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The DRONE MAN

By A. MERRITT

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Four men sat at a table of the Explorers' Club. Hewitt, just in from two years' botanical research in Ethiopia; Caranac, the ethnologist; MacLeod, poet first, and second the learned curator of the Asiatic Museum; and Winston, the archeologist, who, with Kosloff the Russian, had worked over the ruins of Khara-Kora, the City of the Black Stones in the northern Gobi, once capital of the Empire of Genghis Khan.

The talk had veered to were-wolves, vampires, fox-women, and similar superstitions. Caranac, who had brought up the subject originally, said:

"It is a deep-rooted belief, and immeasurably ancient, that a man or woman may assume the shape of an animal, a serpent, or a bird, even an insect. It was believed of old everywhere; and, everywhere, it is still believed by some. Always there has been the idea that there is a borderland between the worlds of consciousness of man and of beasts—a borderland where shapes can be changed, and man merge into beast or beast-and-man."

MacLeod said: "The Egyptians had some good reason for equipping their deities with the heads of birds and beasts and insects. Why did they portray Kheper, the Oldest God, with the head of a beetle? Why give Anubis, the Pschyopomp, Guide of the Dead, the head of a jackal? Or Thoth, the God of Wisdom, the head of an ibis, and Horus, the Divine son of Isis and Osiris, the head of a hawk? Set, God of Evil, a crocodile's, and the Goddess Bast a cat's? There was a reason for all of that. But one can only guess."

"I think there's something in that borderland, or borderline idea," Caranac agreed. "There's more or less of the beast, the reptile, the bird, the insect in everybody. I've known men who looked like rats and had the souls of rats. I've known women who belonged to the horse family and showed it in face and voice. Distinctly, there are bird people—hawk-faced, eagle-faced, predatory. The owl people seem to be mostly men, and the wren people women. There are quite as distinct wolf and serpent types. Suppose some of these have their animal element so strongly developed that they can cross this borderline—become at times the animal? There you have the explanation of the were-wolf, the snake-woman, and all the others. What could be more simple?"

"But you're not serious, Caranac?" Winston asked.

Caranac laughed. "At least half serious. Once I had a friend with an uncannily acute perception of these animal qualities in the human. It was an uncomfortable gift. He was like a doctor who has the faculty of visual diagnosis so highly developed that he constantly sees men and women and children not as they are but as diseases. Sometimes, as he would describe it, when he was in the subway, or on a bus, or in the theater—or even sitting *tête-à-tête* with a pretty woman—there would be a swift haze; and when it had cleared he was among rats and foxes, wolves and serpents, cats and tigers and birds, all dressed in human garb, but with nothing else at all human about them. The clear-cut picture lasted for only a moment—but it was a highly disconcerting moment."

"Do you mean to suggest," Winston said, incredulously, "that in an instant the musculature and skeleton of a man can become the musculature and skeleton of a wolf? The skin sprout fur? Or in the matter of your bird people, feathers? In an instant grow wings and feathers? In an instant grow the specialized muscles to use them? Sprout fangs—noses become snouts—"

Caranac grinned. "No, I don't mean anything of the sort. What I do suggest is that, under certain conditions, the animal part of this dual nature of man may submerge the human part to such a degree that a sensitive observer will think he sees the creature which is its type."

Winston raised his hands in mock admiration. "Ah, at last modern science explains the legend of Circe! Circe, the enchantress, who gave men a drink that changed them into beasts. I agree with you, Caranac—what *could* be more simple? But I do not use the word simple in the same sense you did."

Caranac answered, amused: "Yet, why not? Potions of one sort or another, rites of one sort or another, usually accompany such transformations in the stories."

Hewitt interrupted the general discussion at this point to relate a strange, and apropos, adventure that he had experienced some years before in Ethiopia—a really startling experience that he had never had the courage to reveal to anyone.

Hewitt was a fluent and convincing narrator, and his sober tone imbued his tale with an almost hypnotic air of plausibility. With his own eyes, so he said, he had seen the native priest of an Ethiopian tribal village change himself into a hyena and lope, animal jaws agape and slavering, into the bush to hunt for food.

Not only Hewitt, but his badly frightened native bearers, had been witness to this startling transformation. And to top the whole thing, to remove it definitely from the realm of illusory phenomena, Hewitt claimed that the man-beast had left, startlingly clear in the soft, wet ground, the prints of the paws of a hyena!

There was an uncomfortable pause as Hewitt finished. The other three glanced at each other uneasily, as if not knowing what to believe.

"Mass hypnotism," Winston suggested tentatively.

"We followed the brute's tracks, I tell you," Hewitt insisted doggedly, "to the edge of a pool, where they disappeared. Returning from the pool were the prints of human feet, the left one bearing a missing toe. The priest had such a crippled foot. We all saw the tracks. All of us."

Then MacLeod spoke, the precise diction of the distinguished curator submerged under the Gaelic burr and idioms that came to the surface always when he was deeply moved:

"And is it so, Martin Hewitt? Well, now I will be telling you a story. A thing that I saw with my own eyes. I hold with you, Alan Caranac, but I go further. You say that man's consciousness may share the brain with other consciousnesses—beast or bird or what-not. I say it may be that all life is one. A single force of which the trees, the beasts, the flowers, germs, and man, and everything living are parts, just as the billions of living cells in a man are parts of him. And that under certain conditions, the parts may be interchangeable. And that this may be the source of the ancient tales of the dryads and the nymphs, the harpies and the were-wolves as well.

"No, listen. My people came from the Hebrides, where they know more of some things than books can teach. When I was eighteen, I entered a little Midwest college. My roommate was a lad named—well, I'll just be calling him Ferguson. And there was a professor with ideas you would not expect to find out there.

"'Tell me how a fox feels that is being hunted by the hounds,' he would say. 'Or the rabbit that is stalked by the fox. Or give me a worm's-eye view of a garden. Get out of yourselves. Imagination is the greatest gift of the gods,' he said, 'and it also is their greatest curse. But, blessing or curse, it is good to have. Stretch your consciousness and write for me what you see and feel.'

"Ferguson took to that job like a fly to sugar. What he wrote was not a man telling of a fox or hare or hawk—it was a fox or hare or hawk speaking through a man's hand. It was not only the emotions of the creatures he described. It was what they saw and heard and smelled, and how they saw and heard and smelled it. And what they—thought.

"The class would laugh, or be spellbound. But the professor didn't laugh. No. After a while he began to look worried, and he would have long talks in private with Ferguson. And I would say to him: 'In God's name, how do you do it, Ferg?'

You make it all seem so damned real.'

"'It is real,' he told me. 'I chase with the hounds and I run with the hare. I set my mind on some animal, and after a bit I am one with it. Inside it. Literally. As though I had slipped outside myself. And when I slip back inside myself—I remember.'

"'Don't tell me you think you change into one of those beasts!' I said. He hesitated. 'Not my body,' he answered at last. 'But I know my mind—soul—spirit—whatever you choose to call it—must!'

'He wouldn't argue the matter. And I know he didn't tell me all he knew. And suddenly the professor stopped those peculiar activities, without explanation. A few weeks later I left the college.

'That was over thirty years ago. About ten years ago, I was sitting in my office when my secretary told me that a man named Ferguson, who said he was an old schoolmate, was asking to see me. I remembered him at once and had him in. The Ferguson I'd known had been a lean, wiry, dark, square-chinned and clean-cut chap. This man wasn't like that at all.

"His hair was a curious golden, and extremely fine—almost a fuzz. His face was oval and flattish, with a receding chin. He wore over-sized dark glasses, and they gave the suggestion of a pair of fly's eyes seen under a microscope. Or rather—I thought suddenly—of a bee's. But I felt a real shock when I grasped his hand. It felt less like a man's hand than the foot of some insect, and as I looked down at it I saw that it also was covered with the fine yellow fuzz of hair.

"'Hello, MacLeod,' he said. 'I was afraid you wouldn't remember me.'

'It was Ferguson's voice as I remembered it, and yet it wasn't. There was a queer, muffled humming and buzzing running through it.

'But it was Ferguson all right. He soon proved that. He did more talking than I, because that odd inhuman quality of the voice in some way distressed me, and I couldn't take my eyes off his hands with their yellow fuzz, nor the spectacled eyes and the fine yellow hair.

'It appeared that he had bought a farm over in New Jersey. Not so much for farming as a place for his apiary. He had gone in for bee keeping. He said: 'I've tried all sorts of animals. In fact, I've tried more than animals. You see, Mac—there's nothing in being human. Nothing but sorrow. And the animals aren't so happy, either. So I'm concentrating on the bee. A drone, Mac. A short life, but an exceedingly merry one.'

'I said: 'What in hell are you talking about?'

'He laughed, a buzzing, droning laugh. 'You know damned well. You were always interested in my little excursions, Mac. Intelligently interested. I never told you a hundredth of the truth about them. But come and see me next Wednesday, and maybe your curiosity will be satisfied. I think you'll find it worthwhile.'

'Well, there was a bit more talk and he went out. He'd given me minute directions how to get to his place. As he walked to the door, I had the utterly incredulous idea that around him was a droning and humming like an enormous bagpipe, muted.

'My curiosity, or something deeper, was tremendously aroused. That Wednesday I drove to his place. A lovely spot—all flowers and blossom-trees. There were a couple of hundred skips of bees set out in a broad orchard. Ferguson met me. He looked fuzzier and yellower than before. Also, the drone and hum of his voice seemed stronger. He took me into his house. It was an odd enough place. All one high room, and what windows there were had been shuttered—all except one. There was a dim, golden-white light suffusing it. Nor was the door an ordinary door. It was low and broad. All at once it came to me that it was like the inside of a hive. The unshuttered window looked out upon the hives. It was screened.

'He brought me food and drink—honey and honey-mead, cakes sweet with honey, and fruit. He said: 'I do not eat meat.'

'He began to talk. About the life of the bees. Of the utter happiness of the drone, darting through the sun, sipping at what

flowers it would, fed by its sisters, drinking of the honey cups in the hive—free and careless, and its nights and days only a smooth clicking of rapturous seconds.

"What if they do kill you at the end?" he said. "You have lived—every fraction of a second of time. And then the rapture of the nuptial flight. Drone upon drone winging through the air on the track of the young queen! Life pouring stronger and stronger into you with each stroke of the wing! And at last—the flaming ecstasy of the fiery inner core of life—cheating death. True, death strikes when you are at the tip of the flame—but he strikes too late. You die—but what of that? You have cheated death. You do not know it is death that strikes. You die in the heart of ecstasy!"

"He stopped. From outside came a faint, sustained roaring that steadily grew stronger. The beating of thousands upon thousands of bee wings, the roaring of hundreds of thousands of tiny planes. Ferguson leaped to the window.

"The swarms! The swarms!" he cried. A tremor shook him, another and another—more and more rapidly—became a rhythm pulsing faster and faster. His arms, outstretched, quivered—began to beat up and down, ever more rapidly, until they were like the blur of the humming bird's wings—like the blur of a bee's wings. His voice came to me—buzzing, humming. "And tomorrow the young queens fly ... the nuptial flight. I must be there—must—*mzzz ... mzzzb ... bzzz ... bzzzzz ... zzzmmmm ...*"

"For an instant there was no man there at the window. No. There was only a great drone buzzing and humming, striving to break through the screen—go free ...

"And then Ferguson toppled backward. Fell. The thick glasses were torn away by his fall. Two immense black eyes, not human eyes but the multiple eyes of the bee, stared up at me. I bent down closer, closer. I listened for his heartbeat. There was none. He was dead.

"Then slowly, slowly, the dead mouth opened. Through the lips came the questing head of a drone, antennae wavering, eyes regarding me. It crawled out from between the lips. A handsome drone—a strong drone. It rested for a breath on the lips; then its wings began to vibrate. Faster, faster ...

"It flew from the lips of Ferguson and circled my head once and twice and thrice. It flashed to the window and clung to the screen, buzzing, crawling, beating its wings against it. There was a knife on the table. I took it and ripped the screen. The drone darted out—and in a moment was gone!

"I turned and looked down at Ferguson. His eyes stared up at me. Dead eyes. But no longer black: blue, as I had known them of old. And human. His hair was no longer the fine golden fuzz of the bee—it was black as it had been when I had first known him. And his hands were white and sinewy and—hairless."

[The end of *The Drone Man* by Abraham Grace Merritt]