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Author: Abraham Merritt
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The Drone

by

Abraham Merritt

FOUR MEN SAT AT A TABLE of the Explorers' Club--Hewitt, just in from two years botanical research in Abyssinia; Caranac, the ethnologist; MacLeod, poet first, and second the learned curator of the Asiatic Museum; 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 werewolves, vampires, foxwomen, and similar superstitions. Directed thence by a cabled report of measures to be taken against the Leopard Society, the murderous fanatics who drew on the skins of leopards, crouched like them on the boughs of trees, then launched themselves down upon their victims tearing their throats with talons of steel. That, and another report of a "hex-murder" in Pennsylvania where a woman had been beaten to death because it was thought she could assume the shape of a cat and cast evil spells upon those into whose houses, as cat, she crept.

Caranac said: "It is a deep-rooted belief, an immeasurably ancient, that a man or woman may assume the shape of an animal, a serpent, a bird, even an insect. It was believed of old everywhere, and everywhere it is still believed by some--fox-men and fox-women of China and Japan, wolf-people, the badger and bird people of our own Indians. Always there has been the idea that there is a borderland between the worlds of consciousness of man and of beast--a borderland where shapes can be changed and man merge into beast or beast into 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 Khepher the Oldest God with the head of a beetle? Why give Anubis, the Psychopomp, 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 about it one can only guess."

Caranac said: "I think there's something in that borderland, or borderline, idea. 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 werewolf, the snake-woman, and all the others. What could be more simple?"

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

Caranac laughed. "At least half serious. Once I had a friend with an uncannily acute perception of these animal qualities in the human. He saw people less in terms of humanity than in terms of beast or bird. Animal consciousness that either shared the throne of human consciousness or sat above it or below it in varying degrees. 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. Ordinarily he could control the faculty. But sometimes, as he would describe it, when he was in the Subway, or on a bus, or in the theatre--or even sitting tete-a-tete 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 only for a moment--but it was a highly disconcerting moment."

Winston said, incredulously: "Do you mean to suggest 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 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 very creature which is its type. Just as in the case of the friend whose similar sensitivity I have described."

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. Her potion intensified whatever animal or what-not soul that was within them so that the human form no longer registered upon the eyes and brains of those who looked upon them. 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. I've seen drinks and drugs that did pretty nearly the same thing and with no magic or sorcery about them--did it almost to the line of the visual illusion."

Winston began heatedly: "But--"

Hewitt interrupted him: "Will the opposing counsel kindly shut up and listen to expert testimony. Caranac,

I'm grateful to you. You've given me courage to tell of something which never in God's world would I have told if it were not for what you've been saying. I don't know whether you're right or not, but man--you've knocked a hag off my shoulders who's been riding them for months! The thing happened about four months before I left Abyssinia. I was returning to Addis Ababa. With my bearers I was in the western jungles. We came to a village and camped. That night my headman came to me. He was in a state of nerves. He begged that we would go from there at dawn. I wanted to rest for a day or two, and asked why. He said the village had a priest who was a great wizard. On the nights of the full moon the priest turned himself into a hyena and went hunting. For human food, the headman whispered. The villagers were safe, because he protected them. But others weren't. And the next night was the first of the full moon. The men were frightened. Would I depart at dawn?"

"I didn't laugh at him. Ridiculing the beliefs of the bush gets you less than nowhere. I listened gravely, and then assured him that my magic was greater than the wizard's. He wasn't satisfied, but he shut up. Next day I went looking for the priest. When I found him I thought I knew how he'd been able to get that fine story started and keep the natives believing it. If any man ever looked like a hyena he did. Also, he wore over his shoulders the skin of one of the biggest of the beasts I'd ever seen, its head grinning at you over his head. You could hardly tell its teeth and his apart. I suspected he had filed his teeth to make 'em match. And he smelled like a hyena. It makes my stomach turn even now. It was the hide of course--or so I thought then."

"Well, I squatted down in front of him and we looked at each other for quite a while. He said nothing, and the more I looked at him the less he was like a man and more like the beast around his shoulders. I didn't like it--I'm frank to say I didn't. It sort of got under my skin. I was the first to weaken. I stood up and tapped my rifle. I said, 'I do not like hyenas. You understand me.' And I tapped my rifle again. If he was thinking of putting over some similar kind of hocus-pocus that would frighten my men still more, I wanted to nip it in the bud. He made no answer, only kept looking at me. I walked away."

"The men were pretty jittery all day, and they got worse when night began to fall. I noted there was not the usual cheerful twilight bustle that characterizes the native village. The people went into their huts early. Half an hour after dark, it was as though deserted. My camp was in a clearing just within the stockade. My bearers gathered close together around their fire. I sat on a pile of boxes where I could look over the whole clearing. I had one rifle on my knee and another beside me. Whether it was the fear that crept out from the men around the fire like an exhalation, or whether it had been that queer suggestion of shift of shape from man to beast while I was squatting in front of the priest I don't know--but the fact remained that I felt mighty uneasy. The headman crouched beside, long knife in hand."

"After a while the moon rose up from behind the trees and shone down on the clearing. Then, abruptly, at its edge, not a hundred feet away I saw the priest. There was something disconcerting about the abruptness with which he had appeared. One moment there had been nothing, then--there he was. The moon gleamed on the teeth of the hyena's head and upon his. Except for that skin he was stark naked and his teeth glistened as though oiled. I felt the headman shivering against me like a frightened dog and I heard his teeth chattering."

"And then there was a swift haze--that was what struck me so forcibly in what you told of your sensitive friend, Caranac. It cleared as swiftly and there wasn't any priest. No. But there was a big hyena standing where he had been--standing on its hind feet like a man and looking at me. I could see its hairy body. It held its forelegs over its shaggy chest as though crossed. And the reek of it came to me--thick. I didn't reach for my gun--I never thought of it, my mind in the grip of some incredulous fascination."

"The beast opened its jaws. It grinned at me. Then it walked--walked is exactly the word--six paces, dropped upon all fours, trotted leisurely into the bush, and vanished there."

"I managed to shake off the spell that had held me, took my flash and gun and went over to where the brute had been. The ground was soft and wet. There were prints of a man's feet and hands. As though the man had crawled from the bush on all fours. There were the prints of two feet close together, as though he had stood there erect. And then--there were the prints of the paws of a hyena."

"Six of them, evenly spaced, as though the beast had walked six paces upon its hind legs. And after that only the spoor of the hyena trotting with its unmistakable sidewise slinking gait upon all four legs. There were no further marks of man's feet--nor were marks of human feet going back from where the priest had stood."

Hewitt stopped. Winston asked: "And is that all?"

Hewitt said, as though he had not heard him: "Now, Caranac, would you say that the animal soul in this wizard was a hyena? And that I had seen that animal soul? Or that when I had sat with him that afternoon he had implanted in my mind the suggestion that at such a place I would see him as a hyena? And that I did?"

Caranac answered: "Either is an explanation. I rather hold to the first."

Hewitt asked: "Then how do you explain the change of the human foot marks into those of the beast?"

Winston asked: "Did anyone but you see those prints?"

Hewitt said: "No. For obvious reasons I did not show them to the headman."

Winston said: "I hold then to the hypnotism theory. The foot marks were a part of the same illusion."

Hewitt said: "You asked if that was all. Well, it wasn't. When dawn came and there was a muster of men, one was missing. We found him--what was left of him--a quarter mile away in the bush. Some animal had crept into the camp--neatly crushed his throat and dragged him away without awakening anybody. Without even me knowing it--and I had not slept. Around his body were the tracks of an unusually big hyena. Without doubt that was what had killed and partly eaten him."

"Coincidence," muttered Winston.

"We followed the tracks of the brute," went on Hewitt. "We found a pool at which it had drunk. We traced the tracks to the edge of the pool. But--"

He hesitated. Winston asked, impatiently: "But?"

"But we didn't find them going back. There were the marks of a naked human foot going back. But there were no marks of human feet pointing toward the pool. Also, the prints of the human feet were exactly those which had ended in the spoor of the hyena at the edge of the clearing. I know that because the left big toe was off."

Caranac asked: "And then what did you do?"

"Nothing. Took up our packs and beat it. The headman and the others had seen the footprints. There was no holding them after that. So your idea of hypnotism hardly holds here, Winston. I doubt whether a half dozen or less had seen the priest. But they all saw the tracks."

"Mass hallucination. Faulty observation. A dozen rational explanations," said Winston.

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 consciousness--beast or bird or what not. I say it may be that all life is one. A single force, but a thinking and conscious 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 werewolves and their kind as well."

"Now, 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 mid-west college. My roommate was a lad named--well, I'll just be calling him Ferguson. 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 is also 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 fox and hare and 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 smelt and how they saw and heard and smelt 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 these 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 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. I blinked at him when he entered. 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 receding chin. He wore oversized 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. He said:"

"Hello, MacLeod, 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 for 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. So I'm concentrating on the bee. A drone, Mac. A short life but an exceedingly merry one.'"

"I said: 'What in the 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 next Wednesday and maybe your curiosity will be satisfied. I think you'll find it worth while.'"

"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 its door the 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 looks out upon the hives. It was screened."

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

"He began to talk. About the life of the bee. 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 virgin! Life pouring stronger and stronger into you with each stroke of the wing! And at last..the flaming ecstasy..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 the 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 hummingbird's wings...like the blur of a bee's wings. His voice came to me...buzzing, humming...'And tomorrow the virgins fly..the nuptial flight...I must be there...must...mzzz...mzzzb...bzzz...bzzzzzzz...zzzzmmmm....'"

"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 heart beat. 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 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