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The Woman in the Cage

Blue Ribbon Fiction

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Papua's Teeming Wilds, a Girl of Gold and Marble and Mystery, and the Sudden Growing Up of Young Gault.

THIN smoke, smelling of all the forests, rose up from the mound of ashes that Ao had piled on the camp oven. There was a thigh of young wallaby inside, and as the native stirred the ashes, and tilted up the oven lid ever so little with a long-forked stick, odors of baked meat, warm and mouth-watering, slipped out.

"Smell that," said Gault, the Eglishman impatiently, "It must be done."

Irvine, the Australian, motioned to Ao, who dropped the oven lid again.

"Roast meat," said Irvine, "is like pineapples. You know it's ready when the smell gets so that you just can't keep your teeth out of it. It's endurable, still."

Gault looked at the other. Though he had been traveling the forests of Papua with Irvine for six weeks, he had never quite got over his first astonishment over the fact that the Australian — miner, bird-hunter, sheller, anything and nothing as to profession, nothing at all as to birth—used excellent English.

Gault was very fresh from "home;" he could not help feeling instinctively that the man he had hired to run his expedition for him should have talked dialect or cockney, rather than chosen, cultivated language a little better than his own. It was true that Irvine showed an undeniable gift of swearing on occasion; but any man could swear; Philip Gault could himself, if need were.

The typical bushman's liking for fine literature was not within his knowledge. Nor did Irvine volunteer bookish talk. He had been engaged in Port Moresby by this globe-trotting lad from England to take him through a part of the interior and let him shoot birds of paradise—this being before the days of protective laws. Irvine was willing to do all that he was paid for, but, as he had allowed to Mac Pidgin, biggest man and "hardest case" in Papua, during a "wet evening" at Ryan's hotel, he didn't see that he was bound to act governess to the Kid, even if he did have to be nursery maid.

It was not within Mr. Philip Gault's knowledge that the town—and, incidentally, the territory; for Papua is one big family—referred to him, after that, as "Irvine's Kid."

Gault was not quite so young as the name might have led one to suppose. He was 22, a well-set-up fellow with the public school stamp clear to see on his smooth, pleasant, inexpressive face. Gault had stayed late at school; it was a source of secret and inextinguishable laughter to Irvine to know that his employer had been "saying lessons and getting whacked" scarcely two years earlier.

Irvine himself, at two and twenty, had already gone through the separate careers of horse dealer, road contractor, foremast hand, pear poacher, and sandalwood trader; had his nose broken in a prize fight, strictly illegal, and conducted without rules or gloves; had been engaged to two girls, and should undoubtedly have been married to several more; had seen the world, and fought the world, and fed and kept himself while doing it, without asking a pound note from any man in the world save Jim Irvine. He was 35 now; the tale of his wanderings and adventurings was Odyssean—and Jim could have told you what you meant by that; but would have added, quite without reverence, that he always did think that old bloke—meaning Ulysses—had too much yap about him. . . .

Now, while he lifted the oven lid again, and sniffed the seven times seven delicious smell issuing therefrom—a smell that caused the curly-headed heathen Ao to bring forward, without further words, the big enamel plate—he was thinking of the newly-enlarged schoolboy who sat so comfortably on a folding chair beside him, and waited to be fed, Irvine did not fancy it could be particularly good for young men just out of school to come into large fortunes, and set off to see the world, traveling on velvet.

"They're bound to get into mischief," ran his thoughts as he speared the savory roast on a long knife, and landed it safely in the plate—"but the smacks they get won't be the kind to teach them, and make men of them, as they'd be if there wasn't the money to reckon with. A bloke who goes on his own will be learning something every time he comes a cropper. Not these gilt-edged kids. Now look at this kid of mine—"

Ao was dishing up dinner; he had put the baking tin on the hot ashes, and blown them to a glow, and made rich gravy with a splash of boiling water stirred in the tin; he had poured it over the meat, set the plate on a flat log, and grunted at his master to say that "dinner was served."

"Look at this kid," thought Irvine, as he sat down on his heel, bush fashion, and plunged a knife into the juicy meat. "He's gone through life, in a way, before he's begun it. Shacks of money, travel round the world, in all the regular places, and now the irregular ones—seen all the big stage folk, all the big races and cricket matches that a fellow can want to see in his life—and tiger hunted, and buffalo hunted—with somebody to nurse him through every bit of it—eaten his cakes before he knew what a cake was—got engaged to be married, too. Lord save him, and with it all, isn't more than a kid still." Upon which, having filled and emptied his capacious mouth a few times, he felt moved to repeat his thoughts aloud.

Phil Gault, with entire good humor, buttered a biscuit and replied:

"Awfully good of you, old thing. Don't quite see what you're driving at, all the same."

Irvine fixed him with his blue, keen gaze, which was to Phil's good-natured, impersonal look as chilled steel to hardwood. "What I'm driving at," he said, "is that it would do you a lot of good if something got up and hit you."

"They say," he explained, "that there's a woman somewhere about."

"Gold tried in the fire and all that sort of tosh. Don't particularly want any in mine, thank you. Where's the tea:"

"I don't mean you're likely to get it,' said Irvine. "On the contrary, I think youll even get out of this cursed country, that you'd think so romantic, without having your head lammed by any of its romance. There's your tea; I took mine first."

Gault drank from the iron pannikin, looking about him as the rim tilted slowly up. He was penetrated, more than he would have cared to say, with the romance that Irvine scorned. Night had shut suddenly down upon them a little while before; it was nearly 7 now, and the flame of the cooking fire flung butterflies of orange light against the dark surrounding walls of forest. They were in a narrow clearing formed by an outcrop of rocky soil; a small stream slipped away silently at the foot of the rocks; the opening of sky above them, like the opening of a well, was full of stars. It was hot; they sat away from the fire and kept the necks of their shirts wide open and the sleeves rolled up, but sweat trickled down their arms and faces. There might be a breeze somewhere among the tops of the banyans and the cedars and the cottonwood trees; but down below, in camp, it was as still as the bottom of the sea.

Gault reveled in it; he felt that he was seeing life and tasting adventure. Only that morning, traveling on a forest track, they had been attacked by cannibals; he had written a vivid account of it in his diary and meant to offer it to a newspaper when he got away again. (Three months later one of Irvine's "mates" down south received a letter mentioning the occurrence: "A party of — from the Babakiri tribe pegged spears at us as we were coming down the valley; they didn't mean anything particular, and cleared as soon as we fired into the bush, but my kid thought we'd just grazed the cemetery fence and has been singing hymns to himself ever since.") They had got a dozen or so of birds of paradise and two giant cassowaries; they had shot alligators, seen native dances, and, greatly daring, as it seemed to Gault, had visited and been politely entertained in a number of more or less cannibal towns, which seemed, on the whole, disappointingly like the towns that were not cannibal. They had had an attack of fever apiece—Gault's, according to his own estimate, very severe, Irvine's trifling "the thermometer would have told a different tale if he had seen its readings). They had peeped at the mysteries of the great devil temples, seen the sorcerers handling, with horrid familiarity, their tamed, deadly snake familiars; prospected for gold and found none (but the looking was the real fun), eaten strange fruits and foods, spent beads and stick tobacco upon native curios.

They had, in Gault's opinion, been drinking romantic adventures deep, at its very spring; the overdrawn black tea in the iron mug was the sweeter for it; the wallaby hindquarter was stuffed and spiced with romance. Even the fact that they were camping in the heart of the great forest instead of some village delighted him; for Irvine had told him that he didn't think the Babakiri (blacks) were altogether delighted to have them in their district, and it might, therefore, be as well to get into the bush for the night. Which was, of course, adventure, all the more.

They were both too hungry to talk much while feeding. It was not until Gault's plate was empty, and Irvine was cutting himself a last junk of tinned plum pudding, that the "kid" opened, once more, the question of his standings in the world of men. Irvine's remarks, thrown out carelessly enough, had left a scratch on his vanity.

"I'm essentially as old as I ever shall be," he declared, his pink, boyish face, with the indeterminate dark eyes, turned toward Irvine's teakwood countenance. Irvine, like so many bushmen, was almost ageless; you could not have told with any certainty whether he was an old 26, or a young 39; in 10 year's time, when he would be 45, you would probably put him down as 30 or 50, or anything between.

"Sorry to hear it," answered the bushman. Behind him in their own narrow corner of the camping ground the carriers, naked and perspiring, sat around the fire which they had built high, apparently to make themselves still hotter, and passed the large, tooled bamboo tobacco pipe from mouth to mouth. It was a quiet night; no wind was stirring, but sometimes, in the pauses of the native chatter, one could hear some creature—pig, or wandering vilage dog, perhaps—move with an indefinite rustling through the bush.

"I'm going to be married in six months," played Gault, throwing down his ace. If that was not being grown-up, what was. Why, in a year and a half from now, he'd probably be the head of a family. . . .

Irvine, who was busy lighting his pipe, said nothing, and Gault, his pride growing rawer and more uneasy every moment, pulled a little case out of the swag that lay beside him on the ground.

"I suppose you don't believe me," he said.

"I do believe you, kid," answered Irvine, gravely, taking the first draw at his pipe. "I congratulate you, though you've told me before."

"You couldn't quite understand, I fancy," was Gault's comment, as he fought with a refractory snap. That sort of thing isn't much in your line— But there she is."

Irvine, pulling at his pipe, and watching, though perhaps he did understand rather more than the Kid supposed. That catch was rusted. . . . He remembered a photo he had been in the habit of carrying with him, 13 years ago. It had been in a case, too. He remembered that the catch was so weak it would hardly hold. Use had weakened it. . . . The day he had snapped the case shut for the last time, and flung it into the rapids of the Strickland river, it had opened out as it went through the air; a face had looked at him from the boiling water, as the rapids sucked it down.

He leaned over the picture of Philip Gault's wife that was to be. A nice girl. Yes, a nice girl. Interesting. Distinguished-looking. The face that had gone down in the rapids of the Strickland river was not distinguished-looking. Its eyes clutched you by the heart; its mouth tore your soul from your body. But distinguished—no. Nice? Irvine laughed, silently, bitterly.

"Glad you like her," said Gault, taking the smile to himself. He shut the case again, and tossed it in his swag-bag. He lit his pipe; it was bigger and blacker than Irvine's; a manly sort of pipe. Silence fell between the two. Gault was thinking—"I should fancy he'd respect me now." Irvine was saying to himself, "Kid, kid. You haven't even met love on the road—or off it. Well, that thoroughly nice girl will see to it you don't—on or off, ever any more."

"Irvine," said Gault in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Did you hear that?"

The bushman did not ask "What?" He jerked a word