

at the chattering carriers and silence held the forest glade for a minute.

"Yes," he answered presently. "I heard it. I don't reckon it's anything to worry over."

"Why?"

"Because when a nig is out for business he doesn't let you hear him."

"Then you think," asked Gault in a low tone, "that there's somebody hanging about?"

"I reckon so."

"What do you—"

Irvine pointed at the carriers. They were leaning forward, mouths open, eyes staring, each one of them "registering" curiosity and interest vividly.

"Girl, for a tanner."

"A girl? What would she be doing about our camp?"

"I should suppose," said Irvine, calmly, "that she's either surveying for a projected railroad, or collecting taxes."

"I dare say you think that's funny."

"Well, what does your wide experience lead you to think a girl does want, hanging about a lot of men?"

"I suppose she wants one of the men."

"You seem," observed Irvine, leaning comfortably against a rock, "to be growing up, Kid."

"Ask 'em about it," suggested Gault. The carriers were beginning to buzz among themselves like a hatful of flies.

Irvine asked a question or two, in one or two native languages.

"They say," he explained, "that there's a woman somewhere, because they smelled the flowers the women wear, and heard her moving."

"What are they looking so uncomfortable about?"

"O, that's because they think that she's a ghost woman, and up to mischief. If any of them follow her into the bush, she turns into a fiend and eats them."

"Well, it's pretty simple; if they think that, they'd better stop where they are."

"But the trouble is," explained Irvine, "that they don't know till they find out. You see, the devils and the common or yam-garden girls look alike. Seems to me I can remember dreaming of the same sort of notion, among people who weren't black."

"She's let them go for this night," observed Gault, interestedly, his eyes fixed on the carriers, who seemed suddenly to have lost interest in the dusk wall of scrub and were turning their attention to the circling bamboo pipe.

One of the carriers nodded.

"Eo, Taubada" (yes, sir), he said. "Debil girl him go home. Me no like debil girl. Me flight along him."

"If you pay attention to all the yap of the carriers, you'll not have much to spare for anything else," was Irvine's comment. "Did I think there was anyone really there? Yes; I don't know who or what she was. No, village girls don't generally wander off to the bush when there's strange people about; they're too scary. No, I don't believe in devils. I don't think at all about it. Is this the longer, or the shorter catechism? And are you going to turn in?"

From girl or devil, no further sound was heard. The carriers laid themselves out, one by one, upon the stage of branches they had put up; each man wrapped, oblivious of the heat, in his blanket. The white men slung mosquito nets, and crept beneath the tents that sheltered them both. The night went by.

Next day it appeared that birds of paradise were very plentiful in this area of dense forest, also that they were somewhat less wild, somewhat easier to stalk with Phil Gault's splendid guns than they had been hitherto. It was agreed that a stay of two or three days should be made. Irvine spent an hour or two reconnoitering and came back with the news that there was a big village about three miles away but that the people seemed to belong to the tribe who had attacked the expedition, and he thought, on the whole, it was better to leave them alone.

"We've got tucker enough to do till we get down to the coast again," he said, "and mixing with natives when you've a mob of carriers along means rows, and rows mean mischief. If we let them alone, I reckon they'll let us alone."

Gault was well pleased to stay on in the forest; apart from the chance of sport, he confessed to himself—though not to Irvine—that the ghostly happening of the night had waked his interest. He could not rest till he had found out the cause of it.

"Devil-girl my eye," he thought. "It was a live woman, and I want to know what she was up to."

Something told him that Irvine would not encourage his curiosity. The bushman treated all forms of native superstition with fine contempt—even though he and Gault

had on that journey been witnesses of "manifestations" among the so-called "cercers" of the great towns that would have puzzled a circle of spiritualists and a team of conjurers combined. "Native rot" was all that Irvine had to say after translating and explaining, as far as explanations could go. He would certainly call this rot. Nevertheless, Gault was determined to find out; he didn't know what, but find out anyhow.

In the middle of the night he slipped quietly away from the tent, and was gone a couple of hours. Irvine woke once or twice, and missed him.

"What bit you last night?" he asked suddenly, as he was helping himself to bacon at breakfast.

"There's yours," he added. "Don't want any? Rats. Fever again?"

"No, I'm all right," was Gault's reply. He did not answer the first part of the question, and Irvine was not minded to press him. Nevertheless, he noted the odd, pinched look that the face of the "Kid" seemed to bear that morning—a look that, during the day, scarce lessened at all.

"Not fever," thought the bushman. "Looks more like scare of some kind. I wonder what he thinks he's up to?"

On the next night, being like other seeming simple men of the wilds, very full of guile, he lay still and pretended to sleep, while secretly watching. Gault waited until he thought it was safe, and then crept noiselessly out of the tent. Through a hole in the side canvas Irvine watched his shadow, dusk among shadows, melt into the ashy velvet of the forest wall. The bushman swore softly to himself, softly and with determination. Then he lay down and waited.

Near morning Gault came back, treading cautiously but breathing hard with haste and exertion. He lay down very quietly and seemed to listen. Then he gave a sigh of relief and composed himself to sleep.

It was at this point that Irvine wrecked his comfortable persuasions of secrecy by remarking, in a characteristic drawl:

"What the etcetera dash do you etcetera well think you have been doing?"

"By Jove, you're awake, are you?" was all that Gault could find to say.

"Of course I'm (decorated and embroidered) awake. Where have you been? Playing the giddy goat about the village?"

Gault did not answer; his chest was heaving with some unexpressed elation. One would almost have thought—had he not been a man, and a millionaire, and a prospective husband—that he was very near crying.

"Here, Kid," said Irvine irreverently, but kindly, "spit it out; this is a devil of a queer country, and if you got any sort of a scare, you aren't the first. What's happened?"

Gault, rolling over so that his face was turned away from Irvine, muttered into his camp mattress:

"I saw a woman."

"Well, if you did. What was she doing?"

"She was in a tree."

"In a tree!" Irvine knew as well as Gault—better—that native girls do not climb trees. A thought crossed his mind. Gault might be going insane. In the Papuan bush.

But the Kid had not done. "Honor bright," he said, suddenly rolling over and sitting up—Irvine could see his face in the clear, late moonlight. "I did see her. I've seen her two nights. And she was up in a tree. High up. And she looked at me down through the leaves. And her hair was all gold, like gossamer or silk; it stood out and flew. Her face was white."

"That's clean impossible," objected Irvine. "No white woman could possibly be in the country without everyone knowing. You dreamt it."

"Did I? Did the carriers dream there was some one about the other night when they said there was a girl in the bush? Why, you heard something yourself?"

"Might have been a dog or a pig," declared Irvine, who knew very well it was nothing of the kind. "And anyhow, if they did hear a girl, it must have been a native. And if there was a girl there, and if you really saw something or another up a tree, what are you chewing the rag about?"

"Because I can't understand it."

"What can't you understand?"

"You won't listen till I tell you. She was in a cage."

"A cage, I tell you. Barred in so that she couldn't get out."

"Well, if she couldn't, how was it she was walking about the camp in the dark?"

"She wasn't. I hid myself and watched. And I saw a woman come, a native woman in a grass petticoat, a black woman—or rather brown; that's what they are. She had a basket in her hand, and it was full of stuff—food, I think, wrapped up in green leaves—and she had one of those bamboos they

carry water in. She called out, and the woman in the cage let down a bark ladder. So then the one who had the basket climbed up it, and I couldn't see her among the leaves. And by and by she came down, and the basket was empty."

"If you had a dream, you had a blankety long one, muttered Irvine, who began to look puzzled. "Sounds almost as if there was something in it. I'll lay you saw a tree house—one of the ordinary tree houses, and the rest you fancied."

"I did not fancy it, I tell you. Yes, it seemed like what I've heard about treehouses, but she was caged in. And she was white—at least—"

"Yes—at least—now, we're getting at it."

"She was so very white. More than a white woman. Our women are pinky, or sallow, or pale, or something—they're not white paper color. She was, and it didn't look—it didn't look alive."

Irvine, staring out through the triangular door of the tent into the moon flooded clearing, seemed to consider things in general.

"Night—middle of the night's bad time for thinking," was his verdict. "You go to sleep and I'll go to sleep and we'll talk it over in the morning. Perhaps you can dream a little more before sun-up."

"It wasn't a dream," persisted the Kid, rolling over.

In the daylight, as Irvine had foretold, things looked different. Gault was inclined to allow—after breakfast and after a bath in the creek, with two carriers on the lookout for alligators—that the mysterious woman might have been so very white after all. He

into its nest, but he did not heed her, though Gault nudged him indignantly and said in a hissing whisper:

"Now you've done it!"

"I'll tell you what she is," said Irvine. "She's a white Papuan."

"What! I don't—"

"Albino—same as a white mouse or white blackbird. They're very uncommon; I've never seen one myself and, it's an odd thing, they're mostly always men—but they have that dead-white skin and they have wonderful gold hair like feathers. See how hers grew—not hanging down, but standing up, like a—"

"It doesn't stand up; it floats like—the halo of an angel in a picture!"

"O, you're there, are you?" thought Irvine to himself; but aloud he went on: "It's a lot finer than the ordinary Papuan hair, but it does stand up, or would if it was stiff enough. Yes, she's an Albino all right. Looks as if they didn't fancy her much, sticking her up in a tree house by herself."

"She can't get out. I walked around the tree when the moon was shining right on it, and I saw the house has bars all round it, heavy bars lashed with bark rope, and the lashings are put so that they're out of her reach. She'd need an ax, or at least a good knife, to get out of that. It's a cage."

"That's queer, damned queer," said Irvine, and fell to thinking. "I don't know the ways of these tribes very well," he told the Kid. "Looks as if she'd made them wild over something or other. But it might be they're keeping her for some big chief. I've known them to—and yet, that was in a house in the middle of the village, with people on the watch all round. This is another business altogether. It interests me. Let's wait to see the woman come with her tucker tonight; we might find out something that way."

"Yes, let's," agreed the Kid, his eyes looking suddenly very big and bright. Then, after a moment's silence: "Irvine, would you mind going out of sight for a minute? You scared her—you—I want—"

Irvine nodded, without a word, and dived under the screen of bush. He did not go so far but that he could see, while safely hidden, anything that might be going on at the foot of the great Barringtonia. He counted himself more or less responsible for the Kid, and it seemed to him that there were the elements of trouble, ripe for gathering, not very far away.

Gault, standing beneath the tree, began to call, in his own language, for he knew no other, to the gold-haired creature hidden above. He used soft words; he whistled like a bird. There came no reply; the leaves brushed fingers with the winds; a locust, loud and wooden, chirred in a betel nut tree. Else, in the pauses, there was silence.

"It's no go," he said at last, turning away. "Just close on dark is the time the other woman comes. I'll be there a little before."

"We will," corrected Irvine. In telling the tale years after, Irvine was used to say that the day they spent in waiting was the worst of the whole trip.

"We'd had leeches in the range," he said, "that hung all over us like bunches of tassels dropping blood—that was a nuisance—and in the sago swamp country we were never dry night or day; that wasn't agreeable, either. And when we camped a day and a night at the Angabunga we were eaten alive by mosquitoes. There were bad days all those times, but the cap sheaf of the lot was the day the Kid hung round waiting to see that girl. You see, he was dead, mad in love with her, because he'd thought her a spirit or something at first, and because of her face and the gold hair and the way she looked down out of the tree—O, because of God knows what—it don't matter what, when a man's got it bad. Well, he had it bad for the first time, and it had knocked him clean over. He wouldn't have his dinner and he wouldn't have let me have mine, if yarning and yapping would have kept me from it. He wouldn't stop in the camp, and he wouldn't stay out of it; he would take the carriers off shooting and come back in a quarter of an hour with one old crow and lie down on the ground and kick his toes and say he wished he was dead and get up again and start smoking and let his pipe go out and throw it away. All day he went on like a poisoned dog; it just about made me sick. When it was near dusk he tried to get away without me, but I was on to him and went after, and I put his revolver and mine, too, into my belt, because when a white man gets to fooling around native girls in cannibal country—well, you know—"

"Keep quiet," whispered the Kid. "There's the woman with the food at last. I can hear her."

Irvine nodded. The last spears of sunset were sinking low in the forest; huge violet mock plums lying among dead leaves; red, poisonous mock apricots; white

toadstools, lily shaped, green snakes of thorn set creeper were, for a moment, enchanted into fruits, flowers, stems of magic gold, and blotted, almost instantly, by the dusk. You could still see, as a man swimming sees under water, the shadowed stems of trees, the feathers of the ferns motionless, outspread. Then came a moving shadow and stood still at the foot of the great tree.

Like a cat watching a mousehole, Gault watched his chance. It came when the basket of food had been taken up and the woman descending to earth had just let go her hold. Then Gault sprang up out of his cache of leaves and without hesitation or parley flung himself upon the end of the ladder. The woman let out a scream and, crying, ran away.

Up in the tree the white, caged creature pulled at the ladder, and when it refused to answer her hand, leaned forth. The men could not see her, but they could hear her voice, asking, remonstrating. Gault answered her as if he knew what she was saying:

"It's all right. Don't be afraid of us. We only want to help you."

"O, do we?" muttered Irvine in the background. "Some of us are a lot more concerned about helping ourselves—out of the mess you're likely to get us into."

The woman seemed to understand, at least, the tone of Gault's speeches. She murmured something indefinite, with a note of entreaty in it.

"She's asking us to set her free—I'll swear she is. Where's that ax?" demanded Gault. He had brought one with him; he found it in a minute and was away with it in his teeth, up the bark ladder, before Irvine could do anything to stop him.

"Three miles to the village," thought that worthy, drumming a little tune on the butt of his revolver. "A native girl in a hurry will make half an hour of it. Native bucks in a damned hurry, with their fighting kit on, will make rather less. Something under an hour to get the carriers off and clear, if we don't want to make pot roast for the village. What's he at?"

There was a sudden crash among the branches above; a heavy beam or two fell whooping through the dark. Irvine jumped aside.

"Done it now, evidently," he said to himself. "And what the several unpleasant things he means to do next, I should very much like to—Hi, Kid, what are you up to? We'll have the whole village in our hair inside of an hour."

"I've made her understand," came triumphantly from the broken tree house. ("I'll go bail," was Irvine's comment.) "She knows we want to help her. Shes' coming with us."

Irvine, to himself, down among the dank smelling leaves and thorny creepers, swore as few of his friends had ever heard him swear. To the other he said not a word. He, who was above all things, a fighter, knew when fighting was no use.

In another minute two came down the ladder—Gault first, scrambling and hanging by his hands; the girl after, moving with less activity than one might have expected from a native.

"She's stiff and cramped, poor little soul," said the Kid, swinging himself to the ground and watching the descent of the half seen, shadowy form above him. "My God, did any one ever hear of such beastly cruelty? Whatever she's done—and it couldn't be much, anyhow—to shut her up like a bird in a cage away by herself in the bush, and I suppose to leave her till she died! Thank heaven we came along."

"Is it any use," said Irvine, blocking the way before him, "to tell you that you've time, just time, to get out of the maddest trick you've ever played in your life? Any use telling you that you're probably throwing away your life and mine, and the carriers', poor beasts, to help a damned little hussy of a native girl who just as likely doesn't want any help at all? Kid, put her back where you got her and get on as fast as you can. Don't you see she can look after herself, since she's done it so far? She—"

"You can shut up," came sharply through the dusk. "She's coming. I—I don't believe what you said about Albinos—I—I believe she's white. I'm going to take her with us, and when we get to a mission—"

"O, Lord! O, Lord!" was Irvine's only comment.

There was no quiet sleep, rolled in blankets by the fire, that night for the carriers. Instead they spent the hours from dusk to dawn going hard, relentlessly driven, along the narrow, root encumbered track that led, by compass, toward the distant sea. Irvine calculated that it was just possible for the party to do the distance to the coast in a night, and he was determined that they should. They had the best part of an hour's start, and they

(Continued on Page Eight.)



"Glad you like her," said the Kid, even agreed, under protest, to Irvine's suggestion that she might have been in native mourning—which sometimes expresses itself by a face and body painted over with white wood ashes. But he was quite clear that he had seen her and that she was beautiful.

"We'll leave the boys to look after our camp and you can take me to the place," Irvine declared. "There'll be no peace till we know what the thing really is. It sounds like somebody gone crazy to me, but this country is full of things that can't happen—and do."

"This has happened, anyhow," said Gault, leading the way. Irvine noted that he was hurried and eager, in spite of his sleepless night; that he slashed at the layer vines overhanging the narrow track as if they were human enemies, and hurried up and down the gullies scanning the way at a pace that left both of them breathless and wet through. Yet the road was not long, in 20 minutes they came to a huge red cedar tree beside which Gault turned off into the uncleared bush, motioning, as he went, for silence.

"It's quite close," he whispered. "Stoop down—under those bushes. I found it by following the sound the other woman made; you could never see it. Now, look up."

Irvine looked up and, as he afterwards said, received the shock of his life. Some 30 feet above him, among the clotted leaves of a great Barringtonia tree, a face looked out and down. And it was, as Gault had said, white—white as stone—and it was beautiful. The eyes were large, half hid by very deep, curved eyelids; he could not see their color, but they were not dark. The mouth and nose were nothing in particular; the neck was glorious, a column of pure marble. In that and in the deep, carved eyelids, and in the hair—gold, sparkling, floating, so fine that it looked less like hair than mist—the woman's beauty lay. He could not account for the dead-white color; European in whole or in part, he was certain she was not.

An idea struck him, and he slapped his leg, crying, "I have it, Kid! The woman drew in her head, as a startled bird draws back

into its nest, but he did not heed her, though Gault nudged him indignantly and said in a hissing whisper:

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