makes apes of us both. You'll believe what seems impossible, presently, Mobray, just as I believed that"—he pointed to a headless torso of a Dyak on the coral sand—"when he said Ti Fong took Daunt's vessel, made Daunt his prisoner, and sent the vessel here. Unfortunately the Dyak didn't know the rest of the scheme, but we haven't seen the end of it yet. They didn't land intact, because you gave warning. For that I am grateful. We'll go to the house now. You've had a shock that needs digesting to believe."

"You . . . you killed them all? Doctor Loo Yee also?" asked Mobray. He was startled at the sudden rage of the man-ape.

"Loo Yee, no! The surgeon, cleverest of them all. Nick, you hear that? Loo Yee was on board. He's escaped us." And the man-ape called Jornado howled to the apes in the trees in their lingo. Mobray saw the leopards sniff at human flesh and turn away daintily, but the smell of blood affected them. Jornado caught the neck of one and flung the animal savagely toward the jungle. The others disappeared after it.

Again the girl grasped his hand and they returned to the house where natives brought brandy and a glass for Mobray and he drank a tumblerful before his flesh ceased quivering.

"Come out here where it's dark, Dick," called the voice of his brother, the same inflections, the tones magnified, and Mobray sat on the porch hearing the dreadful tale of master surgery that dealt worse than death and after-hells to Sir Nicolas Mobray.

"I've got one hope, Dick, that I can go through it again and have this brain, this ego restored to the body of a human. You could do that for me. You could round up those devils and force them to operate again. Otherwise death is the only way out."

In the darkness Mobray clutched hope. He lost his horror of this uncouth shape that spoke his brother's thoughts and asked so tenderly about Nick's wife and little son. Loo Yee was on the island and would be captured, he said with child-like optimism. The jungle was as silent as it had been noisy.

"You go to bed, Dick, in the big front room that was mine. I like sleeping in a tree better. Tomorrow you'll see the birds."

A servant showed Mobray to a room with an old four-poster bed and heavy furnishings shipped to the island a century before, when the Dutch were stripping its lagoon of pearls, its jungle of Birds of Paradise, before they abandoned it and—for services rendered a high official—it came into the possession of Jornado. Mobray heard from his brother how Jornado had stolen the pair of Celestial Singers from Ti Fong and was captured, and his brain transplanted into the skull of a huge orang-outang before he was landed on the island.

AT DAWN Mobray was awakened by bird songs of such singular ecstasy that he went to the window. Fine wire screened an enormous expanse of gardens with orange trees in flower and golden fruit, drapes of wine-red bougainvillea, flame trees, hibiscus, and the seductive perfume of ylang-ylang. On tall perches birds of shimmering plumage poured forth their love-songs, their long tails swaying with iridescent colors to the carpet of flame-tree petals beneath. Jornado's daughter was holding cupped hands filled with rice, and she saw him and beckoned. By her smile the night horror might have been a bad dream, pleasantly ended by morning.

Dressed, he came down to watch her feed the Celestial Singers. Sun dappled the gardens, made living jewels of the birds and an Eden of the old stone house despite its incongruous solidity in a tropic setting that called for airy bamboo building. The stoop flanked a pool fed from a mountain stream. Ripe oranges fell from the trees and plopped into the water, bounded down the steps, those soft sounds like the ghost echoes of drums that had boomed in the night recalling realities in a dream nuance that began when Jornado's daughter finished feeding the

birds and sat beside him on the old stone steps that were tilted by crowding jungle roots.

He had fallen under the spell of youth, a girl's beauty and soft voice, the passionate wooing of tropic beauty in lush growth, and forgot she was a mystery his mind refused to accept, Jornado's daughter, until she spoke of those things.

"All night I worried about Captain Daunt. He is our friend. Tell me what happened to him."

Mobray mentioned the trip with the black leopards to the Maharajah's palace, the visit to the jewel-shop.

"Probably he had that big pearl made into an ornament for you," he said. "But I never dreamed of a girl on the Island of the Red God . . . never of a girl like you, Mayala."

"I was born here just a few days before Jornado was brought here—as you see him. He stole Ti Fong's daughter who is my mother, and Ti Fong's Celestial Singers. And Ti Fong never forgets. He is a terrible man. My mother feared him, and her mother feared him and killed herself to escape from him though she was his wife."

"Ti Fong's daughter—your mother," he murmured.

"And she is clever like him, but not cruel. Come and see her with the leopards . . . the bagheelas. . . ."

She led him through green tunnels of ferns and flowering vines where the air was perfumed and moist as warm wet gauze. Mobray thought they came miles to the clearing, a natural glen of grass above which vines grew from tree to tree in a green trellis heavy with flowers hanging like colored flames. At the edge of the clearing they halted. Leopards lay, or stalked back and forth, or sat around Ti Fong's daughter who pulled their ears, rubbed their pelts, talked to them in a

crooning purr, resting. And when she rose and lifted her hand a tom-tom began throbbing, a little flute played a tune, the players hidden beyond the vines, and Ti Fong's daughter coaxed the leopards to leap over her head; she coaxed them to form figures like circus tumblers with a row of cats resting their paws against one another and others on their backs until the pyramid loomed high and an agile young cat bounded to the top and stood erect. At her word the towering wall of velvet crumpled and became cats again, dancing on their hind paws, leaping to swipe at hanging orchids or crunch them in their scarlet muzzles.

Mobray watched entranced, forgetting everything but the sight. Then as Ti Fong's daughter made a circle of the cats, the girl beside Mobray clutched his fingers and touched her own lips in a warning gesture, though he had been motionless, hardly breathing.

In the circle Ti Fong's daughter knelt under flickering shadows threaded with sun-gold. The drums beat faster, the flute was silent. Watching intently, Mobray lifted a hand to rub his eyes. Where the woman had crouched a black leopard sat and the woman was nowhere. Legerdemain! But clever as magic. The cat danced as no leopard ever danced, gorgeously swaying, twirling on her hind paws, spinning until there was a dark nimbus swelling as a humming top seems to spread, then diminishing as Mobray watched until he saw it was not a leopard, but the woman whirling, and the black fur blanching to the color of her flesh and dark sarong. He had time to notice the circle of leopards, ears laid back, fangs bared, scarlet muzzles twitching, snapping at empty air, as a dog will snap if his master blows in his face; as if they sensed the dreaded powers of darkness evoked by her who ruled them. And when the

weird spell broke, they slunk, mewing, nearer her and fawned, their tails dragging the grass.

Mayala's hand was drawing him back over the path.

"If I could only do as she does," the girl sighed. "I dance with them, but I can not become one of them."

Mobray opened his lips to say it was a trick, an optical illusion, but changed his impulse because of a howl that rang out suddenly, the cry of a great ape booming, vibrating on the quiet heat, silencing the myriad sounds of rustlings and insects in the jungle, and the twittering of birds. The song of Celestial Singers was broken off. Coming near the wire enclosure he saw the birds' heads under their wings as they gripped the high perches.

"Something has happened," cried the girl, running.

MOBRAY ran after her to a break in the trees where they could see the long white thumb of coral and the Red God like a grotesque setting of a thumb-ring.

Streaking the blue sea, leaping like a stone ricocheting over the waves from the speed at which it flew, was a power-launch, and lashed to the stern was a barred cage from which a voice howled.

Mobray knew that voice. He froze in his tracks at its message, booming over the water, growing fainter, dying away.

"Jornado, they trapped me. It's Nick Mobray. Ti Fong's launch came in during the fight and lay hidden. Look . . . Ti Fong's boat . . . out there."

Forgetting the girl, Mobray raced toward the spit, staring where that bounding power-launch flew to a rendezvous with a vessel barely discernible.

The island was all noise, the bedlam of the night tore loose again. But Mobray was staring, focussing his gaze at sea, and he saw the vessel, low, rakish,

streaked black and white like an orca, turning abeam to glide along as the launch slowed down.

A cannon shot crashed. A puff of smoke floated and broke and vanished. There was a splash where the ball fell short of Ti Fong's vessel, and before another shot was fired, the cage was swung on her, the launch was towing behind and she streaked for the far horizon.

Mobray was scrambling up the feet of the Red God, climbing to its knees and shoulders by rough apertures of its crude carvings. He stood beside the great ear, shorter than its hanging lobe, staring at the sea, the tropic sun blazing on his bare head, his senses swimming dazedly. And he saw the man-ape called Jornado swinging toward the god and swarming up beside him.

"You saw?" growled the mighty voice. "You heard. They outwitted us, but how could I guess Ti Fong sent in Daunt's steamer with his own men to have us busy fighting them away while he sent in the launch to lie hidden? God knows what devils it has landed! We'll have to scour the jungle to find them. They can't escape, but the pity is that Nick, your brother, is in Ti Fong's hands again. It means a more hellish vengeance. Your brother tried to take Ti Fong's pair of Celestial Singers as I took the parent pair. The birds were killed. Making Sir Nick into a companion for me is not enough for Ti Fong. You heard what he cried out at first?"

Mobray couldn't speak. The man-ape, Jornado, swung beside him; the mighty voice had the organ sorrow of a requiem, the eyes held grief, but the sea for Mobray was heaving up and down, the long white spit was waved like a kriss to his eyes.

"'Jornado,' he called, 'shoot and end me . . . don't let Ti Fong put me in a cir-

cus . . . he says——' Then they must have hit him, though he yelled again, as you heard," growled Jornado.

"Nick," gasped Mobray, "a circus!" A moment later he slumped and was sliding down the shoulder of the Red God. A huge hairy arm caught him from that fall, and Mobray was carried through the jungle to the house over the shoulder of Jornado the ape.

HE WAKENED on the stoop, lying on a couch in the ineffable peace of that perfumed shade. Mayala was lifting his head, holding a lime drink to his lips. His hands grasped her, felt the warm strength of her wrists, clung because they were blessed flesh and blood and youth and things he could comprehend.

"The sun was too much for you," she murmured.

"Not the sun . . . hells, devils, mysteries . . . and Nick!" His voice cracked on his brother's name. He sat up, still grasping the girl's arms. "Tell me I've dreamed. Assure me none of it happened. I've been whanged on the head and lost my mind."

"No, no, you're quite well. The sun on the Red God is always fierce. The red rock draws heat."

She did not understand that he craved a denial of what happened. And he thought the lime drink was drugged, for the spasm of horror passed and he lay in a languid waking coma hearing the oranges plop and splash as they fell into the pool, hearing distant sounds that did not mean anything to him or matter until the sun was low and there was no golden spidery gleam of it on the pool.

Mayala brought him food, turtle broth, cold roasted chicken, bread and fruit, and he ate hungrily. She played on a silk-stringed, moon-shaped guitar and sang little Chinese love-songs for him, and the

stars came out, the moon rose presently and the house was very still. Then she left him, and he went upstairs to bed and wakened to the music of the Celestial Singers and watched her feed them again. But there was a new distraction below.

A group of island natives came through the jungle and interrupted the bird-feeding. They carried a man in a hammock of twisted vines and came up the steps of the stoop. Looking down, Mobray saw it was a white man, alive but utterly spent, dark hair streaked over his forehead and cheeks. But Mobray knew him. He ran down the stairs, startled out of lethargy and bad dreams.

The bearers halted at the door, and Mobray laid a hand on the man's wrist. The weary head turned and the eyes opened.

"Mobray," whispered a croaking voice.

"Daunt!" came Mobray's cry, and the bearer went inside to where Jornado sat in a great chair in the cool, dark living-room beside the silk cushions of the couch where Ti Fong's daughter sat, her small, ivory-tinted hand caressed by the paws of the ape.

"It's Captain Daunt!" Mobray cried as the woman rose.

"And about done for," croaked Daunt. "The devil made me swim ashore after they got what they came for. He's put it over again, Jornado. My fault! Give me some brandy and I'll talk."

On the couch, with natives massaging his body with scented oils, Captain Daunt's hoarse voice gathered strength to tell his story, from the time Ira Singh warned him in the jewel shop he was foolish to be in company with Lieutenant Mobray.

"Somebody grabbed Ira Singh and slugged me. Ti Fong's men evidently followed us after we got out of the Maharajah's car. They move like eels any-

way. They got in the bazar, and next time I got breath I was being hustled with a bag over my head to Ti Fong's yacht. I expected the worst, but he wanted to use me. I'm more valuable to him at large, evidently. He sent in my vessel, knowing you'd use the cannons when you found out the trick, and he gave me my choice of piloting his launch in while the noise was loudest and hiding it, or—well, never mind his alternative. I took the safe way for myself. Then I had to be a party to the abduction of—your brother, Mobray. I wish to God it wasn't true. I wanted to live as I am. Somebody has to fetch supplies here and take out cargo. I guess you know by this time what's been going on. Jornado is my friend and partner. I failed to save him from Ti Fong's vengeance, but I'm the only link between him and his lady and Mayala, and necessities. . . . If it was just Jornado, he'd get along on the island. But the women——”

Mobray nodded. He blamed Daunt for his forced treachery, but recognized the reason. After all, Nick had blundered into the vengeance of a master-devil when he tried to take Ti Fong's remaining Celestial Singers.

“Why did Ti Fong want Sir Nick?” growled Jornado's voice.

“He's insane, of course,” said Daunt, “the most terrible madman ever spawned by hell. It suits his Asiatic whim to sell his captive to some zoo or circus as an orang-outang able to speak. A trained ape. We've got to stop it. The minute my vessel can navigate I'm after him. And I know every lane of the animal cargo game. I know all the dealers. I'll head him off. Just let me get over that swim and the coral scratches, and get my boat in shape. And Jornado, you might start men working on her. You might look over her and tell me how badly she's damaged.”

WHILE Captain Daunt slept in Mobray's bed, the others were on the vessel with torchlights and the work of repair was already begun. Mobray's career, Jornado's seamanship, swarms of natives whose forebears had sailed those seas in beautifully built dugouts before the Romans settled Londinium, were clearing the wreckage and repairing the deck-house and steering-gear, the severed cargo slings and emergency sailing-gear. And on the rail, against the buxom figurehead of the bows sat Mayala, plucking the silk strings of her moon-guitar and singing love-songs.

Captain Daunt slept the sun around, waking only to eat and drink and sleep again. The swim from Ti Fong's vessel had been a test for his iron endurance, but the native massage, the food and rest restored him amazingly and he was working with the others on the third day after he landed. In a week the vessel was fit for a cruise. And during that week Mobray had explored much of the island with Mayala. He had watched daily the circle of leopards put through their tricks. He had seen again and again that transformation of Ti Fong's daughter into the guise of a leopard and restored again to her own form. Almost he believed what Mayala said:

“It is true. Many native people have that gift. I wish I could be a black bagheela.” Mobray's arm caught her closer.

“You stay as you are. Some day you're coming away from this island, to see other places . . . some day, when Nick——” He could not speak of his brother sanely even yet.

“But if I could become a black bagheela, I would go with you. I would break into Ti Fong's kampong and kill him.”

“I wouldn't let you take the risk,” said Mobray. But with the girl soft and warm

in his arms he was staring into the clearing where Ti Fong's daughter crouched, the outlines of her form blurred darkly, trembling as she shook off human shape and became a leopard dancing, leaping lithely to bring down hanging orchids and bits of vine.

There were no tom-toms and flutes that day to drive paroquets and lorries from the surrounding trees. Birds darted in drifts of brilliant color from branch to branch. A big green parrot circled a vine and hung upside-down above the dancing bagheela. A swipe of her paw struck it lifeless, and tossing it like a ball she played as a cat with a mouse, gay feathers strewing the grass.

Mayala caught her breath and drew Mobray silently away.

"Never have I seen her kill anything before. She is never cruel. It shows she is wholly bagheela, not even her kindness left of my mother. How awful if she should ever be hungry when she turns to bagheela!"

Mobray tried to comfort Mayala as they sat on the stone steps of the pool watching oranges bobbing. The girl seemed depressed by the metamorphosis of her mother into a merciless cat killing for amusement, but Mobray marveled at the ancient witchcraft of the dark ages and reeking jungles and forests.

Captain Daunt barged on their brooding and dispelled it by handing the girl a little box. In it was the black pearl on its chain, which he dropped over her head, and said:

"If I hadn't stopped to have the Maharajah's pearl fixed so you could wear it, we wouldn't be in this mess, Mayala."

"Then what can I do to make up to you, Captain?" she asked.

"A pretty big favor. Let me sell a pair of Celestial Singers to the Maharajah.

It's going to take plenty to pay the price Ti Fong will ask for his prisoner."

"Captain Daunt, don't hesitate about the price," cried Mobray. "I haven't it, but his estate, everything he has."

"That would take time to negotiate. Besides, it's my carelessness that let Ti Fong's men on the island."

"Take the birds," cried Mayala. "Only they need such care on a voyage. I must go with them."

"I thought of that. Not you, Mayala. Perhaps your mother. Jornado wouldn't let you go. I've talked to him and we agreed about it." And from the thick foliage of an ancient tree boomed the voice of Jornado:

"Sir Nicolas was our guest and we let that devil Ti Fong get hold of him. We must make amends. So Bibi-ti will go with the birds. She knows the cruelty of Ti Fong as none of us do. She is of his house and knows the anguish of her own mother who was Ti Fong's wife before she killed herself to escape him. She has seen the world beyond these shores, where she has lived with grief for fifteen years and never once complained or wished aloud that she could return to the land of the living. Perhaps she will find amusement in seeing other places again, and other . . . people." And the mighty voice of Jornado ended in a sigh of sorrow, a sigh of renunciation.

Mobray felt the stark tragedy of Jornado as never before, doomed to live in his half-world, neither man nor beast, retaining the intelligence and fine attributes of a man imprisoned in beast form, chained to the daily torture of hideous grotesquery before the woman he loved, separated from her by worse than death. He was glad to be aboard the vessel in the rush of last-minute preparations when the big cage containing a pair of Celestial Singers was carried beside the black-

swathed figure of Bibi-ti. As the vessel forged away they saw Jornado standing on the Red God's shoulder with Mayala beside him waving.

BIBI-TI devoted herself to the birds until the vessel docked at Singapore for Captain Daunt to go ashore. It was anchored far from shore and a sharp watch set with Mobray in command. Ti Fong's spies would inform him of its arrival, and they feared the terrible power of his evil tentacles reaching into every port.

There on deck, watching the distant city like a marble hand on the arm of the long Johore peninsula, Bibi-ti told Mobray of Jornado's tragedy. The blue-eyed, red-headed sea captain had seen her in her father's house feeding the Celestial Singers. He had taken them and her, as mad a love idyl as the tropics ever fostered, and for weeks they were happy until the day Jornado disappeared. Captain Daunt took her to the island, where instead of her lover, the soul and brain of him was brought in the ape's body, just before Mayala was born.

"I had my daughter or I should have gone mad or killed myself. And I delved into the ancient mysteries that Ti Fong taught me in childhood and practised them among the bagheelas."

Daunt's respect for her was profound, when Captain Daunt was rowed out to the vessel bursting with news.

"Ti Fong sold Nick to the Maharajah. I called on the nabob and he's complaining of trickery. He paid enormously and his purchase refuses to 'talk' and seems dying, refuses food. The only good feature is that in the Maharajah's court the crowd can't gape and jeer. And he'll look at the birds. If they please him he'll buy. I've got us an audience with him."

"I must go with you to coax the birds to sing," said Bibi-ti.

"Of course," Daunt agreed.

She was wrapped in a black sari and veiled like a Moslem woman for the ride to the Maharajah's court, and only on the journey did Daunt confide his most important news.

"I asked him to have Ti Fong present, Bibi-ti."

Under the veil she trembled as Daunt assured her no harm could possibly come of the meeting, but both men walked close to the veiled figure as they were ushered into the court where the Maharajah sat beside the Chinese. A mere inclination of heads acknowledged the nabob's introduction. Their eyes were on the hapless transformation of a once proud peer, chained to the bole of a living tree. Its head lifted. Around the skull was the puckered brand of its ignominy, the mark of surgical skill of the dread Ti Fong's henchmen. The dull eyes quickened at sight of Mobray. The black lips moved, but only a croak of despair was uttered and the shamed head drooped again.

Near the Maharajah lay his two tame leopards, lazy as full-fed house-cats until the visitors entered. Then they were afoot, ears back, teeth showing in snarls, spitting as they glared at the veiled figure. The Maharajah tried to soothe them between courteous amenities and explanations.

"Captain Daunt, I have complained to Ti Fong of a bad bargain. The ape he sold me does not speak, but he has offered to prove his claims for the creature today. As a dealer in rare animals I knew you would be interested in my new possession."

MOBRAY was briefly fascinated by the aspect of triumph in the yellow mask of Ti Fong's face. Black eyebrows cut horizontally across the dome-shaped,

shaven poll. The nostrils were dark apertures of the flattened nose, the lips a thin dark line. He wore a magnificent robe embroidered in gold and green dragons, the wide sleeves concealing his hands.

"The ape shall speak. You will hear him beg for favors," he said, striding toward the tree while the Maharajah rose and tried to quiet the spitting leopards that glared with burning green eyes at the quivering folds of Bibi-ti's wrappings. Mobray saw the black veil fall.

"Not here, not that dance here," he gasped at her, but was too late. The sari dropped. A black leopard began that slow, swaying dance of the jungle, terrible to watch in the court where punkahs moved with restful pause and swing, peace-conveying where there was no peace, but only primal madness, monstrous cruelty and impending doom piping to the *danse macabre*.

Mobray did not see the whip in Ti Fong's hands hurled high, until the lash whined through the air and the ape howled and leaped as its chains clashed and a long red snake oozed blood where the lash had coiled around its body and lifted skin.

"You fiend! You devil!" boomed the agonized howl. "God, Dick, shoot me and end this misery. I only want to die quickly."

Mobray leaped at the Chinese, but a gun spat from his left hand, a bullet in his shoulder spun Mobray around.

Ti Fong was running toward the iron door-grilles, firing again. The dancing leopard leaped. A ribbon of soft flowing red unfurled from her flank. The tame leopards were mad and the court seemed full of snarling, spitting cats. There was a mewling screech as one landed on the ape's shoulders, the snap of jaws on a spinal column, a shake and an unearthly

screaching of the dancing bagheela as she leaped in fury, driving back a tamed cat that had shaken the ape limp.

From the safety beyond the grilled iron doors the Maharajah saw his pampered pets trying to climb the walls to escape the she-leopard. His court was a bloody arena. Utterly cowed, their tails lashing, their fangs showing, they crouched while the dancing leopard caught up the black sari in her teeth and tossed it. On her hind paws she stood quivering and turning like a top. The sari covered her. The white teeth and the red mouth blurred before their eyes, and as the spinning slowed down they saw a woman's black hair, white face and red lips.

She glided to the doors which His Highness opened and flew to the cage of Celestial Singers. Her voice crooned, her hands caressed them while Mobray knelt beside the dying ape-man.

He lifted the grotesque head to his shoulder, seeing only the intelligent eyes glazing fast, hearing only the hoarse echo of his brother's voice:

"I'm glad it is ended, Dick. Forget all this if you can. I'm not suffering at all. I've heard that the big cats paralyze by that neck hold. Odd adventure, wasn't it? You'll carry on till my boy can take things over. Don't tell them what happened. And don't try to take vengeance on Ti Fong, it's too risky. . . . Dick . . . I fancy I hear music——"

In the outer court the Celestial Singers broke into glorious melodic song and on the wings of music the soul of a man in torture escaped its prison of grotesque flesh.

Captain Daunt heard a car roaring away. Ti Fong had escaped. The sailor stood with a hand at Salute to Death but his mind was planning reprisals as the Maharajah slipped into the court and

snapped chains on the collars of his leopards.

"Command me," he said to Mobray. "Anything in my power shall be done to honor him who was your brother. There is a tomb in the grounds where lies an illustrious warrior of my ancestors that his presence would honor, and its silence is no deeper than shall be mine about what I have seen today. Captain Daunt, any price you name shall be paid for the Celestial Singers, that they may sweeten his rest with their songs. How may I serve you and the lady further?"

In the zenana, the skin wound of Bibiti was dressed and she rested while a flower-covered, flag-wrapped form was sealed in a tomb of carved marble with priestly chanting and rites of honor.

When again Daunt saw her, she had

shed the last stoic silence of that *alter ego* at her command.

"Take me home to Jornado," she pleaded. "The circumference of Earth is all too short a distance to run from Ti Fong. Had his aim today been as deadly as his powers of darkness, I would never see my child and Jornado again. Take me home."

Through the night roared the Maharajah's shining car with armed guards bringing them to Daunt's vessel.

"He's licked us again," commented Captain Daunt.

"At least my quest for my brother is ended," said Mobray. "Ended in the only way possible, rest and peace for him. And I begin to see the oriental argument for Nirvana since Asia spawns devils like Ti Fong."