



BLUE BOOK



AUGUST, 1939

MAGAZINE

VOL. 69, NO. 4

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Cover Design

Painted by Herbert Morton Stoops

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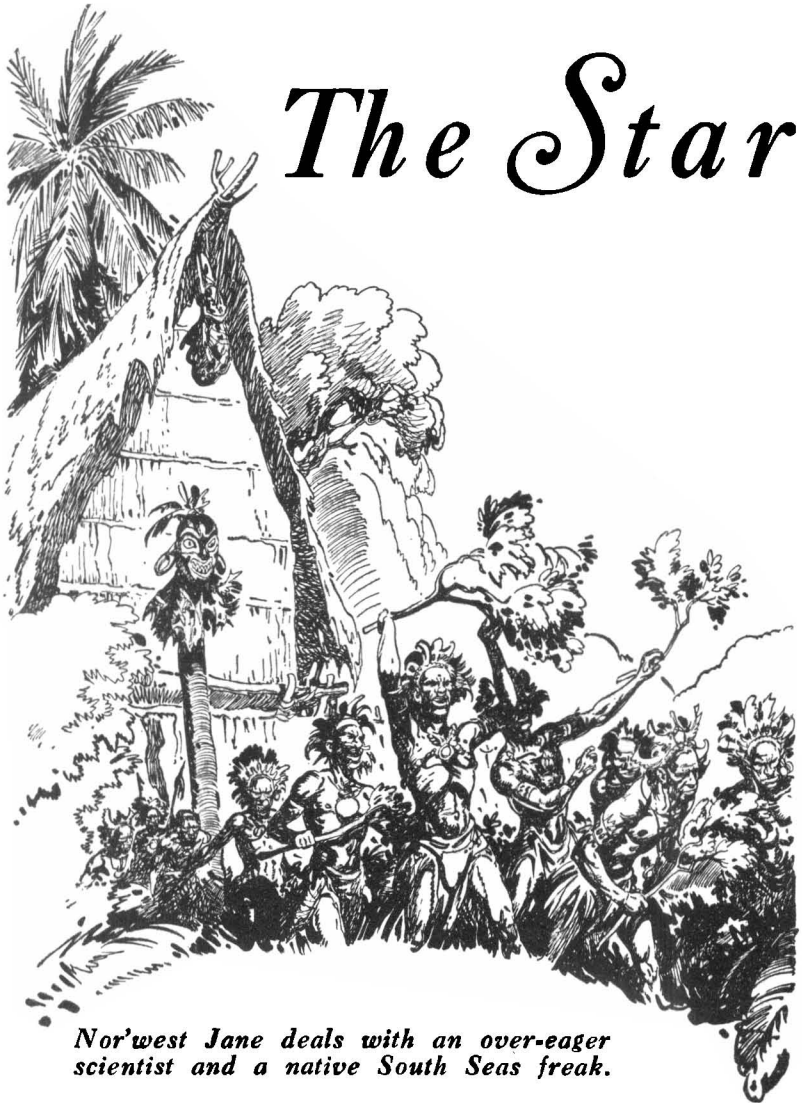
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Published monthly, at McCall St., Dayton, Ohio. Subscription Offices—Dayton, Ohio. Editorial and Executive Offices—280 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE—August, 1939. Vol. LXIX, No. 4. Copyright, 1939, by McCall Corporation. All rights reserved in the United States, Great Britain, and in all countries participating in the Pan American Copyright Convention and the International Copyright Union. Reprinting not permitted except by special authorization. Subscription Prices, one year \$1.50, two years \$2.00 in U. S. and Canada, foreign postage \$1.00 per year. For change of address, give us four weeks' notice and send old address as well as new. Special Notice to Writers and Artists: Manuscripts and art material submitted for publication in the Blue Book Magazine will be received only on the understanding that the publisher and editors shall not be responsible for loss or injury thereto while such manuscripts or art material are in the publisher's possession or in transit. Printed in U.S.A.
Entered as second-class matter, November 12, 1930, at the Post Office at Dayton, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1897.

Pen drawings
by John
Richard
Flanagan

The Star



Nor'west Jane deals with an over-eager scientist and a native South Seas freak.

SELDOM, to Nor'west Island, came travelers or tourists. The large boats—all of four thousand tons—stopped at Samarai; the small boats, ketches and schooners of a hundred or less, didn't ask for passengers, and didn't treat them nobly when they came. Few people ventured the trip a second time.

Of these brave hearts was Lombard, yellow-haired and young—an anthropologist, furiously cultured and fanatically eager; and all his softness lay upon his undoubtedly pleasing surface.

Lombard, not new to the great dark island of which Nor'west Jane was the acknowledged uncrowned queen; Vasco, the plump pearl-buyer of undefined east Mediterranean race; Junia, his daughter, eighteen or so in years, and forty in wisdom; and Jane, grass-widowed from her wedding, in her late twenties, red-haired

and blue-eyed, stood together in the sago-swamp beside the headhunters' village, and discussed business. Nobody noticed the heat, which at this hour of afternoon was appalling—they were all salted to hot climates. Nobody thought or spoke of the stained-glass-window beauty of the towering sagoes, with the sun striking through their enormous fans of emerald and amber; the conference of four included no tourists; and business, to them all, was paramount. Junia's business was just the job a girl has to carry through sometime or other, sooner rather than later—Lombard being, for the moment, the "prospect" without which a deal is not a deal. Vasco, fat, perspiring and disappointed, was trying to maintain, in the face of known facts, that Nor'west must be a pearling proposition, because of the immense freak pearl that had once been found there, spewed

of Death



By
**BEATRICE
GRIMSHAW**

up by a volcanic explosion. Lombard was looking for material for a pamphlet that should stir the doves of several learned societies. And Jane—

But Jane could speak for herself.

"There isn't," she said, looking very tall in her clean white frock, and keeping her eyes fixed on the stockade of the village, where chained cockatoos were already announcing the arrival of guests, "there isn't nothing, not in the way of pearls, in all these seas; and I reckon I

know, because why, I'd have had my husband Jack out of that Sydney hospital where they can't do nothing for him, and away to the American place that makes you think of fowls—what do they call it?"

"Chicago?" ventured Lombard. "But it isn't pron—"

"That's right. Chicago. There's a doctor there who can cut you up and put you together again, so they say; and by jings, I'd 'a' given Jack his chance if



there'd been sight or smell of a pearl, except that one that was only fit to break people's heads with; they called it a museum piece and gave us not half enough. So you see," she concluded.

The small plump man from the Mediterranean unsnapped his cigar-case—offered it to Lombard, who shook his head,—lit an enormous cylinder and spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"You've lent your horses, and brought us to the place we want to see."

"Two pounds a day," interjected Jane.

"And pearls or no pearls, we want to see all over it. All over it," he repeated significantly. "We understand, Junia and I, that you've got these people under control and won't let them harm anybody—"

"Nor let anybody harm them," added Jane.

A flash of understanding passed from the brilliant eyes of Junia to her father's small bright eyes which had maybe, once, been large and shining too. They say that girls take temperament from their fathers.

"Let's put our cards on the table," Vasco said coaxingly. "You're a business woman—"

"Am I?" Jane said musingly, as if she were asking the question of herself.

Junia gave a small tinkling laugh, and looked at Lombard. She caught the flash of Jane's wide blue-green eyes in ricochet. "I thought so," silently she said. "Soppy about him. In spite of dear invalid husbands."

Her father went on: "If you've anything worth showing to us, trot it out. Why," he said, growing suddenly warm, "I have found sousands and sousands of things besides pearls, a sousand times as valuable. I'm what you'd call an impresario of the uncommon. Pearls, yes—when there's nothing better."

Lombard—who didn't understand all this, didn't know for the life of him why Jane was looking troubled, and Vasco eager—said: "As for uncommon, Papua's the home of that. Paradise for entomologists, biologists, especially marine, and for chaps like me; skull-hunters, you know." He was stating a simple fact; but the recoil of it astonished him.

"I said so," Vasco was exclaiming excitedly. "Didn't I was saying, Junia, on that boat, that the story was true, and didn't you was saying it was impossible? Well, here's a man of the science, who tells you. In the seas, on the earths, this country has more strangenesses—"

"You never told me you were interested in any of the sciences," Lombard intervened skeptically.

"No, no, no. For sciences, I am ignorant. Except the big science of all, money. And her I know." He raised himself on his toes, and sank back again, as if in ecstasy. "Money—it grows in strange places. Mrs. Jane, it shall grow for you and for the gentleman who wants to go to Chicago—ah, the terrible place!—if you will take us all, one-two-three, go! to where that god lives."

"God?" put in Lombard. "These people don't have gods."

"They've got a chap," Jane somewhat reluctantly said, "who doesn't go out in daylight, and has a fine house to himself. And they feed him bonzer, and give him presents. And they do reckon he's something above human, like."

"Well?" asked Lombard, still puzzled.

Jane suddenly broke out:

"If some one or other—maybe it was that Greek recruiter—hadn't been and told, and it got out down to Sydney, I wouldn't 'a' said a word if you'd burned me alive. These blokes is all the same as my children, which I haven't got and never won't have, so far's I know. . . ."

But Mr. Vasco, he said it was five hundred if it was true. And if he promises—”

“Promises what? And what’s true?” demanded Lombard, who was now becoming as curious as anyone else.

Jane’s answer exploded like a shell: “True about the man with the tail.”

Lombard said excitedly, “My dear Jane!” Junia Vasco emitted a laugh of the kind once called silvery. “How altogether priceless!” she drawled.

Jane went on: “If he and all of you promises that the poor cow won’t be annoyed in no way, I’ll call them off that’s looking at you through the stockade with their bows drawn, and show you his house. But go easy,” she added. “I don’t want none of my boys getting into no trouble for killing white men. They’re fine boys, and I’m ejicating them as fast as I can; but jings, they’re no Sunday-school kids, and maybe I wouldn’t like them as well if they was.”

Vasco said pleasantly: “I hear you’ve taught them to speak English.”

“I learned them that proper,” Jane agreed. “Nobody allowed in my store that didn’t talk nothing only good English. You can talk to Bulupo himself if he’ll let you; he’s shy sometimes. There, they’re coming out to meet you with branches of trees; that means it’s all right.”

A FEW minutes later Lombard and Vasco emerged from a high thatched native hut. They seemed excited. That was nothing remarkable with Vasco, who habitually boiled at as low a temperature as a Hollywood director; but Jane remembered—what did she not remember about Lombard?—that she had never, until now, seen him moved out of his scientific self-possession.

“Grand!” Vasco was saying. “Superb! Junia, didn’t I was telling you it could be true—anything could be true, about this mad country?”

Lombard declared: “The most perfect specimen ever discovered. Nothing like it before. If I can exhibit him before the—”

“Exhibit him?” Vasco called profanely upon several of his gods. “No! I shall pay the money. I shall show him. He is a fortune. Listen, Junia, he has a tail—but a tail like a cat, with fur; and he can wave that tail so that you will cry with wonder.”

Jane suddenly broke in, much after the manner of a policeman on duty: “What’s all this about? Show him?”



You’ll not do no such thing! Why, stone the crows! I said you could see him—photo him—”

“It doesn’t matter if you said a thousand sings,” excitably interrupted Vasco. “This man, this invaluable curio, he says he wants to go.”

“And you’ve filled the poor fool up with your chat about the food he’ll have, and the ships he’ll travel on, and the things he’ll see—like one of them damn’ recruiters that comes taking them away with their lies?”

“Jane,” said Lombard pacifically, “take it sensibly. This fellow is of enormous scientific importance. You couldn’t deprive—”

“Don’ mind her. The man, he says to me he’ll go. And shall I throw a fortune in the sea?” Vasco spread out scornful hands. “And you, Mrs. Jane, will you don’t take the money that will send your ’usband to the American doctors?”

Jane had never looked handsomer than as she answered him. Lombard, vexed as he was by her opposition, could not but admire her splendid figure, posed beside Junia’s equally beautiful but tiny form.

“My man,” said Jane, “was the finest man in the Islands. He was that fine

they chucked him out of the Tongas, before he married me, because them islands was full of rich princesses, and they was afraid one of them would up and marry him. He was like that. And he'd maybe be like that again, if— But I don't sell no one away from his home because of Jack."

"Home!" Lombard repeated with indignation. "But—"

JANE said: "I seen a woman, when I was in Australia, going round to fairs as the Fat Lady. They dolled her up in red-and-blue velvets and gave her rings and bracelets and white boots with buttons. The people walked past her and talked about her and poked her, same as they talked about and poked beasts in the other part of the show. She used to be smiling all the time, and nodding her poor fat neck at them."

"Well? Sounds all right."

"Does it? I went behind and seen her after. She was lying on the floor, like two barrels that'd been upset in a barroom, and the way she was crying— she says to me: 'It's hell. But don't tell them I told.' And she rolls over and pulls herself up and begins to sing, with the tears hopping down her fat cheeks, for fear the manager would come in and catch her. 'It's hell,' says she."

Lombard made an impatient noise. "There's no need to be sentimental over it. The man says he'd like to go; you can't get over that."

"Can't I?" demanded the Queen of Nor'west, opening her eyes very wide. (And when Jane opened wide her eyes, those who knew her best made haste to stand from under.) "I've only to lift my hand, and not one of you would leave this place alive."

"Does she was telling truth, or not?" crisply demanded Vasco.

"Jane's no liar." Lombard replied.

"But Mrs. Jane," Junia said, "would never harm—you." She looked at Lombard softly, through eyelashes dark and long as rushes set about a twilight mountain tarn. Junia was twilight, even as Jane was splendid day.

Lombard was smiling; hard to say at what, or at whom. "I shouldn't bet on it," he stated. "What do you say, Jane? Are you going to give your boys three more heads for the clubhouse?"

Jane said, trembling all over: "I could."

"I don't doubt it," Lombard said. He was looking at Junia as he spoke, giving her a flashing smile.

Perfectly conscious of the danger of rousing Nor'west Jane to anger, Lombard, who liked to take chances, took his chances now.

It was Vasco, the business man, who hurriedly threw oil on the stormy waters.

"Off course, off course, my dear lady, we will do as you say. Let us take photos, plenty of photos, and we wasn't asking any more."

"Cross your heart, is that true?" Jane demanded. She was still breathing heavily; her face was white beneath its tan.

"Cross my heart, lungs and liver, and kidneys too, if you are liking it," obligingly answered Vasco.

There was a moment's silence. A long way off, the reef made honeyed thunder, stirred by rising tides. So still was it in the village, that the clinking of the shell and bead harness worn by the headhunters could be heard as the wearers breathed. How much they understood, no one could say. But they watched the face of the strangers, and of Jane.

"Jingoes!" said Jane suddenly. "You know I can't do it. Can't set them on you!" Her hands went up before her face.

From the savages, waiting, came one or two curious clucks of sympathy, mingled with annoyance.

"Let's get home," the Queen of Nor'west ordered. "Them blokes, they don't like to see me vexed, no matter who done it. Lombard, I reckon you're telling the truth anyhow. We'll let it go at that."

"But we're all telling the truth, Mrs. Jane," softly expostulated Junia, sidling over toward the young scientist. Her action said—and was meant to say: "Whatever comes of this, I'm on your side."

IT was high noon in the village when they came back next day; Vasco and Lombard armed with cameras; Junia, exquisite in orange linen, prepared to stand by her father to the last ditch, and incidentally to rivet Lombard's fetters a little more closely. She did not quite like the familiar old-friend style of his address to Jane. Jane was opposed to Vasco; Junia didn't mind that, but she feared, somewhat, the possible influence of Lombard—if Lombard let himself be talked over. This small, dainty creature with the soft dark eyes was at heart a true child of clever, greedy Vasco; like her father, she had already gauged to a pound the value of Bulupo; she did not mean to miss her share, whoever suffered.

THE STAR OF DEATH

They'd have to let Lombard show the creature once—just once—before some scientific society; and then, as long as he lasted (Junia knew the trade in human freaks: knew, better than Nor'west Jane, how they broke and crumpled, and died at last, burned up by the glare of a million gazing eyes), she and her father would reap harvest. As for the photographs—but better take them; keep this obstinate woman quiet till the boat returned, and then slip the creature off in the dark.

The heat in the sheltered village, the coconut and betel palms where no wind blew, was murderous. The shadows under the brown-thatch houses were black as pools of tar; beyond them the sun blazed merciless, molten-white. Men were lazing in the houses, women sleeping; here and there a lad went slowly down toward the lime-green pools of the lagoon, seeking a coolness that could not, at that hour, be found.

Vasco, whom nothing escaped, was the first to notice a slim, stooping native youth, dressed in a calico loin-cloth, separate himself from the others who were going to bathe, and slip away to a shady, almost landlocked pool where no one else was bathing.

"That's Bulupo," he chuckled aside to Junia. "Good lad; I told him he must keep away from people and never let himself be seen; and look, he's don't letting anyone look to him now, before ever he goes on any boat!"

Jane, a little way off, had her eye on Bulupo too. "That's queer," she said to Lombard, who was putting a film in his camera. "None of them boys ever goes bathing in that little lagoon; they say it's full up of devils. I dunno where they got the notion, but they're not fond of bathing in the place. And may I go hopping to church, if I know where Bulupo got the notion of going there."



"That's the cure," said Jane. "It draws till it begins to loosen."



Lombard could have told her, but judged it wiser to say nothing. He snapped the camera shut, and waited for Bulupo's return. Come what might, he was going to have his pictures.

"Lookit," said Jane suddenly, "I never heard you make no promises about the boy. That dago bloke, he'd make them and break them like making piecrust; but you—" Jane's deep voice faltered a little. It had been hard for her to see Junia make hot running these two days. "You," she went on, "don't tell lies. What do you reckon you're going to do?"

Cornered, Lombard replied plainly: "Take him with us. If you understood—if you dreamed—of his importance from a scientific point of view—"

"Yes, I know," Jane rapidly answered. "I know all about them monkeys that you says was your grandfathers and mine. God help you for saying it, though you don't believe in no gods. I reckon well you'll get it all the hotter by and by. Jingoos, Lombard, you're like them doctors that kills dogs, and says it's all for their good and because of science. When you're a man, you're bonzer, and I don't care what little tart hears me say it; but when you're a scientific bloke, you're—"

LOMBARD was never to hear what Jane thought of him, as a man of science. A shriek from the lagoon brought her speech to a premature end.

"Something's got him," she said, suddenly cool. She ran toward the water's edge. Bulupo, wailing, sat in the shallow water, holding up one leg. Other natives were running toward him; they

cried out as they ran, and the language they used was not, this time, English.

"Wha—wha—what's they saying?" gasped Vasco, who had come up at the double, and was suffering for it.

Jane, walking deliberately into the warm water, said: "They're saying, 'It's the Star of Death.'"

"What's that?"

Bulupo had ceased crying out; he was sitting quite still, holding out and curiously regarding one lean leg, the leg was marked with several deep punctures, from which blood was slowly trickling.

Jane answered: "You scientific blokes ought to know. It's a pink-and-white starfish; and if it stings you, you die."

"There's no such creature in New Guinea," Lombard stated.

"Didn't I was telling you they got all the strangest things in this country?" Vance yelled. "Lombard, you—"

Lombard intervened. "I've heard of it in the central Pacific. It's very rare, and hasn't been studied."

"Too right it hasn't. But Jack, he knew about it, and Jack learned me," Jane declared. "That boy will die for certain; the natives thinks there's no cure for it."

Vasco was on her in a flash. "But you know there is. Mrs. Jane, you'll tell me—you couldn't be so cruel as not to tell."

JANE said, speaking like one in a dream: "That boy will go home, and lie down; he won't suffer. But he'll just wink out, quiet. And they'll take him, quiet, and bury him under one of them big palms near the sea. And he'll lie there listening to the tide on the reef, and the talkin' of them palms above him, and nobody won't come looking at him, and nobody'll disturb him, not till the Last Day."

"Mrs. Jane!" Vasco howled. "Mrs. Jane!"

Lombard put his hand on her arm. "Jane—will you save him?" Jane pulled away from him, looked once at Bulupo, who had wandered drunkenly out on to the sand.

"I won't," she said.

Lombard struck his hands together. "Lord," he cried, "that anyone could be so—"

"Is your cure a sure one?" Junia suddenly asked. Jane answered her without looking at her. "Sure as death—or life," she told the girl. She was watching Bulupo.

"Is it in your store?"

Jane was silent. If she didn't tell,—if she declared that she had been lying, and that there was no cure for the sting of the deadly creature,—Bulupo would peacefully pass away, as she had wished him to do.

The fish was rare in Papua, little known; the natives there had never heard of a cure for the sting. In the Tongan Islands, where Jack once had lived,—Jack, who had told her all about it,—the fish was common, and the cure common knowledge. But nobody else here knew of that. If she chose to say there was no cure, all evidence would be with her. And on Nor'west Island, life and death were cheap. So cheap that Jane herself had never been able to rate them very highly.

The minute passed.

"Lombard," said Nor'west Jane, "do you give me your word not to take him away if I save him?"

"All right," Lombard gave in grudgingly, "I promise."

AFTERWARD, Jane was never able to remember just what it was that moved her to act as she did. Bulupo was leaning backward, now, very quiet; his eyes were beginning to close.

Jane glanced once at Vasco, once at Lombard, who looked as if he would have liked to wring his hands, if only his dignity as a man of science had allowed. Then, short-skirted, cool, she stepped into the bright green water, holding a stick in her hand. On the tip of it, carefully, she lifted a starfish, a beautiful thing, pink-and-white, like a carved toy wrought of ivory and coral. Vasco gave a yell of horror; Lombard started forward.

And then Nor'west Jane took three quick steps, caught Vasco with a sudden inexorable grip and spoke: "This here starfish can sting twice," she told the terrified Levantine. "And one twitch of my hand will put it on you. Will you sign a court-of-law contract to leave that poor freak in peace here he's at home?"

"Yes," squealed Vasco. "I'll sign—anything."

"Lombard's witness," said Jane. And with that she released Vasco, walked over to the native with the starfish still dangling from the stick, and laid it underside down on the native's leg, where a few dark spots of blood marked the injury. The starfish, with its poisonous spines erect, curled its five fronds round the limb and clung tightly. You could see that the suckers on the white underside

had taken hold, that they were drawing the poison out, acting like tiny cupping-glasses on the skin.

"That's the cure," said Jane. "It draws till it begins to loosen, and then you can knock it off with a stick."

"Keep it on," excitedly ordered Vasco. "Maybe you'll see different when—"

Jane silently held up her hand. The relatives of the boy were gathering round. From the throats of the women came a low, moaning cry.

"I reckon," Jane said, turning away, "we're too late."

Even as she spoke, the starfish loosed its hold of the dead boy, and dropped upon the sand. Lombard lifted it on the point of his stick, and flung it far away. Then he bent over the body, examining it with professional skill.

"Gosh," said Junia, recovering herself quickly (she had turned very pale at the sight of this swift death), "that was a near thing. Look at Father. I think he's going to cry."

Jane had walked away from the rest of the party, mortifyingly sure that she had alienated Lombard for good by her sudden burst of savagery (but "Jings," she said to herself, "how could I let that poor devil be taken?") found him unexpectedly at her elbow.

"You'll have to forgive me, Jane," he said. "All of us, for that matter. We were wrong, and you were right, though I'm sure it would not have made much difference. The poor devil was far gone with disease and would never have stood a long journey. That's why the poison killed him so quickly, I suppose."

Jane said, suddenly, turning away her head, "How much do you reckon is the fare to Chicago?"

