

Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Snakeskin Cigar-Case*

By BODO WILDBERG

An eerie and dread experience in the tropics—an unusual story

JUST as every blow against the earth, even the tread of the smallest child, moves it a little, so every experience that befalls any one of us makes a change in him.

There are sensitive natures that feel a man's past in his personality very distinctly. I think I am one of them.

The first time I set eyes on the little man with the snakeskin cigar-case, his uncanny history worried me.

Mind you, I didn't know anything about his history, or about *him*. There was nothing striking in his appearance. He was carefully dressed, had a bloodless little face and a shriveled little body, and he stooped when he walked. He might have been anywhere from forty to sixty years old. There was something about him that reminded me of a mouse, or, to be more exact, of a certain curious Indian rodent that I had seen several times in the zoological garden. His small black eyes roamed about uneasily, and there was a timid, deprecating sort of half-smile on his thin-lipped mouth. His complexion was yellowish, his skin was wrinkled, his hair was black with a sprinkling of gray. There was nothing startling about him anywhere.

But the first time I caught sight of him, I lost myself in strange, sultry dreams of the tropical jungle, and just missed being run over by an auto-truck. A few days later, when I passed him again, an exactly similar vision came back to me, and I bumped into a fat old lady and nearly lost my balance. After that,

when I caught sight of his characteristically tilted gray hat and his overcoat trimmed with gray fur, I turned and went the other way in a hurry. I had a feeling that his star and mine clashed in the heavens, and that any contact with him would bring me bad luck.

I have always been a firm believer in signs. Every day is crammed with prophecy. But the trouble is that the senses of most of us are so dull and unreliable that we misinterpret the warnings that come to us. The event proved that I was right about the little man's strange past; but I met him—once—with impunity.

The meeting would never have occurred if it had not been for a curious accident—if there *are* any accidents in this grotesquely complicated but mysteriously ordered world.

I had been at the movies. The picture was an unconvincing exotic thing, no doubt patched up in Hollywood somehow, and I had been bored to tears. I remembered a nice little tea-room down a back street, where I knew I could get a cup of real East Indian coffee and wash the tawdry picture out of my memory. But when I walked into the nice little place, I was disappointed to find every table occupied. At last I desisted, over in an alcove by itself, a tiny table with one empty seat. The other was taken by a man who was mostly buried under the *New York Times*. I breathed a sigh of relief and stepped over to him.

"This seat isn't occupied, is it, sir?"

The *Times* came down a few inches, and—I stared into the face of the little man who looked like an Indian rodent!

*Adapted by Roy Temple House from the German.

I had an impulse to turn and run, but I checked it. I sat down, as nonchalantly as I was able, and ordered a cup of Java.

THE little man seemed glad to have my company. In a curious, half-foreign accent, he started a friendly conversation at once. It transpired that he had come in, a few minutes earlier, from the same movie theater where I had been.

"Those fellows don't know the first thing about Sumatra! Not the first thing, I tell you! Vegetation all wrong! Costumes completely impossible! And the actors—stuff——"

He stopped suddenly, and his face darkened as if he had been assailed by painful memories.

"Have you been there yourself?" I inquired.

"Been there—I guess I *have* been there! Did you ever hear of the Bonaliva peninsula?—I lived there for——"

His eyes had taken on a far-away look. He swallowed with a painful effort. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

"I don't talk about it much. But I think maybe *you* would understand a little——"

He dreamed a while longer. Then he put his hand in his inside breast pocket.

"Have a cigar, sir!"

He held out a cigar-case made of a beautifully mottled leather with an extraordinary shimmer about it. It had short, broken red-brown and reddish-gray stripes—I had never seen anything like it. I noticed that the little man handled the case with a peculiarly caressing touch.

He saw my eyes fixed curiously on it.

"Yes, sir, it *is* handsome. And I wouldn't part with it for the world! Not so much because it's good-looking as because——"

He stopped. I waited a moment. Then I helped him out.

"Because of its associations, I suppose," I said.

"Exactly. Because of its associations," he agreed, and stopped again. "It's a reminder of what I loved most in all the world. It's the skin of a snake——"

I was puzzled. "You don't mean that you loved a snake——"

"Oh, no!" he said hastily. "That is—not exactly—I don't know. All I do know, is, I loved a woman——"

I waited a while longer. And my patience was rewarded.

"I don't know whether you know," he went on after a while, "that an important industry of the Bonaliva region of Sumatra is the working up of snakeskins into various kinds of leather goods. The industry was started a good many years ago by a Dutch firm, but the Malays have developed remarkable skill in handling the skins. The natives in that part of the island are a wild lot and they used to make a great deal of trouble, and the climate is something hideous—swamps, fever, madness, murder, a regular hell of a place. But the healthy young fellows they sent over seas to look after the business—I was one of them—were extremely well paid, and we usually stood it pretty well for a few years and got out with whole skins.

"But if ever the Devil himself walked the earth, he walked the Bonaliva peninsula. And his first lieutenant was Antananiki, the magician, the brown fiend that had half the peninsula in the hollow of his hand—damn him!"

He held his cigar between two fingers and studied it strangely. I could see that his hand was shaking.

"Sort of medicine man among the Malays; you understand. Pure bunk, of course. Antananiki hated me from the beginning. That was because he knew Banta cared for me, and for all his superior demigod attitude, I knew he was

sweet on Banta, too. Banta! She wasn't a Malay girl, she was a fairy. Pretty and slender and wise—not dark at all, I tell you—sort of gleaming golden complexion, you might call it."

He shuddered. Then he went on, more rapidly.

"She had Dutch blood. You wouldn't have thought she was anything else than a South European. And I want you to understand that the relations between the two of us weren't at all like most of those low-lived colonial affairs. I looked on Banta as my wife in the sight of God; I had made all my plans to give her an education, and when we got back to civilization I was going to marry her in church like any Christian.

"There is a strange belief among the Bonaliva tribes that many human beings are lower animals changed into men and women, and that they will eventually go back to their animal forms again. Antananiki said to me once in that damned mocking way of his: 'You know, *Sabib*, that some people have the power to change themselves into what they really are at bottom, into their animal, when the rest of us are asleep. I think *you* could do that too, if you chose. I can see at times that you are almost a tree-rat' (an island rodent a little like a squirrel—*beterosciurus*). 'Shall I help you change yourself into one, so that you can slip into Banta's *kampung* at night without anyone's seeing you?'

"And his ugly painted face twisted itself into a horrible grin that showed his canine teeth like the tusks of a boar.

"Then *you* must be a wild hog at times, Antananiki!" I retorted angrily.

"It may be, *Sabib*. And some others of our acquaintances may be animals, too. I have known pretty women who were serpents. And a little fat juicy tree-rat would do well to look out when there are serpents around!'

"A FEW days later, at noon, I lay in my hammock trying to sleep. You have no conception of the crushing torment of such a noon in the tropical lowlands. It squeezes your head in a burning vise, it scatters your thoughts, kills your will, makes you a stupid animal with no power to do anything but suffer.

"I lay bathed in sweat, and tried to think of the one pleasant thing in that hellish world—little Banta. My eyes were half open, and my face was turned toward the shady green jungle. All of a sudden a glimmer caught my eyes. Some animal was moving. Was it a chameleon? No, it was something larger. Ah! It was a well-grown python, a sort I had never seen before, with splendid coloring, ranging from golden brown to a delicate rosy gray. It raised its great head, thrust out its long, supple tongue, and seemed to be gazing at me.

"I can't remember that I was in the slightest degree frightened. I gazed back at the snake, dreamily indifferent, scarcely even curious. The snake seemed harmless enough. It came slowly toward me. Then I heard a crackling in the bushes. I knew at once what caused it. Young snake-hunters, not yet subjugated by the heat, like the foreigners and the older natives, often chose this very midday period, when the animals were dull and sluggish, to go out in pairs and beat the jungle in search of booty.

"My visitor seemed to be listening. I had a feeling that I must warn her. But at once I asked myself why I should, since this beautiful skin would make up into some valuable object in art leather.

"I tried to move, tried to call, but I could do neither. Then I began to have the strangest feeling I have ever experienced in my life. It seemed to me that I was growing smaller. My body seemed to be shrinking together. And then I felt

distinctly that I was a four-footed rat—a *heterosciurus*! In that ghastly heat I shivered with terror. The two young hunters broke out into the clearing. '*Ah ve loloda gibai!*' [This is a fine one!] one of them cried to the other. One seized her by the neck, the other by the tail—she struggled desperately—in vain! The strong young fellows carried her off triumphantly.

"As long as the python is young—and its length of life corresponds approximately to that of human beings—the Malays are not in the slightest afraid of the creature. It is not poisonous, and it is still not strong enough to crush a strong man. Moreover, those trained snake-hunters are unbelievably bold and expert.

"The capture had been effected before my eyes like the gliding panorama of a dream. But the effect of it was completely exhausting. As soon as the snake and her captors had disappeared, I fell into a sleep which was rather a painful swoon.

"When I awoke, it was almost night. I should have been at the factory long before. Then I remembered my strange feeling. Was it possible that something obscene and outrageous had happened to my body? Had I not dreamed that I was turning into a tree-rat? I felt over my body, long and carefully. No, I seemed to have my normal dimensions and all my members. But had I not dreamed of something else—of a beautiful big serpent which my cruel hunters had carried off to her death? And all at once, I remembered the magician Antananiki and his ugly insinuations about Banta.

I LEAPED to my feet and ran to the hut of her parents. She had not been there since morning. I asked everybody in the village. No one knew anything about her. Only one little boy declared that he had seen Banta about noon, running away toward the jungle.

"I rushed to the factory. Filled with apprehension and nameless horror, I dragged myself to the repulsive spot where the snakeskins are peeled off. We were mercifully careful to kill the poor beasts with a club before we skinned them.

"And there, at the carrion pit, stood the ugly magician Antananiki, watching the men at work and gloating over the poor victims. When he saw me, his grin turned more devilish than ever. It would have given me the keenest pleasure to flay him as they were flaying those poor dead reptiles, without stopping to knock him in the head first.

"But I could do nothing. I was rooted to the ground. And I stood by, mute and motionless, as they stripped the skins from three or four ordinary pythons. Then they dragged up a beautiful, shimmering body, and—I can't go on——"

The little man swallowed a great mouthful of hot coffee. In a few moments he continued, a little unsteadily but calmly.

"We were never able to learn anything of Banta. Some of the villagers declared that she had had a disagreement with her parents and conjectured that she had run off to another village. But we could find no trace of her on the peninsula, and anyway, I knew she loved me and had been pleased at the idea of leaving the island with me.

"I had this case made from a piece of the skin. I never found anybody who had ever seen a skin just like it. Of course that doesn't prove anything, but——

"Curious odor, hasn't it?" He thrust it under my nose. Then he did the same with his own. But I almost had the feeling, before he pushed it carefully back into his inside breast pocket, that he had touched his lips to it.

"I was in Palembang some time later," he said musingly. "I had got over it all,

after a fashion, and life had begun to have a certain charm for me again. I met an old crony in the capital, a young Spaniard that I hadn't seen for two or three years. We went out to see the sights together. 'Man,' the Spaniard kept repeating, 'you don't look at all as you used to!' He insisted that I get weighed and measured. I had lost more than twenty-

five pounds—strange, for I felt well enough and I hadn't been fat before. But when they measured my height, I was more than an inch and a half shorter than the height I thought I remembered. Either the thing I had gone through had affected my memory, or——"

And the little rodent-face puckered up in puzzled and painful musing.