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JUNGLE

STORIES

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**VOODOO
FANGS**
*by DAN
CUSHMAN*

KI-GOR - Jungle Lord
*staked his lion strength, his mamba speed
against the jackal cunning of*
THE LOST BEASTS OF TA' TAMBA

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JUNGLE STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, President

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A NEW FULL-LENGTH KI-GOR NOVEL

THE LOST BEASTS OF TA'TAMBA . . . John Peter Drummond 4

Ki-Gor, White Lord of the Jungle, and Brend, boy-emperor of the Stolen Kingdom, battled side by side against the thousand warrior-beasts of Ramfis. Crawling swamp lizards would have had a better chance of victory. But struggling in the claws of Durga-Rama, the fiend usurper, Helene cried: "Ki-Gor, my mate, will save me!"

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What ancient monsters would prowl the jungle when the foolish bwanas unlocked the Valley of Dragons?

Winter Issue 1948-'49

(Nov.-Jan.)

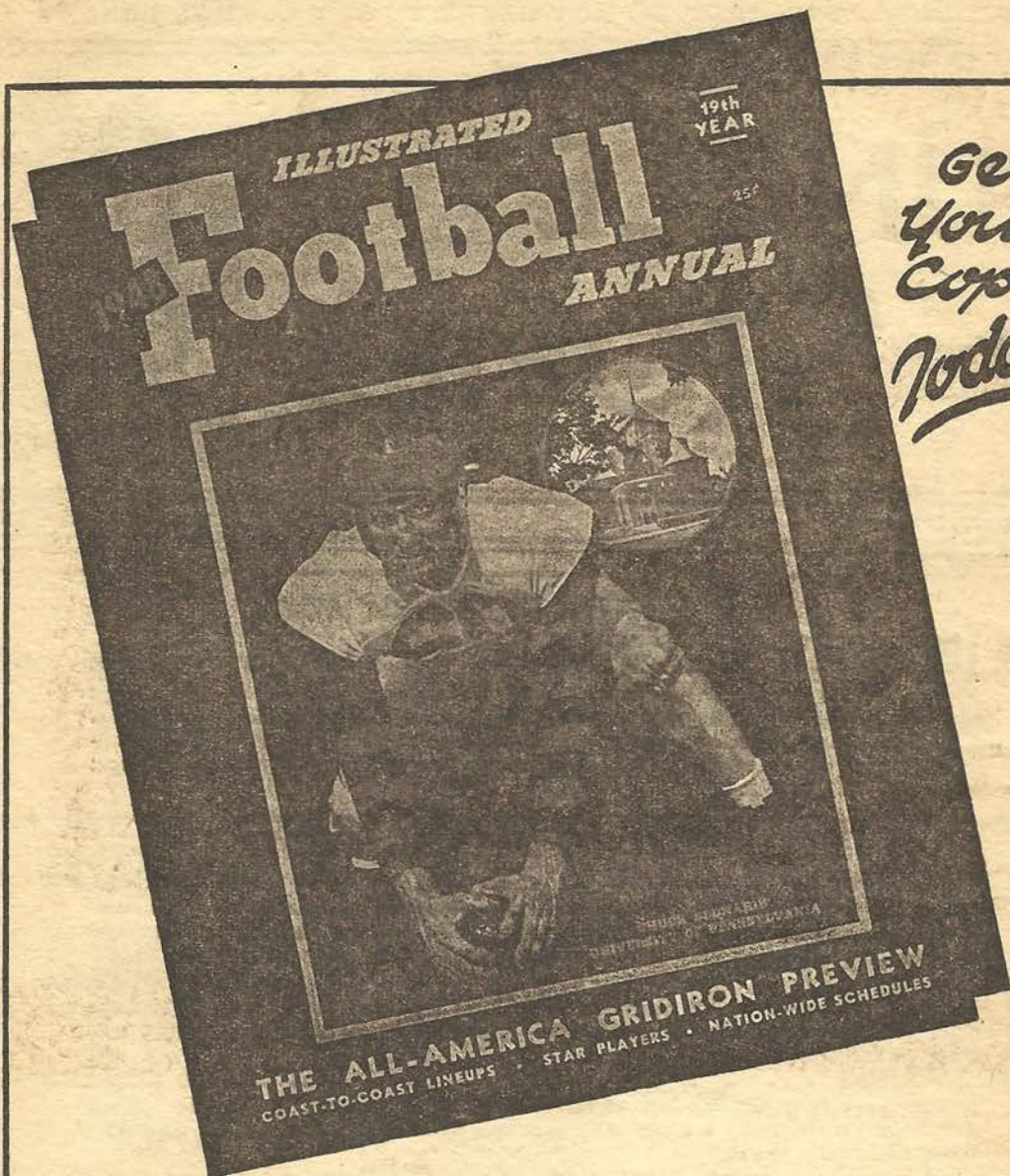
Vol. 4, No. 3



20c per copy

THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

JUNGLE STORIES: Published quarterly by Glen-Kel Pub. Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter October 2, 1944, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted 1948 by Glen-Kel Pub. Co., Inc. All rights reserved. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.



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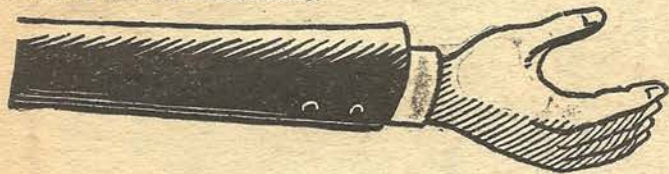
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Durga-Rama snarled a command, and Panthra, the lioness, leaped at Ki-Gor, clawing at his eyes. Ki-Gor tried to shift position . . . He heard Arlenna scream . . .

THE LOST BEASTS OF TA'TAMBA

By **JOHN PETER DRUMMOND**

Could a thousand crawling jungle monsters stop Ki-Gor's
safari to the Stolen Kingdom?

KI-GOR had been watching the strange scene for many minutes. He had seen the black man fall and die with the peculiar foam showing at the corners of his mouth. He had watched the terrified movement of the boy, who had light brown skin and slim, un-negroid features. He had watched the leopardess as

she first caught their spoor and crept forward, belly down along the drooping bokongu branch.

So intent had the leopardess been on her prey that she had not noticed the slight stir of air, like the passage of some mighty bird, as Ki-Gor swung in a wide, pendulum arc through the air, one long, supple

arm holding a vine. Her eyes had not strayed from the quarry as Ki-Gor dropped lightly to a branch directly above, his well-developed toes giving him sure footing without a steadying touch of his hands.

As the leopard inched forward, Ki-Gor watched with grim intensity, his hand drawing the great, keen-edged hunting knife from his waist. At last the leopard's tail stopped twitching; her body became rigid as it set to spring. He sensed the exact moment and leaped, his tall form plummeting directly in the cat's springing path.

Ki-Gor struck the boy with his back as he fell, knocking him face forward to the ground. The leopardess saw Ki-Gor at the last instant, but she was already launched in the air, unable to alter her course. She twisted, snarling, flinging her feet to strike Ki-Gor's shoulder. It was a movement as fast as the strike of a jungle adder, as fast as the lash of a cobra. But quick as her movement was, Ki-Gor was ahead of it. There was a subtle, lightning shift of his tall, superbly muscled body, a weaving back, a darting movement of his left hand, and his powerful fingers closed on the great cat's throat.

The leopardess was very large—taller, heavier than Ki-Gor himself. From nose to tip of tail she would have measured more than eight feet, and her velvet soft fur covered a massive weight of steel-hard muscle.

But despite that, Ki-Gor held her at arm's length. He seemed to be toying with her, as she herself had so often toyed with baboons before killing them for the pure joy of killing. He held her at arm's length as her forepaws lashed in futile arcs. Then, suddenly, he hurled her to earth, following her down, swinging with the knife.

The next second he was crouched with one knee on her flanks, the long blade driven completely through her chest, pinning her to the earth.

He waited thus until the leopardess was through swinging her paws in death agony. He watched the tension of living leave her muscles, then he removed his knee, jerked the strong hunting blade free, and with

considerable care polished the blade on the animal's soft fur.

Only then did he look at the boy.

"I am Ki-Gor," he said, speaking the Congo dialect in a voice that was singularly soft, like the rustle of night wind through ochilla weed.

Brend, the brown boy, backed slowly away, bronze-tipped assagai in his hands, staring at the strange man who stood before him. It had all happened too quickly for his understanding—there had been the man dropping from nowhere, knocking him to the ground; the sudden, sharp struggle between man and clawing beast; the swing of the knife; the death-agony of the leopardess—and now, as a final wonder, here was this man of the light colored skin claiming to be the mythical person called Ki-Gor.

Long ago, Brend had heard of Ki-Gor. In his native valley, far beyond the eastern purple rim, Brend had listened to ivory hunters tell of a great man-animal who called himself thus. However, none of these men claimed to have ever actually seen Ki-Gor, and so he considered it only another story to be told in the hours of night, when the fire burned blue—a story to be followed by tales of Tol-ab, the spotted crocodile, and Skaab, the jeweled elephant who was said to roam the primordial fastness of the White Nile.

And now here was this man, in form like a god, in quickness and strength like nothing he had ever seen, claiming to be the very man.

Ki-Gor laughed, "Why do you stare at me, boy? I am real. Here, feel of my flesh. I am not some shadow of the sun. I am merely Ki-Gor, the man who stood on a limb and watched a leopardess planning to eat you for supper."

Brend remained tense for a moment, hunched forward, the assagai pointed at Ki-Gor's chest. At last the quiet sincerity of the White Lord's voice made him forget his fear. He lowered the assagai.

Ki-Gor then walked to the fallen black and bent over him. He ran his hands over his lifeless muscles, glanced at the still-open eyes, at the flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth.

"This man was poisoned!"

"No, he was not!" Brend fingered his assagai nervously, raising his voice. "I did not poison him. I swear by the gods of my people that I did not——"

"Boy, I did not say you had. You were not terrified of him in life, but in death. Therefore you did not poison him. I watched it all—from above."

Ki-Gor walked through the knee-deep ferns, light-footed as the leopard-cat he had just slain. He laid his bronzed hand on Brend's shoulder.

"Boy—who are you? Where do you come from? I know every native tribe, every cubit of this jungle that is my home. Yet I have never seen a man of a brown tribe such as yours. And this black man—the tribal welts on his cheeks are strange to me. It must be you have come from a great distance."

THE BOY did not look like a typical African native. His skin had a strange, olive cast. His chin was rather pointed, with a cleft in the middle, his teeth were even and small, his face narrow, his nose thin and high bridged, his hair wavy brown. His face reminded Ki-Gor of the carvings he had seen long ago in temple ruins near the land of Sho-nab, which white men called "Ethiopia."

The lad answered, "My name is Brend. I am from a valley called Ramfis, eight days travel from the rising sun. I do not know where I am or why I was brought here. Only Kal-ab could answer these questions, and he is dead."

"Why would anyone wish to poison Kal-ab?"

"He was not poisoned. For eight days Kal-ab had only the meat he killed, and the fruit we picked. I ate of everything that he . . ."

"Some poisons are slow, and some are quick. The tribes of Bakele have one poison made of white-veil spiders which brings death in the space of twenty breaths, and another poison of dragon toadstools which kills in fifty days. I will wager that your man Kal-ab was poisoned before he left the valley of Ramfis."

Ki-Gor then asked. "What is that tattoo mark on your shoulder, Brend?"

"It is my mark of birth."

"Are all the children of your valley thus marked?"

"Only those of the king's line," the boy answered proudly.

From his first glance, Ki-Gor had guessed that this lad was not of ordinary tribal blood. There are many races clinging to remote corners of the jungle, and such races may have kings and customs dating to eras long forgotten.

"Is the king your father?"

"The king, my father, is dead."

"You were next in line, but you were judged too young by the council of old men—is it not so?"

Brend looked at the White Lord in wonder. "It is so!" he breathed. "Then it must be that you are the real Ki-Gor of whom the ivory hunters told. They said that Ki-Gor moved by magic, flying through the air like the wind, leaping like an arrow of the gods. They said he had eyes that see beyond the most distant horizon, seeing things even in the minds of ordinary men."

Ki-Gor laughed. "I have no magic, Brend. I merely guessed. You see, once, when gored by a rhino, I spent many weeks in a thing which my white brothers call a bed, while my friend, a doctor of the mission house at M'bwela, gave me bitter medicines to cure me. In the end I was cured by an ancient black with a poultice of leaves and bark, but no matter——while there I learned to read. I read a story like yours written in a book. That is all the magic I have—the memory of that story, and the guessing of yours. Now tell me everything."

Brend spoke, "I was born in the valley of Ramfis where my father's people have ruled as kings for more years than a great tree has leaves. My father, King Sandrak, died but a council of chiefs judged me too young to take his place. When I reached my fifteenth year, I could marry the girl Arlenna and rule as king. For two years now it has been so planned."

"There is an old man ruling in your place, Brend?"

"He is not old. Durga-Rama is still young——scarcely five-and-twenty. Why did you think him old?"

"Because the old are more wicked."

"Durga-Rama is wicked although young!" Brend compressed his lips and doubled his small fists. There was in his attitude a hint of the man to be, a glimpse of the royal blood in his veins. "Durga-Rama has always desired Arlenna. He has always wanted to rule. I have been a fool to let him do this to me—let him steal me from the valley. But now what can I do? How can I stop him? He will marry Arlenna and rule in my place."

They were startled by the sound of a woman's voice coming from the jungle's green wall.

"It will not be so."

The boy spun around, staring in amazement as a tall, slim-waisted girl walked into view.

She was beautiful. Her beauty seemed almost fragile at first glance, but there was supple grace and strength beneath her smooth, tanned skin. She wore a strip of leopard fur, leaving her slim waist free, revealing legs that were gracefully long. She came close to Ki-Gor, stood with shoulder pressed against the muscles of his arm.

It could be seen how perfectly they were matched, that she was truly the White Lord's mate, Helene.

A little smile touched her lips. She kept her eyes on Ki-Gor's face, sensing the response of her jungle mate to Brend's story of treachery.

Ki-Gor's muscles seemed tense beneath his tawny skin. They were like drawn springs which had waited too long for release. He noticed Helene looking up at him.

He asked Brend, "You could show me the route back to your valley?"

"You could not find it. Only Kal-ab knew the way."

A tiny man climbed rapidly down a vine and skipped through ferns coming to his armpits. It was Ngeeso, the pigmy chieftain. He cried, "Who is it dares say there is any spot in the jungle that Ki-Gor cannot find?"

Ki-Gor smiled. He again spoke to Brend,

"You say you traveled eight days?"

"Yes."

"Always toward the west?"

"Each morning the sun rose at our backs."

"And on the third day did you see a humped peak through the mists of the north?"

"It was so."

Ki-Gor nodded.

Helene asked, "You have been there, Ki-Gor?"

"I have been to the blue rim of hills which the Spala natives call the ridge of Ngoi. There is a pass which the Spalas fear to climb. They have stories which tell of a fierce race of great apes, and of tall black men who kill them with bronze-pointed assagais." He stepped over, and with a naked toe rolled the bronze-pointed assagai that Kal-ab had carried. "Yes, that is the same place. Ramfis. It has long been known to hunters and traders, though its wealth was not enough so any would brave the danger of trading with its natives. Within five days—six at most—I could be standing on its rocky rim." And he smiled. "If I chose."

Helene could see the sparkle of excitement in the Jungle Lord's eyes, the tense eagerness in his muscles.

"I will never tame you, my Ki-Gor," she said softly.

II

THE ISSUE now decided, Ki-Gor was impatient to start. The valley of Ramfis was a long journey. Even traveling alone it would take him five days. With Brend and Helene along, he would be inevitably delayed. And there was always a risk that the usurper, Durga-Rama, would make Arlenna his wife as soon as Brend was out of the valley.

Ki-Gor whistled twice in a low, vibrant manner, and was answered a few seconds later by a rumbling elephant call from some place back in the deep bush. They could hear undergrowth crashing, the shaking thud of heavy feet, and soon a huge elephant came into view, his trunk swinging like a pendulum between gleaming tusks that would have been worth a small fortune to the ivory hunters of Europe.

Brend trembled and commenced to run,

for there is no beast of the African jungle more feared than a bull elephant such as this, but Ngeeso, the pigmy, streaked up behind the boy and pulled him back.

"Have no fear, brown boy! Behold! It is Marmo. See the man Marmo calls his master?"

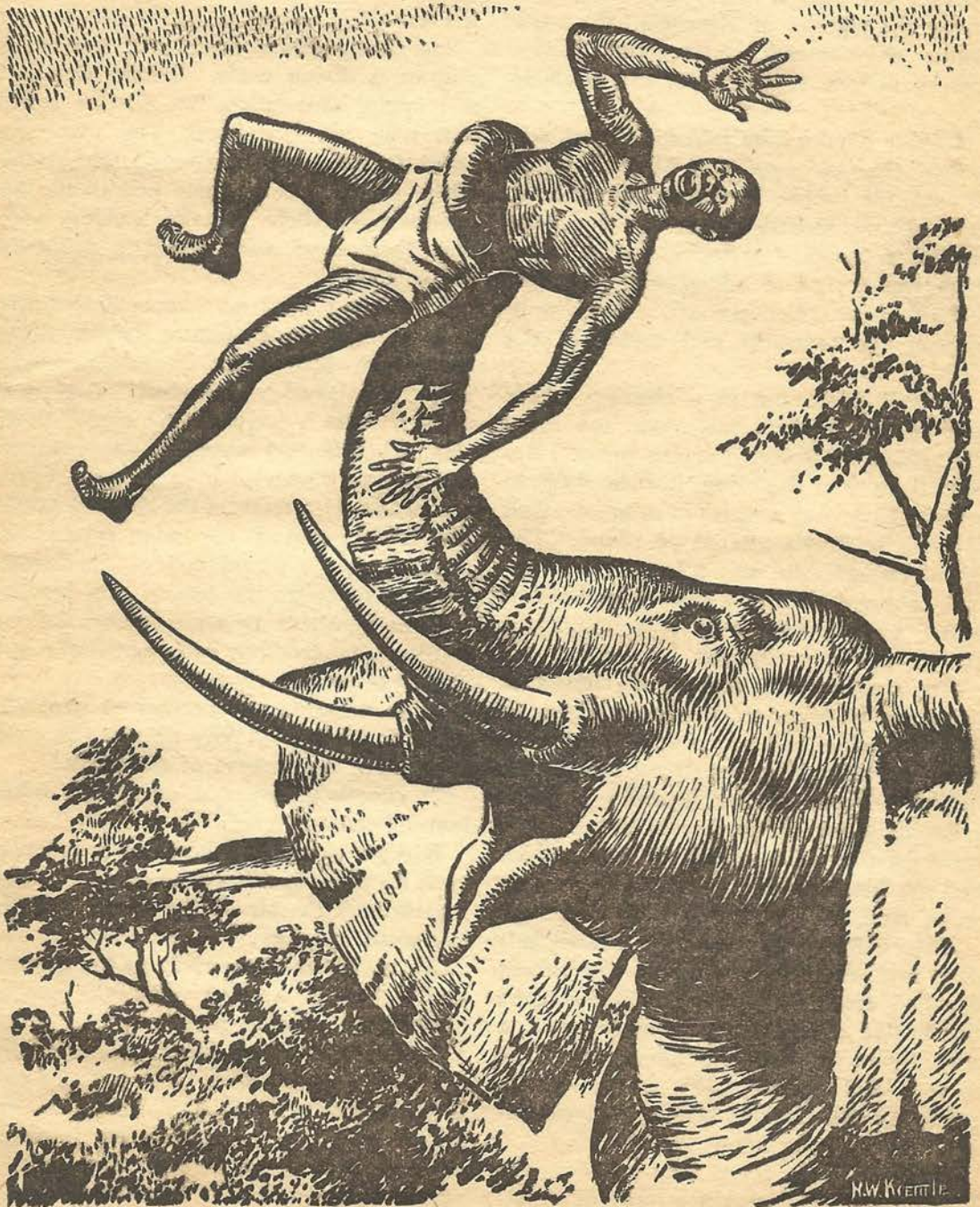
Ngeeso pointed with triumphant pride as the huge tusker came to a ground-shaking stop, and sank on front knees before

Ki-Gor, curling his trunk for the White Lord's foot.

Brend returned with hesitant step, staring in wonder as Ki-Gor was lifted lightly to Marmo's head. The elephant would have started off, but Ki-Gor's voice, speaking the Swihili tongue, stopped him.

"There are more to follow, thou impatient mountain!"

Marmo sank again to his knees, waving



his wide ears in understanding. He coiled his trunk again, lifting Helene.

"Come, Brend," smiled Ki-Gor. "You are of a line of kings, you must ride in a kingly style."

With Ngeeso jabbing at his back, Brend placed his foot on the curled end of Marmo's trunk, and was lifted aloft.

"And now, boy, I must bandage your eyes," said Ki-Gor.

Helene explained, "Do not be afraid, Brend. We have a secret home that none except the pigmies of Ngeeso's tribe know about. Even though we trust you, Ki-Gor will let no one see the path that leads to it."

Ki-Gor fixed a blindfold of leopard skin around the boy's eyes, and Marmo started through the jungle. Despite his great bulk, the elephant moved gracefully along the narrow footpath. After a couple miles there was a roar of falling water and the feel of spray filled the air. They were nearing the cataracts and rapids of the river.

A trail broke out in a clearing where natives once cultivated cassava, and Marmo waded belly-deep in cane grass. Before them was the river, lashing itself to a white fury over a series of cataracts, then splitting in rapids around an island. The island was narrow, only a few acres in extent, bowered over with huge trees beneath whose vaulted tops only stray beams of equatorial sun penetrated.

From a towering tree of the island to one equally high on the near shore, a bridge of vines had been swung. It looked slim, like a single spider strand at its great height. From below, it could be seen swinging slowly in the breeze that forever blew up this wild stretch of river which had not been looked upon by a half dozen white men.

Helene found the end of a tendril ladder, and climbed swiftly as the others watched from the ground. She reached the bridge and paused, looking down, a tiny figure against the blue sky. She waved, and started with swift, certain stride as the fragile bridge swayed beneath her.

But even such travel was too slow for Ki-Gor. He had speedier ways of cross-

ing to his island. He lifted Brend on his shoulders, cautioning him to keep a tight grip around his neck. Then, as though the boy weighed no more than a ngila monkey, he went swiftly, hand over hand, up a tendril to the high-swinging bridge. There he found a vine rope, tied and ready. He untied its end, pulled back, stretching it tight, stood for a few seconds, looking at the river far below. Then, calling a final word of caution to the boy on his shoulders, he wrapped the vine rope around his left wrist and leaped.

He swung down, down with the swiftness of a diving eagle. Brend screamed and might have fallen, but Ki-Gor seized him with his free hand. The rope was fixed to the exact center of the bridge. They swung like a long pendulum, the swiftness of their passage making wind burn their faces, and their hair straighten out behind.

Then they were no longer descending. They were at the bottom of the arc, flying level with the river, its white-running froth just beneath their feet. And next up, up, until it seemed they would never stop. At the very crest, Ki-Gor laughed, and twisted about his eyes seeking Helene who was only a tenth of the distance across the bridge. And the next second, he alighted at the island end of the bridge, his feet touching the tendril and bamboo walk as lightly as an eagle feather striking water. The crossing had been made in a matter of seconds.

"You are slow, copper-haired one!" he called to Helene. "Why do you choose to imitate the ant instead of the hawk?"

"I choose to live and enjoy our island home!" she answered.

Ki-Gor shook his head in wonder at such an attitude. For him, a vine swinging through the air of the jungle was the last word in safety.

He made his way swiftly to the ground, and followed a neat path of pebbles through an opening in the wall of green. He put Brend down then, and untied the blindfold from his eyes. The path led to a tiny clearing with a small house at one side. The house was made after the white man's fashion of logs and bamboo, with a veranda and a roof of bundled palm.

They went inside. It had no furniture in the general sense of the term, but it was clean and dry, with numerous couches of fragrant grass, and a hammock of woven vines where Ki-Gor liked to take his ease after one of his journeys that well might encompass a quarter part of the dark continent.

THERE was not a great deal to be done in preparation for the journey. There was no food to take, for Ki-Gor and Helene were adept at finding food anywhere. There were no plans to be made, for the master plan of the expedition had already mapped itself in Ki-Gor's brain. For supper he ate a few strips of pink antelope meat which had been hanging in the cool shadows since the day before, and he spent the hours of evening whetting his hunting blade and assagai point until either would cut hair that was blown against them, and to wrapping new sinew around his mighty strongbow—the bow that no man save Ki-Gor had strength to bend.

Helene watched these preparations intently. "You act like one going to war!" she said, with a tone of alarm.

He nodded. "I have a feeling that I am about to face great danger, to see many strange forms of death. I cannot explain it." He indicated his heart. "It is something that comes to me—here."

They slept, and in the morning they left with blue mist still hanging over the river. The scent of the jungle rose around them—the incredible fragrance of unseen blossoms mingled with pungent odors of fungus and decay. Night prowling animals had gone to their dens, and only a chorus of birds and the inevitable chattering of monkeys interrupted the crystal stillness of morning. Marmo went steadily, following a narrow footpath, the sides of his huge body brushing the narrow, jungle walls, carrying with effortless ease the ones on his back—Helene, Brend, Ngeeso, and Ki-Gor himself.

From time to time, without uttering a word, Ki-Gor would seize a low hanging vine and disappear into the vast ocean of treetops overhead. Marmo would trudge on, never glancing or waving an ear at

these strange antics of his master. The others would ride for what seemed a long time, then, unexpectedly, Ki-Gor would appear, dropping lightly to the elephant's back from the overhanging jungle.

That evening, after being gone for longer than usual on one of his mysterious trips, Ki-Gor said,

"There is a clearing ten miles distant on a little trail branching to the north. We will find fresh water there, as well as plantains and bananas."

It seemed incredible that Ki-Gor could have gone so far, even swinging from tree to tree, but after a long hour's travel, they found the camping place exactly as he said.

Next day was much like the first, as was the next, and so on for five days. They were now deep in an unknown jungle where swamp stretched for many miles, and trees with bulbous bases, like giant tulips, grew from the water. Reaching higher ground, they found an ancient footpath striking northeast through the domains of Shuli and Bantu tribesmen. Toward the close of the fifth day, the camel-humped mountain rose at their left, and on the sixth they saw a jagged horizon, purplish and remote through primeval mists.

"It is there!" cried Brend, standing on Marmo's swaying back, dancing on his small feet from excitement. "It is the ridge of Ramfis! Ki-Gor's magic has led us back by the identical trail that Kal-ab followed!"

After sighting the ridge of Ramfis, Ki-Gor hunted the remote back paths of the jungle. He turned over the guiding of Marmo almost wholly to Helene, and spent practically his entire time making long excursions through the treetops, scouting to make sure that the men of Ramfis would not be warned of their approach. For the safety of Brend, and the girl, Arlenna, his coming must be a surprise to Durga-Rama.

That night he chose to camp in a deep ravine where a trickle of cool water flowed from a mossy cleft. In the morning, he awakened Brend, and the two of them set out to survey the country.

They left the ravine and climbed slowly through areas of thicket and scrubby trees.

Half way up the ridge of Ramfis, Ki-Gor sighted the stone and thatch huts of the black guards, who, with their families, lived out their lives near the passes, standing guard chiefly against bands of wild Mahkoor tribesmen who each five or ten years, sent raiding parties down from their country in the sudan of south Egypt.

Ki-Gor squatted in the crotch of a small tree, so perfectly concealed that one of the great apes which frequented the scrub forest passed within an assagai's cast without detecting him. Ki-Gor dropped to the ground a few seconds later, and found Brend trembling from fright.

"Boy, what is the matter?"

"The ape. Did not you see——"

Ki-Gor laughed. "Of course I saw."

Brend was serious, "Even the greatest black warriors fear to meet the great apes. See up above! The guards stay always near the passes. They would not dare venture over where the country is broken by caverns."

"Who are the warriors of your tribe that they are terrified by a colony of apes. Surely——"

"They are not terrified!" said Brend with sudden loyalty. "They have been left alone for hundreds of years because they help us guard against raids by the Mahkoor."

"In other words, the apes keep their place, and the people of Ramfis keep theirs."

"Yes."

Ki-Gor pointed toward the ridge where it was rock-jumble and gnarled trees.

"If we were there, we could see almost the entire valley, is it not so?"

Brend nodded. "If such a place could be reached."

"The ascent does not look difficult and I must see what lies ahead."

"But I told you, the——"

"Yes, the apes!" Ki-Gor nodded. "Perhaps those apes will prove to be our allies before we are through, Brend."

"You do not understand. They are untamed. They make no friends." He looked at Ki-Gor, "You do not intend that we should——"

"Not we. You are going back to the ravine to wait with Marmo, Helene and

Ngeeso. I will go up the ridge."

KI-GOR looked at the sun. He had time for the journey before dark.

He paused for a moment to eat a strip of uncooked zebra flesh. Afterward he cleansed himself in the tiny stream, tightened the thong of his strong-bow and slipped it over his bronzed shoulder, made certain that his quiver was filled with heavy, copper-pointed arrows.

The sun was dropping toward the vast jungle of the west when Ki-Gor emerged from the ravine, and trotted with a long, effortless stride up a flank of the ridge to the country pockmarked with trees, and covered with billows of gnarled trees. The wind was wrong, carrying his scent to the hills, but that did not stop him. He must find a safe camp in the ape country, then cross to the valley of Ramfis without delay.

As he neared the crest, he climbed more slowly, the assagai in his left hand.

There were movements——shapes of grayish black moving here and there among the trees, blending in color with the basaltic rocks. Ki-Gor's keen nostrils were distended a little, catching the characteristic unpleasant odor of the anthrapoids. He watched the earth, noting the droppings, and the trails that had been worn by centuries of hairy feet.

The way became steeper. Here and there he scaled sheer-faced escarpments. The rocky crest was now only an arrow's shot above. He sensed the closeness of danger, and his hearing became more acute. He detected soft, rustling movements ahead of him, and behind. There were red-lidded, savage eyes watching from trees, and brush, and rocks, but Ki-Gor walked on, seeming to be as casual and relaxed as ever.

Then there was a different kind of movement. Abrupt. He sensed what was coming, and spun around. A gray-black, hairy form was charging from behind a twisted thorn tree. A huge bull ape. Massive——almost on the scale of a gorilla. As Ki-Gor saw him, the beast roared, rising to his bowed hind legs, throwing high his massive, hairy arms, his yellowish fangs flashing in the dim, evening light.

With a movement of automatic quickness, so fast no eye could have followed, Ki-Gor slid the strong-bow from his shoulder, fixed the notch of a copper-pointed arrow. The bow bent under his mighty arm, and the arrow was driven with the force of a swinging axe.

It was a perfect shot. The arrow entered just left of the ape's frontal chest-bone, plunged on to shatter the spine, pass completely through, and bury half its shaft in the rocky earth a dozen strides beyond.

The ape plunged on for three desperate strides. He shrilled a death-cry, and plunged face foremost across the ground. He lay there, chest heaving blowing red foam from his nostrils so close that Ki-Gor could feel his hot, damp breath against his feet.

A garbled chorus of sound went up from the brush around as other apes jabbered, watching their fellow lashing in death agony. Another bull bounded out, and as he rose to charge, Ki-Gor smashed him down with a second arrow. A third ape crashed out. Ki-Gor spun, fixing an arrow, bending the bow. He hesitated, and watched with grim satisfaction as the bull paused, and retreated on all fours with his ugly rump thrust high.

Ki-Gor's arm relaxed. He removed the arrow, dropped it once more into the quiver.

Here and there he caught sight of gray-black forms slinking into the deeper shadows. He waited until the sounds of their



retreat became faint, and the air was cleansed of the peculiar taint of their bodies, then, moving swiftly once more, sometimes bounding to the crotches of trees and away again, he covered the final three hundred meters to the ridge crest.

There, after many days, he looked down and saw the wide valley of Ramfis spread beneath him.

The valley was broad and undulating, covered with jungle, broken at intervals by irregular patches of sudan grass. The patches of grass looked tiny from his remote vantage point but Ki-Gor, with his acute sense of distance, knew that many of them were miles in extent. Gigantic baobab trees grew here and there among the sudan areas, and in one clearing, like long-legged spider-creatures, he could see grazing giraffes.

Through the center of the valley flowed a river, its surface gleaming like polished steel in the last reflected light of the sun.

He was tempted to go on, now that he was so close. Instead, he turned back. Helene had been worried by Brend's talk of the savage apes, and he did not want to cause her unnecessary anxiety.

He retraced his steps, the apes giving him a wary distance. Darkness settled, and



he covered the final miles with instinct guiding him through the black, jungle night. Helene, Brend and Ngeeso were sitting close to the comforting bulk of Marmo, waiting.

Ki-Gor squatted on the sandy floor of the cave for hours that night, talking to Brend about the valley of Ramfis.

III

LIKE ALL PLACES, Ramfis had its good and bad men. There was the ruling class of brown men who had long ago journeyed up the great river from the land where all is desert. And there were black tribesmen, like Kal-ab. The blacks outnumbered their brown rulers by eight to one, and they were brave fighters, but through superior intelligence the brown men kept them in virtual slavery. Across the river, Brend said, a tribe of cannibal blacks called the Batolo had held sway for centuries. Sometimes the Batolo would cross the river and steal a woman or two who were working in the Ramfis yam fields, but generally they kept the peace, for, despite their savagery, they were no match for the well-disciplined army of the Ramfians.

On the sand of the cave floor, Brend drew maps of the valley, the city, and even plans of the bamboo and ironwood houses of the brown men, while Ki-Gor watched intently, fixing each picture in his mind. Brend told much of Durga-Rama; of Arlenna, the virgin; and of his friend, Liike, the high-priest of Isis. He also told of the danger that waited, of the merciless treatment accorded spies, of the great Arab dogs which were kept chained to give alarm when strangers entered the walled city of the brown men, and of the savage lion, Panthra, which Durga-Rama had trained to guard him.

With the first sign of dawn, Ki-Gor left the cave. He walked rapidly down the slope toward Ramfis. As the scrub growth was left behind, and the jungle became deep, he seized a vine and swung to a tree limb. He moved from tree to tree, swinging in easy arcs.

He did not hurry. He did not want to reach the city of Ramfis before dark. For

minutes on end he would pause and stand on some high, swaying limb, perfectly blended into the pattern of the jungle, watching for some telltale movement. He could see none.

When evening came, Ki-Gor was close to the city of Ramfis. Hand over hand he climbed the huge branches of a baobab tree, and perched near its top to watch.

All was as Brend had diagramed. There was a large native village of thatch huts, a circular stockade enclosing the more pretentious houses occupied by the brown rulers. He recognized from Brend's descriptions the palace of Durga-Rama, the amphitheatre where gladiators of the black race often fought on feast days, the temples of Isis and Ra with the house of High-Priest Liike standing between them.

He mapped his course. He would scale the stockade on the far side where large trees of the jungle crowded close. Once inside, he would cross to the shadow of the inner stockade which circled Durga-Rama's house, and enter Liike's house from the rear. His chief worry were those great, Arab hounds of which Brend had warned him. They might catch his spoor, and commence howling their alarm.

Darkness settled. He dropped to the ground, passed through the soft, wet earth of a millet field, commenced circling the native city. Tom-toms were beating, and he could see oiled, black bodies dancing around a fire. There were no brown men dancing, of course. They looked with disdain on such pleasures, preferring to lie on reed couches and drink a sweet, pink wine concocted of the juice of sugar palms.

There were watchmen along the stockade. Sometimes Ki-Gor passed within long assagai reach of them, but so silent were his footsteps, so stealthy was every movement, that his presence was not once suspected.

Ki-Gor paused on reaching the far side. It would be easy to scale the stockade when the guards were not watching, but there was always a danger that one of the dogs would scent him and raise the alarm.

He moved back in the shadows of the great trees, planning another course. One of these trees towered far above its fellows. He climbed it, examining the long,

ropelike vines that stretched from its high branches. None of them swung with sufficient freedom to suit his purpose, so he cut one and tied it near the end of a middle limb. He grasped the vine, swung himself in a wide, gentle arc. At the crest of his swing he released his grip, sailed clear of the stockade, alighting in the deep shadows far beyond.

He stood close against the inner wall which surrounded the house of Durga-Rama. The guard was a short assagai cast away, standing with his back turned. Ki-Gor started away—stopped. A huge, gray dog emerged in the starlit yard. The dog snarled, lunged towards him, and was brought to a sudden stop by a chain around his neck.

Ki-Gor whisked the strongbow from his shoulder, fitted an arrow, released it. There was a thud as it struck. The dog had commenced to bay, but the sound changed to a whining gasp as he fell.

Ki-Gor waited, back pressed against the wall. The guard was turning, assagai ready in the bend of his arm. He was peering toward the spot where the dog lay. He evidently could see nothing. He probably would not even have investigated had not something else caught his eye.

A tiny man had climbed the stockade



and was balanced on its crest. The guard shouted a word in his tribal tongue and charged forward with assagai pointed. For a second, Ki-Gor did not realize the small man's identity. Then he saw—it was Ngeeso, the pigmy.

"Ki-Gor—you must return. The apes—there are hundreds of them. We saw them creeping through scrub-brush by sunlight. Even Marmo fears."

Ki-Gor seized the little man, "Tell me, Ngeeso. Is Helene . . ."

"She was still safe when I left. She did not want me to come, but I know danger when I see it, Ki-Gor—"

"You do, indeed, my brave Ngeeso!"

He started back toward the stockade and then saw the guard. The fellow had stumbled over the dead dog and was crouched on one knee, examining the animal. He found the arrow, tried to remove it. It came free only after he had braced his feet and pulled with both hands. He stood with the shaft, staring. He had evidently never seen such an arrow—its copper head the size of a man's palm, its shaft the thickness of the thumb.

"Hoo-ee!" came his shriek of alarm.

Ki-Gor and Ngeeso were moving with swift silence. A patch of starlight separated them from the wall.



A rear gate of Durga-Rama's palace opened. A man stood outlined in the slice of pale light. A thick man with vast shoulders. He wore a robe of white cotton and around it a flowing scarlet scarf. He led a massive lion on a leash.

Ki-Gor knew that this man must be Durga-Rama himself, and this lion the mighty Panthra.

Durga-Rama had been drinking wine in the civet-scented luxury of his home. He was so close that Ki-Gor caught the scent of it on his breath. Due to the wine which had somewhat dulled his senses, Durga-Rama might have passed without seeing the White Lord, even though they were so close, but Panthra turned, snarling, lifting one front paw.

"Panthra!" roared Durga-Rama, jerking the huge animal back.

KI-GOR could have killed the lion at that moment with an arrow from his strong-bow, but he still had hopes of avoiding a general alarm. He moved to one side, skirting the wall. He stopped. A dozen guards were coming, assagais and elephant hide shields waving. He turned the opposite way. More guards. Durga-Rama was bellowing orders.

There was only one way. He would have to scale the wall to Durga-Rama's yard. He leaped to its top, thrusting his leg so Ngeeso could seize it and clamber after him.

The pigmy chief caught his ankle, but his fingers slipped and he fell backward to earth. The guards were there. They rammed and fought each other in an attempt to get their hands on the pigmy. He struggled, eluding them along the ground.

"Escape! Escape without me, Ki-Gor!" he hissed.

"No, little friend!" Ki-Gor answered.

He leaped into the mass of struggling guardsmen. It was dark, but he located Ngeeso, still struggling along the ground. Ki-Gor flung men from his way, he bent, seized the little man, and flung him bodily over the heads of the guardsmen.

"Run! Run little chieftain!" he shouted. "You must go to Helene and Brend!"

Durga-Rama had freed the lion, and it

came roaring forward, eyes on Ngeeso. He saw Ki-Gor and paused. This, he could see, was his real assailant. This strange white man. The pigmy on the ground could wait.

Panthra faced Ki-Gor, hesitated a fraction of a second with muscles tensed and belly dragging the ground. Then he sprang, fangs hungry for Ki-Gor's throat.

Always before when Panthra had been set on a human quarry, it had been easy. Men always put out their hands, trying to fend him off, but Panthra, with his strong front paws, had swept aside such puny efforts at defense. His leap would carry him on, taking man to earth. His teeth would close on the throat, there would be a crunch of bones, and the man-animal would become a limp mass of flesh. That was the real sport for Panthra—to slam the helpless creature, to shake him, the while feeling the good, warm blood running in his mouth.

But this time it was not the same. This white man did not retreat as all the others had. Instead, he had actually moved forward to meet the charge.

Panthra swung his paws to brush aside Ki-Gor's hands. The hands were not as he expected. Only empty space. It threw the lion off by an imperceptible degree. For a ragged fraction of a second he was off balance. He tried to shift the direction of his spring in mid-air. At that moment, a hand came, quick as the strike of a snake, closing like a steel trap on his left foreleg.

Panthra twisted, trying to free himself. He lashed with the other paw. It was the movement Ki-Gor expected—that he wanted.

He seized the other leg, and flipped the great beast over in the air, side-stepped, and slammed him on his back to the hard-packed earth.

For a short click of time, Panthra was helpless. Ki-Gor's hand streaked from the scabbard at his waist, his long-bladed hunting knife making a blue flash in the starlight.

He pounced forward to drive the blade through Panthra's heart . . .

But quick though the jungle man's action was, the ragged second of his advantage was too short. Panthra twisted to his

side and struck at the knife hand with a hind foot.

Had the dagger-claws of that foot taken hold they would have ripped skin and flesh from the bones of Ki-Gor's forearm. A subtle shifting of Ki-Gor's body saved him. He was at one side, feeling only the sting of the sharp claws as they brushed him.

He was crouching forward, knife in hand. Panthra snarled and came to his feet. The savage lust of battle was strong in Ki-Gor. He forgot the others, forgot the dozen assagais at his back, forgot Durga-Rama, himself a warrior and strong as an ape.

Panthra retreated, reaching back with slow, tense legs, his mouth snarling open, revealing his yellow fangs. Now, for the first time in his savage existence, he felt fear—fear of the tall white man whose quickness and strength was greater than that of a jungle animal.

Ki-Gor started forward, knife ready—but there was a pin-prick of an assagai point in his back, just over the heart. He stopped short, and stood rigid.

"One move you die!" a heavy voice snarled behind him.

HE did not move. He knew the words were true. Death was only an assagai-thrust away.

He lowered his knife, turned slowly. He could not see Ngeeso. The pigmy must have escaped. Panthra retreated yet a couple of steps, lay on his belly, eyes like yellow coals, tail licking back and forth. Native guards with assagais leveled made a circle. Durga-Rama elbowed his way through, and stood with hands on hips, powerful legs spraddled wide.

"Who are you that you call yourself Ki-Gor?" he sneered.

Ki-Gor did not answer. He looked at Durga-Rama, judging his qualities as they were written in his face.

He was not old—perhaps thirty years. Although short, he was heavy, and as massive of muscle as Ki-Gor himself. His eyes were small, but they were quick and crafty. The assortment of gold and copper ornaments on his arms and fingers told Ki-Gor that the man was vain; his per-

fume of civet indicated that he fancied himself as a lover; his sneering smile was proof that he thought himself extremely clever.

"Answer me!" roared Durga-Rama. "Who are you to refuse an answer when you are questioned by the king of all Ramfians. And that dwarf who escaped—why did he call you by the name of Ki-Gor?"

The jungle man answered, "Ki-Gor is a legend believed only by fools. I am Bondo, the hunter. I came to your valley seeking friendship, and you meet me with lion's fangs and the points of assagais."

Ki-Gor was not tempted to reveal his identity. It would only lead Durga-Rama to doubling precautions to prevent his escape. The name "Bondo," which was a term of respect given him by Buto tribesmen, would serve well enough for the short time he intended to remain in captivity.

Durga-Rama kept looking at him with his crafty little eyes. He stepped forward, to took the strong-bow from Ki-Gor's shoulder. He lifted it, hooked his forefinger in the thong, and with a heave of his muscles bent it slowly back. Ki-Gor watched with composed features, as though it were an everyday occurrence to meet men with strength to thus half bend his bow.

"It is true that the White Lord called Ki-Gor carries such a bow as this," Durga-Rama said craftily. "It is perhaps unfortunate you are not Ki-Gor, otherwise I might take you inside my palace and feast you. As it is I must lock you in the prison."

"I do not fear your prison."

"Good! And perhaps you will not fear the things I am planning for you—you, the man who would dare swing a dagger at my royal lion!"

He spoke to a leader of the guards in a language Ki-Gor did not understand, and strode over, placed the leash once again on Panthra's neck, and led the animal through the gates to his palace.

The blacks bound Ki-Gor with many strands of grass rope, and thus, with only his legs free to walk he was taken through the gates of the arena.

The guards stopped there, muttering to

each other, keeping Ki-Gor surrounded by their spears. One of their number started away at a run, and came back, carrying a blazing faggot.

He held the light overhead, and Ki-Gor could see a circular wall of close bamboo pickets twenty feet high, and above, the seats where spectators could safely watch the struggles of men and beasts. They turned right to a doorway. The torch-bearer went ahead, lighting the way down a series of damp, stone steps. There, beneath ground, was a passage and a row of little, cavelike rooms with ironwood doors.

The torch-bearer swung one of the doors open on its creaking hinges, guards jabbed assagais in Ki-Gor's back, and he stooped over to enter the room. The door closed behind him. He could hear a thump as the bar dropped in place.

He stood, his head just touching the low, planked ceiling. The room was tiny. Had his arms been free, Ki-Gor judged that he could have spread them and touched both walls. At one side was a shelf dug into the dirt which served at once as a bed and a chair.

Ki-Gor sat down. The torch had been thrust in a crevice of the wall out in the passageway, and through the copper grating he could see a couple of the guards peering through.

He twisted his hands, trying the ropes that bound him. It had not been a skillful job of tying. He could have freed himself had he wished, but there would be no purpose in it with the door locked and guards watching. So he sat still, waiting.

The dungeon was close. Prisoners had been there many times, but in years it had not been cleaned. The bones of animals that had been tossed them as food lay rotting and noisome on the floor.

Distantly he could hear the sounds of the tom-toms, the weird chant of warriors executing the native dances.

After a time, Ki-Gor said to the guards, "Do your people never sleep, or do they dance on forever?"

One of the guards grinned through at him, his strong teeth showing in the fading torchlight.

"Perhaps they dance for your death."

"And when do I die?"

"Tomorrow. Did not Durga-Rama tell you? You will die for the pleasure of his wedding-feast."

Ki-Gor knew he must escape. He must escape quickly. He must somehow get to the High Priest, Liike, to tell him that Brend still lived. Liike was a man of power, and he would use his influence to see justice done.

"And how am I to die?" asked Ki-Gor.

"You will die as Durga-Rama told you. You will fight the great ape Zag in the arena above us."

"What weapons will I have?"

"The weapons your mother gave you when you came into the world. Your hands!"

"Have other warriors fought this ape with their hands?"

The two blacks laughed at this. One of them said,

"Twelve times since the great ape was captured on the ridge there have been warriors turned in the arena with him, and twelve of them made food for the hounds. But a man does not have to win. All he needs do is escape. You see, white man, there is a peeled palm pole smeared with fat. If a warrior can escape, climbing that greased pole, then he is the chosen of Isis and can sit at the right hand of Durga-Rama, and be given the honors of our greatest warrior for one day."

The second guard stamped his bare foot on the floor, laughing, "Ho! Do you think you can escape by that pole, *bondele*?"

"Perhaps I will *kill* this ape of yours!"

And that brought shouts of merriment from both of them.

Ki-Gor asked, "When is Durga-Rama to marry?"

"I have heard he will take the maiden Arlenna to his couch before the sun sets thrice."

"Three days!"

"Ho! There will be much feasting, white man. And you will be part of the feast." This brought new laughter, new assagai pounding as dust rose from the floor. "You will be a fine meal for the hounds, white man."

Ki-Gor sat back, listening to the continuing throb of tom-toms, as the dance went on in celebration of Durga-Rama's ap-

proaching coronation and marriage. At last he lay down and slept.

The tiny room was still gray with darkness when he awoke, but rays of reflected light shone through the copper grating, and he knew by that it was morning. He stood, moving his hands inside the rope bonds. He stepped to the massive door, but the guards were still there.

"How is the fighter of lions this morning?" their leader asked, thrusting his ugly, tribal-scarred face close to the grating. When Ki-Gor did not immediately answer, he went on, "I bring you great news, *bondele*. You are to be honored."

"In what way?"

"You are to be taken for final judgment before Durga-Rama himself."

The guards ranged themselves on both sides of the door, weapons ready. The bar was then lifted, and Ki-Gor walked out.

"How long has Durga-Rama been your king?" he asked in an off-hand manner as he climbed the stairs.

"For three seasons."

"So long?"

"There was another—a boy. A weakling. But he is gone. The gods have been good and stole him away. Durga-Rama has not worn the crown. But he will, after his feast of marriage two suns from now."

"And what if the gods bring this boy king back?"

"You are a fool, and a *bondele*," said the officer, twisting his notched lips, making his nostrils flare over the copper nose ring he wore. "The boy king will not come back. It is the word of Durga-Rama."

IV

KI-GOR was taken outside. His hands were tied, there were guards on all sides of him. The arena gate was open, and a cage of heavy bamboo poles waited. He bent, entered the cage. He sat on its floor with head and shoulders hunched against the low top. The door was closed and double-latched. Four porters lifted the cage and carried him through the town for dancing, paint-smeared natives to see. They spat at him, flung chunks of dirt, followed him back to the gates of the brown men's city.

The cage was carried inside the house of Durga-Rama, up a flight of rude stairs, and inside the private rooms of the usurper.

Ki-Gor peered through the slats of the cage and saw Durga-Rama himself, squatting on a heap of thatch, eating a cassava and palm-nut concoction with his fingers. Behind him Panthra lay crouched, gnawing a joint of freshly killed goat.

The door was opened, and Ki-Gor stepped out standing with a height that made the ceiling seem low. Panthra, scenting the hated white man, roared and lunged forward, his yellow eyes on Ki-Gor's throat. A sharp word from Durga-Rama froze the action, and the lion crouched back, his tufted tail whipping the matted floor.

Durga-Rama wiped his greasy hands on thatch and smiled, showing a set of teeth turned brown by the chewing of betel nuts.

"Bonda!" he said, using the name Ki-Gor had given him. "It is well that such a mighty warrior as you should call on me."

"I was brought in a cage. Did you not notice?"

"My people wanted to see you," said Durga-Rama, picking his teeth with the nail of his small finger. "It is not often that they see a warrior so mighty he fights lions with one bare hand and a knife."

"Why have you brought me here?"

"To tell you of the honor that is to be yours." Durga-Rama hunched his huge shoulders forward, and again showed his betel-stained teeth. "Last night you said the name of Durga-Rama was spoken from the land of the White Nile to the hills of Kenya. Is it not then an honor when you are chosen to fight Zag, the great ape, at my wedding feast?"

"I would fight your coward lion instead."

Durga-Rama bent forward, hand on the hilt of the crescent shaped scimitar at his waist.

"Do not anger me, white man, or you will die like a slave at the fire and your carcass will be thrown in the river to be eaten by crocodiles, or by the cannibals of Batolo."

"You fear me, Durga-Rama, otherwise

you would show your strength by fighting me yourself."

"I fear no man, nor does my lion, Panthra." He sat there, the corners of his mouth drawn down. He reached and stroked Panthra's massive head. The lion received the caress, but made no return show of affection. He had been tamed through fear, not love, and someday he would turn on his master. It was always thus with the great cats.

Durga-Rama said, "I do not toss Panthra into the same arena with every renegade warrior. You will have to content yourself with our fighting apes. They will be savage enough for you, I'll wager. And if you prove a coward, as I suppose you will, there will be a way of escape. There will be a pole, three times the height of a man, that you may climb to the wall." He spoke to his men, gesturing sharply with a greasy hand, "Throw him back in his dungeon."

Again in the dungeon, Ki-Gor sat with his back against the dirt wall, waiting, listening to sounds of natives, drunk on millet beer. He thought of brave little Ngeeso, wondering if the pigmy had escaped; he thought of Helene, of her danger.

A pot-bellied slave of a Bantu came down the steps carrying an earthen pot. A slot was opened in the door of Ki-Gor's cell, and a heap of vile-smelling offal was dumped inside on the dirt floor.

"Your food, Master," grinned the slave, showing rotting teeth.

Ki-Gor took the insult without flinching. He was immovable as a bronze god. He waited in the foul hole as the day passed. He closed his eyes, resting himself so he would be at his best for the ordeal. Sleep came as the stultifying heat of afternoon settled. Then, suddenly, he awoke.

Men were shouting. He could hear tramping feet above. It was the crowd entering the stands that circled the arena. The games were about to commence.

"Get your sleep, white man," grinned a guard through the grating. "You have yet a while to wait. There are to be other fights. Yours is merely the last."

The noise increased. After an extended wait, Ki-Gor heard the sound of warriors fighting with *boo* sticks. There were re-

sounding whacks as the clubs struck home, the cheers of savage blacks, the laughter of the brown men. Following that engagement, a wild boar was turned in with a lancer and killed, and by way of diversion, two drunken hags clawed each other with their fingernails.

The hags were finally chased out and an expectant silence settled. The guard peered through at Ki-Gor. Other faces appeared. The leader of the guards strode down the stairs and came to the door, elbowing his subordinates aside.

"It is your time, Bondo!" he said. "Are you ready?"

"I am ready!" answered Ki-Gor.

V

THE BAR was lifted, and the door creaked open on wooden hinges. Ki-Gor stepped out, arms still bound at his sides.

"Free him!" said the leader.

Two of the guards fumbled, untying the knots. The ropes were unwound, and Ki-Gor stretched himself, shaking the kinks from his magnificent muscles. For a moment there were no words spoken. Guardsmen looked at him in hushed awe. Never before had they seen a man of such proportion, of such strength.

"The king must not be kept waiting for you, white man," said the leader.

Ki-Gor climbed the steps, crossed a narrow passage lined with bamboo pickets ten feet high and lashed across the top, walked through a gate to the arena.

He stood for a moment, allowing his eyes to accustom themselves to the brilliant, late-afternoon sunlight. Then, with a single, sweeping glance, he took in the features of the scene.

The arena was about a dozen strides in diameter, roughly circular, surrounded by a perpendicular wall about three times the height of a man. Above the wall, safe from the highest-leaping beast of the jungle, were the seats of the brown men. Beyond, on a circular platform, the blacks were jammed together in a solid mass, resplendent in feast-day paint and finery.

A roar greeted Ki-Gor as he came into view. Then, as the roar subsided, taunting

voices made themselves heard. Bits of food and pellets were flung at him, striking him, bounding to the dust at his feet. He made no sign of having noticed.

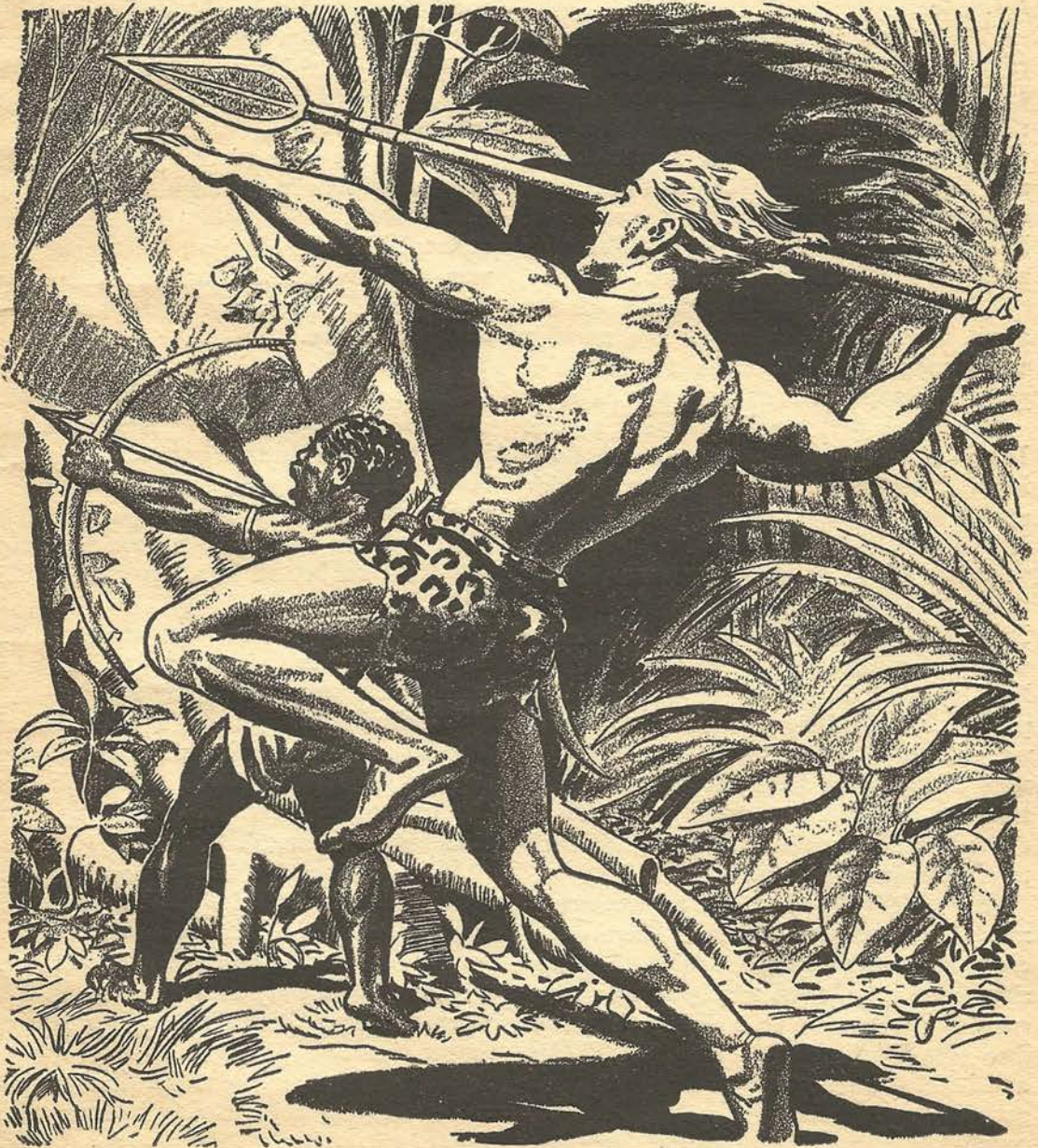
His eyes noted Durga-Rama, gowned in a white kufthan with scarlet sash. Panthra lay at his feet, lips drawn back from his fangs, his glowing eyes on Ki-Gor. At Durga-Rama's back was a slave, waving a long, ostrich-plume fan, and at his left, seated a few inches lower, was a girl.

The girl was young—perhaps Brend's tender age. She was beautiful. Even judged by the classic features of Ki-Gor's

lovely Helene, she was beautiful. Her skin was brown, with a velvet texture; her eyes were very large, and dark; a thin robe of cotton was drawn around her young figure which was just swelling into the lines of womanhood. She seemed fragile as a lotus leaf.

Ki-Gor did not doubt that this young girl was Arlenna, whom Durga-Rama intended to take to his couch in marriage.

Ki-Gor looked up at her, and for a moment their glances met. He saw compassion in her eyes—pity for the horrible fate that awaited him.



Durga-Rama bent, and spoke to her. He laid his hand on her shoulder, had his thick lips close to her ear. She shrank a little, as though his closeness were loathsome, but she nodded quickly. It was not a pleased smile. It showed that she feared the man, and her fear made Ki-Gor detest him as he had never detested a person before.

Ki-Gor's eyes traveled farther. In scarlet robes of their calling sat the priests of Isis and Ra. One of them, gray-bearded with sightless eyes, sat in an elevated position. This, he knew, was the high-priest, Liike—the man he had come to the valley to see.

If fate went against him, in his last extremity, Ki-Gor would shout his message to Liike. He would tell him that Brend still lived, that he had been kidnapped through the connivance of Durga-Rama, and that someday he would return. But that only as a last resort. For the moment, Ki-Gor looked at the sightless Liike with no sign of interest or recognition.

Ki-Gor walked to the middle of the arena. He folded his arms. His muscles were long; they rippled like the bodies of pythons beneath his smooth, tanned skin.

Two black men ran in, carrying a pole. It was the trunk of a palm, two or three inches in diameter, glistening from a thick application of grease. Quickly they placed it in a hole that had been bored close to the wall. When in place it weaved uncertainly, its top within reach of Durga-Rama's arm. Perhaps it would bear the weight of a man such as Ki-Gor, and perhaps not, but its coating of grease would prevent his climbing it anyway. The pole was merely a bit of torture. It would provide a comic spectacle for the mob if a terrified man were to grasp it and try to climb while the great apes clawed his flesh to ribbons from behind.

One of the blacks made an announcement. The arena was cleared. There was a creak of wooden wheels outside. A dozen slaves and guardsmen were pulling a huge cage. It was rolled to a sliding door, the door was lifted, the cage opened. Ki-Gor could feel the tenseness of the crowd as a guardsman with a long pole poked between the bars of the cage to force out

some surly animal. There was a gasp, a cry of pleased anticipation as a huge, gray-black creature lumbered into sight. It was an ape, shaggy and abysmal, turning, limber hands on long arms trailing in the dust.

"Zag! Zag!" screamed the crowd, calling the brute's name.

There was more shouting and poking, and another ape came out. This one was "Gombon," evidently. The two of them remained near the entrance for a while, blinking dull, red-rimmed eyes, growing accustomed to their new freedom.

If Zag saw Ki-Gor, he made no immediate move to attack. Perhaps it took some time for his dull brain to digest the fact that an unprotected man was there. Then he opened his mouth, showing powerful, yellowed teeth, and let loose a guttural snarl.

One of the guardsmen reached through with a barbed lance, sticking the animal in the back. The pain of the lance infuriated him. He charged, but the weapon was quickly withdrawn, and the huge beast struck the arena wall, making it creak and wave.

THE CROWD shrieked with laughter at the spectacle. Once more the lance, this time from a new direction, Zag beat at the walls with his huge arms in a raging fury, but the second ape, Gombon, merely stood by the gate, rocking back and forth on bowed legs, his eyes on Ki-Gor.

Ki-Gor still stood in the center of the arena. He seemed relaxed. His face was still composed, still arrogant.

In his blind fury, Zag's eyes fell on Gombon. He rushed, and suddenly stopped. Only then did he notice Ki-Gor. He turned, and charged with long arms brushing the ground.

At a distance of two strides the ape slowed, and stretched high his arms. He pounced, swinging them down with a force that would have driven most men to the earth, a heap of broken bones. But when the arms descended, Ki-Gor was no longer there.

At the final moment he had moved aside, shifting with the quickness of a leopard-cat. He slid beneath one of Zag's

descending arms. The ape was thrown off balance. He snarled with froth dripping from the corners of his wide mouth, enraged that his quarry had evaporated from the earth in front of him. With an effort, he came to a stumbling stop, veered his huge bulk around, But Ki-Gor was not there, either. Zag's half human voice rose in a frustrated scream, while his claws tore at the coarse, straggling hair at his own chest. And at that second, Ki-Gor saw his chance. He sprang through the air, pouncing with knees on Zag's back, his hands feeling for the great arteries of his throat to close off the blood supply to his brain.

The ape's arms beat the empty air. He turned, flopping blindly like a monster that had lost all sense of equilibrium and direction. He turned around and around, fell to the ground, pawing over his shoulder, trying to free himself of the terrible thing that was holding like a leech to his back.

Zag rose to great heights, flinging his arms high in one final effort. His hind legs seemed very short and bowed, his chest became pointed, his belly sunken. He was all massive shoulders and arms, a horrible, distorted beast, a thing conceived in the mind of an angry god and born in the furnaces of hell. He flung himself backward, trying to crush Ki-Gor against the wall of the arena.

Ki-Gor was jarred, and Zag succeeded in writhing part way free. He swung back, finding the flesh of K-Gor's shoulder with his claws. He raked three shallow furrows from which blood came in quick, scarlet streaks. But the jungle man did not relinquish his advantage. His fingers still probed the soft recesses of Zag's throat.

During this time, the second bull, Gombon, watched dull eyed from a crouching position by the gate. He seemed to have no interest in the fate of Zag. Then suddenly he scented the fresh blood flowing from Ki-Gor's shoulder. It seemed to whet his savage appetites. He roared, and came forward.

The crowd saw him and was in ecstasy. Now indeed would they see the arrogant white man defeated. He would no longer

be a conquerer, riding on the shoulders of their mightiest beast. Instead he would fall crushed and mangled with broken bones poking through his bloody flesh. They would see him become a limp and lifeless thing. They would see him tossed about by the two apes until they were tired of playing with him, and finally they would see the starved hounds of Durga-Rama turned inside the arena to devour him.

They watched as Gombon paused with hands uplifted, directly over the back of Ki-Gor. They watched those arms descend and close on his naked back. They cheered as Gombon reared back, the white man in his arms, tearing him off the back of Zag. But what followed after that was so quick that not one eye in the vast assemblage followed it.

There was a flash of Ki-Gor's bronzed body as he twisted. Suddenly Gombon's arms were no longer around his body. Instead he was thrust back, those hairy arms held wide and high by the hands of the white man.

Ki-Gor released the hold, leaped backward, landed on the balls of his feet, knees bent in a crouch. Then he moved sideways and sprang. His fingers reached, finding the eyes of Gombon. A quick twist of crooked fingers, and the ape was for the moment blinded.

Gombon roared, his voice rising higher and higher until it became a shriek. He staggered, arms lashing like some insane monster. He collided with Zag, and slammed him to the dirt of the arena. He plunged on, falling, and collided with the wall, striking it with such force it threatened to collapse.

In their seats above, the brown men were shouting from fear. Danger to themselves—that was a thing they had not reckoned with. Durga-Rama stood, hand resting on Panthra's collar, watching while a scowl twisted his heavy face.

Ki-Gor backed to the middle of the arena, hands resting on hips, stepping nimbly to one side or the other, avoiding the blind rushes of the ape. He waited his moment. Finally the beast was directly between him and the greased pole, standing a full height, hands pawing at

his eyeballs. It was exactly the thing Ki-Gor had wanted. He went forward with two swinging strides. He launched himself into air. One foot touched the beast's back, the next rested on his head. From that elevated position he sprang, grasping the grease-slick pole in one hand, while his toes swung on, resting at the top of the arena wall.

For the second he balanced there precariously, looking down on Durga-Rama.

THE USURPER acted quickly. He snarled, and whisked the heavy scimitar from his waist. He leaped forward, swinging the crescent-shaped blade in a mighty arc. It connected with the pole, cutting it in half just beneath Ki-Gor's fingers, and the jungle man fell backward to the deep dirt of the arena below.

Durga-Rama waved his scimitar on high and shouted down to his guardsmen, "Death to him! Death! Death!"

Black guardsmen were swarming near the gate, the metal heads of their assagais rattling together. They peered through the strong bamboo pickets, fearing to disobey the command of Durga-Rama, but fearing more the fury of the savage apes and equally savage white man.

Ki-Gor came erect, and his eyes flashed around the arena. His attempt at escape had been frustrated, and now he could see only death on every hand. His eyes rested on Liike who had stood, and was facing down on the scene, trying to piece it out by hearing alone.

"Hear me, Liike," screamed Ki-Gor, his voice rising over the sounds of the mob.

Liike took a blind step forward. "I hear!" he said in a harsh voice.

"I have come to tell you of the true king of Ramfis! I have come to tell you of Brend, the boy whom Durga-Rama had stolen from the valley and taken to a far jungle to die. He is not dead, Liika! The real king still lives. Someday he will return . . ."

"I hear! I hear!" Liika kept calling.

Durga-Rama leaned over the railing, his scimitar clenched in his hand, an expression of black rage mottling his heavy face. He seemed poised there, tempted to leap to

the arena below, to swing his scimitar on the hated white man, to cut off the voice forever with its damning accusation against him. But his fear of the great apes was too strong. Suddenly he remembered Panthra. He spun around, cut the leash with a whip of the scimitar, snarled a command in the beast's ear.

Panthra did not hesitate. He saw the hated white man below—and this time there was no sharp knife to strike at him with cobra quickness.

Panthra launched himself into air. A shrill scream from the throat of Arlenna reached Ki-Gor's ears. He turned, and there was Panthra, poised above him.

Ki-Gor moved aside—one of those lightning movements that had saved his life so often in the past. Panthra saw him, but he was unable to change the course of his spring in mid-air. The huge lion struck earth on all fours, spun, started to lunge. Again Ki-Gor was gone. Cleverly he had shifted position, placing Zag between him and the lion.

Zag saw the big cat, and writhed back from fear. Sight was coming back to Gombon's eyes, and he saw Panthra, too. The two of them fled, chattering their terror. Simultaneously their weights struck the arena wall. The bamboo bent, creaking. It wavered a moment. There was a sharp, splintering sound as one of the outside supports gave way, and following that a roar of collapsing wood mingling with the screams of brown men and black.

A section of the wall had collapsed. The wall had served as a main support of the overloaded stands above. The stand slumped forward, pitching its mass of humankind toward the ground.

For a second the way was open. It was Ki-Gor's chance to escape. He sprang through, reached the gate, ran to the central path of the brown men's city.

Only one guard was there. The guard recognized him, and after a momentary hesitation, charged with his assagai lifted high. He set himself, and drove the spear at Ki-Gor's heart. But his quickness was no match for that of the jungle man's. Ki-Gor sidestepped, felt the bronze head of the assagai burn past his chest. His hand streaked down, seized the shaft, and

with a powerful twist, sent the black warrior rolling head over shoulders to the ground.

The guard came to one knee, shrieking the alarm, but no one could hear him through the pandemonium that seethed through the arena. He still had a weapon—a short-bow, and quiver of tiny, poisoned arrows. He fitted an arrow in the thong and drew back, aiming at Ki-Gor's heart, but at the same moment, moving infinitely quicker, Ki-Gor's long arm came down, driving the assagai. The copper head of the assagai flashed once in the late, afternoon sunshine, and cut the warrior through the middle, pinning him to earth. The cry of terror that rose from the warrior's lungs ended in a death-gasp.

Guards were running from their posts around the arena now. They came a moment after their companion had fallen. For a second they paused, staring at the tall white man as they would stare at some evil spirit protected by the armor of the gods.

Ki-Gor did not turn and run. The fear they felt of him would have vanished had he done so, and an arrow, or a carefully aimed javelin would have cut him down. Instead he planted his feet wide, and his voice rose in a wild jungle scream of triumph.

"Aye-ya!" he cried, beating his chest with forearm and fist. "Hear me! I am Ki-Gor, beast of the jungle!"

Many times they had listened to the tales of Ki-Gor, the great white lord of the forests, and now that mythical being had assumed flesh in all his terrifying proportions, and stood facing them. Ki-Gor kept one arm upraised as though ready to call down the thunder of the gods, while he backed slowly toward the ironwood gate of Durga-Rama's palace.

The strength of that gate would have defied Ki-Gor's strength, but he did not need to open it. With a vaulting spring backward he reached the top of the eight-foot wall. He crouched there, looking at the blacks, and still no weapon was lifted against him.

Durga-Rama had by now broken free of the terrified mob in the arena. He charged from the gate, trampling men and

women. He saw Ki-Gor poised there and shouted,

"After him, you cowards!"

When his men still did not move, he roared with rage, and charged them with his scimitar. He cut down two of them with the first savage swing. He rushed on, scattering the guards before him.

"That man is Ki-Gor," he bellowed. "You hear me?—Ki-Gor! He has come to conquer you and murder your women. Death to Ki-Gor. Hear me! I will give a brown maiden to any black who will bring me his head."

Ki-Gor dropped to the inner court while he was speaking. The sound of Durga-Rama's bellowing seemed distant there. He reached the door. It was barred. He drove into it, shoulder first, and it collapsed beneath his power. Five strides took him the length of the great hall; three long leaps, and he was up the stairway. He burst inside the private rooms of Durga-Rama. Only a slave was there—a woman, sprinkling fresh thatch over the couches.

Ki-Gor saw his strong-bow hanging on a peg, his quiver of arrows nearby, his long-bladed hunting knife sticking in a pillar.

Guardsmen were inside the front door. He could hear them in the courtyard, too. Durga-Rama was issuing orders, organizing pursuit.

Ki-Gor fixed quiver and knife at his belt, slipped the strongbow over his shoulder and climbed to the top of a thick, bamboo pillar supporting the roof. He held himself aloft with locked legs, and dug his way through the thick layer of palm thatch.

ONCE OUTSIDE, he crouched, looking at the scene below. Over there was the arena with its seats half collapsed. One of the great apes was plodding across the street of the native village. Durga-Rama could be seen waving his scimitar, ordering his guardsmen to surround the house.

For the time no one noticed Ki-Gor, crouched on the ridgepole above. He stood, and ran along the narrow apex with the same ease that he would follow a tree limb

in the forest. He speeded his step near the end of the roof, and with a bounding leap he launched himself in air.

He seemed poised, like a bird in flight. He sailed out a long distance, and then down, down. It appeared that he would surely impale himself on the pointed poles of the stockade. He didn't. He cleared the stockade by inches, and ran toward the encroaching jungle.

No one was in striking distance except a native archer. The fellow sprang to a perch overlooking the stockade, his bow and poisoned arrows in his hands. From over his shoulder, Ki-Gor saw him. Still running, the jungle man fitted an arrow to the string of his strong-bow, turned, and drove the arrow. It winged true, smashing the native backward as though he was struck by a war-axe.

The vine was there as it had been left the night before. Ki-Gor seized it, and swung far out, alighting on a branch. He swung to another vine, and another. In a matter of seconds he was beyond their sight in the leafy bowers of the jungle.

VI

THROUGH the cool of approaching evening he went, with the breeze fresh against his face. The sun sank like a ball of vermilion through the overhanging mists of the jungle. By dark the area of large trees was left behind. He was forced to travel a footpath. He was on the scab-growth of the hillside when darkness settled.

Here, on higher ground, the scent of the great apes became strong. It continued so as he neared the cave. A sudden fear knifed through him. The apes should not be this close if they had any great fear of Marmo.

He speeded to a run. A gray shape loomed before him, shaggy and truculent. An ape. The animal saw the jungle man and retreated, crashing through scrub-brush.

Ki-Gor went on, bounding in long strides from rock to rock. He reached the crest. There, only an assagai cast away, was the big rock which marked the mouth of the cave.

He came to the black portal. No fresh spoor of ape there, so he took a deep breath of relief.

"Helene!" he called. "Do you hear me, Helene?"

No answer. Only the rolling sound of his voice, echoing from the rock walls.

"Helene!" he shouted more loudly.

There was a stir of movement, a sound of hurrying footsteps. It was not Helene. It was such a sound as a small man or boy might make. A form took body in the gloom—Ngeeso.

"Ah, Ki-Gor, thou hast come!" cried Ngeeso in the pigmy tongue. "I escaped as you told me and came here. They were already gone. I followed their trail into the valley, and then came back in hopes you would escape and meet me here."

"You did well, Ngeeso. Tell me, at what sun did you arrive?"

"At midday."

"And how old was the trail?"

"Only a few hours."

"They will be safe, Ngeeso. With Marmo, they will be safe."

They left the cave and traveled through night blackness down the rocky hillside, finally coming on Marmo's tracks in soft earth a long arrow shot away. A moon came from clouds, and it was easy following the spoor along the zig-zag path through scab-bush.

But in the deeper jungle no ray of moon penetrated. Blackness was complete. Ki-Gor put Ngeeso on the ground and walked slowly, bending forward, guided as much by his sense of smell as by sight. For an hour it was thus, with the men feeling their way.

"One would need the nose of N'goi, the hungry leopard, to follow such a spoor," Ngeeso muttered.

"Patience, little man."

"What have you found, Ki-Gor?"

"Nothing, but I have a sense of Marmo being near."

Ki-Gor whistled softly, the two familiar tones. Instantly there was a responding movement in the deep brush. A crash, a thunder of heavy feet shaking the earth.

"Ha! He is there, the mighty Marmo!" Ngeeso shouted.

Ki-Gor kept talking in a quiet voice, "I am her, Marmo. I am here, thou moving mountain"—and his words, in Shahili, guided the great beast to his side.

Marmo loomed a deeper shadow in the dark. He stopped and reached forward with his trunk, finding his white friend's shoulder, curling it around him with slave-like adoration.

"Where is Helene?" Ki-Gor asked him.

The elephant had no power of speech, but his intelligence was exceeded by no animal of the jungle, save man himself. He understood the question Ki-Gor put, and did his best to answer.

Marmo lifted his trunk high above, trumpeting with a quiet, high-pitched sound. He stamped his feet, rocking his massive bulk to and fro.

"She left thee. And the brown boy, he left too. She told thee to wait for her here!"

Again Marmo rocked, accompanying the movement with a fanlike waving of his ears, signifying agreement.

"She left at mid-morning, Marmo. You have stood here through the hot hours. She feared that they would see your bulk, those guards of Ramfis, and so she chose to go forward without thee. And now she has not returned as she promised, and thou, poor, patient beast, did not know what to do."

"What will *thou* do, Ki-Gor?" asked Ngeeso. "You have not taught your mate to be earth-bound. You have taught her to travel swinging through the trees like yourself, and up there none can follow."

"She would not travel by trees with Brend along. We will find their spoor along the footpaths."

He went on, slowly as before, but any spoor left behind was now too faint. He sat down with his back against the trunk of a Bokongu tree and waited until at last the gray of dawn came up from the east.

He started again, watching for the signs he had taught Helene to always leave as guidance. An hour passed, and there was none. He wondered if she had taken the tree route with the boy riding her shoulders. The girl had developed superb strength under the tutelage of Ki-

Gor, and she loved, when left alone, to attempt to equal the feats of her jungle mate himself.

He rounded a bend in the little used footpath, and spied a sign of the kind he had been looking for.

A bit of *nogi* vine had been broken off, woven in a circle, and left hanging on a twig level with Ki-Kor's eyes.

He seized it, examined it. It was wilted from yesterday's sun, so she had hung it there shortly after leaving Marmo. There were eight twists used in making the circle, indicating that he intended to travel eight arrow shots, following a circular course toward Ramfis.

Ki-Gor tossed the message twig aside and hurried forward, traveling the footpath in long strides. Ngeeso tried vainly to keep up, but ended by riding on one foot in a bend which Marmo made in his trunk. After a distance of two arrow shots, Ki-Gor found another twig similar to the first. He was standing, examining it, when he glimpsed someone down the footpath. It was Brend.

The boy was exhausted. He was torn by thorns, the soles of his feet left bloody marks in hard-baked earth of the path. He saw Ki-Gor and ran the last few steps of the distance. He fell to hands and knees, weeping from exhaustion and thankfulness.

Ki-Gor lifted him in his arms, "Boy! Tell me about it, boy."

"They have captured her, Ki-Gor," he wept. "I could do nothing to save her, Ki-Gor. She told me to escape. I wandered all night through the jungle without knowing where—"

"Who captured her? Brend, talk to me! Who—"

"The men of Durga-Rama. They captured her last night at dusk when we tried to approach the wall, searching for you. It was my fault, Ki-Gor. I thought we would be safe, but there were so many guards—"

"They were looking for me, Brend. But tell me about Helene!"

"She was carried off and I could do nothing to stop them. I escaped on my hands and knees into the jungle. Am I a coward, Ki-Gor, that I did not—"

"No, Brend. You are not a coward. You could not fight them all. You did right in coming to me."

"But Helene will die."

"She will not die, Brend." Ki-Gor put the boy down and went on, speaking half to himself. "She is worth more to Durga-Rama alive, and therefore she will live. Perhaps the tyrant will use her to force me back to his city. Or perhaps he may want to make a trade—Helene for you, Brend."

"Ki-Gor, I will give myself up. If I do that, then Durga-Rama will free her."

"No, Brend. There would be nothing gained by you giving yourself up. We have only one course open to us. We will ride Marmo through their wretched gates and rescue her!"

VII

THE MORNING BEFORE Helene had ridden Marmo along the valley trail as far as she dared. Brend was along, and he cautioned her that it was Durga-Rama's habit to keep lookouts posted on the main jungle trails. As it would be difficult for any watchman to overlook the spectacle of two persons riding an elephant, Helene left Marmo in a little-used side path, and went on toward Ramfis with Brend, traveling afoot.

Brend said it would be best to circle through the deep bush and approach the city from its river side, where a grove of towering trees grew down near the stockade.

It was a long journey, longer than she had anticipated, and darkness was settling when they came in sight of the city.

From a distance they could hear the noise of shouting men, baying dogs, and the thunder of elephant-hide drums. Helene looked questioningly at Brend.

"Those are the alarms," he said. "It must be they are searching for someone, otherwise the hounds would not be loose."

"Perhaps Ki-Gor?"

"Perhaps."

Helene forgot some of her caution. She started along the path, her lythe, tanned body moving with sinuous swiftness.

Suddenly she stopped. She could sense danger ahead. There, in that patch of wild coffee, was a movement, a tremble of glossy leaves.

She seized Brend's shoulder, and started back. A crackle of twigs in that direction made her draw up a second time.

She looked, but she could see nothing. Only the dim, surrounding jungle. Yet she was certain that many eyes were watching her.

She backed slowly, her small assagai leveled before her. A whisk of air sounded directly above. She leaped aside, expecting the deadly arrow of a blow-gun. Instead, a wide loop of grass rope settled over her naked shoulders, and snaked tight, locking her arms against her body.

She struggled, trying to bring her assagai into play. It was useless.

"Brend!" she screamed. "Run, Brend. They must not capture you. You must return to Marmo. Tell Marmo what has happened. He will find Ki-Gor."

A second rope descended, and a third. She was helpless. Brend had vanished. She could hear the crackle of underbrush as he scrambled along. Black men had appeared from every side, their leader bellowing in a coarse voice, telling them to capture the boy. They were after him, smashing through the tangle, stabbing with their long assagais, firing poisoned arrows at him by sound.

In a few minutes they gave up and gathered around Helene, jabbering to one another, staring at the strange sight of a captive white woman.

Their leader, a thick-chested man named Mokotto, issued a guttural command. An assagai was pointed at Helene's spine, and she was made to walk across a stretch of cassava and millet to the gate of the city.

They paused with her at the door of a large wood and bamboo house.

"Wait!" Mokotto said to her, speaking a variety of Bantu. "I will tell Durga-Rama."

He climbed the stairs and saw Durga-Rama sitting cross-legged on a heap of thatch, drinking palm wine. At sound of the footsteps, Durga-Rama looked up and

scowled, his face seeming very large and greasy by the light of the smoky fat-lamp that burned near his knees. When the black man paused to bow, he scowled the more. He cast away the dregs of wine and barked,

"Speak, fool!"

"Great Durga-Rama!" cried the black dramatically. "I have captured a woman."

"What woman?"

"I do not know."

"If she is some black wench, then——"

"She is not, Lord. She is white."

"White!"

"Like Ki-Gor who fought the apes in the arena this afternoon, this woman is white. And she is beautiful."

The scowl faded from Durga-Rama's thick face. He poured more wine from an earthen vessel, lifted his cup and smiled, showing his brown-stained teeth.

"So you have captured a woman of the whiteness of Ki-Gor. I have heard it told that the White Lord had a mate. And this must be the one. That is good. Come, my strong Mokotto, and let me reward you."

Mokotto hesitated, looking at the copper bracelet Durga-Rama was going to give him. Evidently he had not said everything that was on his mind.

"Have you gone deaf? I said to come for your reward."

"I am not deaf, my Lord. There is something more. Please do not be angry with me——"

"Out with it!" Durga-Rama thundered.

"There was another. The brown boy—Brend."

"He was with Ki-Gor's mate?"

"Yes. But he escaped. It was not my fault, Lord——"

Durga-Rama quieted him with an abrupt gesture. He looked dark, and cursed under his breath.

"Perhaps it is well," he muttered at last, and the guardsman took a deep breath. Durga-Rama would rather have Brend escape than be brought alive into the city. There had been mutterings against him since the disaster of the afternoon. Even over the rumble of elephant drums he could hear the funeral chants as the blacks wailed the deaths of relatives who

had been crushed in the arena. And now this meddler—Liike—was organizing something against him. So it would be worse if the boy were there, a figurehead to rally around.

He tossed the copper bracelet and said, "You have acted wisely."

"And the woman, my Lord? You will see the woman?"

"Yes, the woman!" A grim smile played with the corners of Durga-Rama's hard mouth. Bring her before me. I would see if she is like the white man."

DURGA-RAMA was happy over this new turn of events. A few minutes before he had grimly contemplated the thought of Ki-Gor returning with the lawful king, and now, like a gift from Isis, this woman had fallen into his hands. With her he could do much. She would be worth more than a hundred assagais against the jungle man. Perhaps he could even force this Ki-Gor to take Brend into the forest and brain him. He chuckled, contemplating such a thing. Indeed, that would be the supreme jest!

He bent forward, his face close above the grease lamp, watching as the woman was thrust through the door. He could not see her for a moment because of the guards, then they stepped aside, and he fastened his piglike eyes on her body.

Durga-Rama had looked on many women, but he could not restrain a little exhalation of pleasure at the loveliness that was here revealed before him. Indeed, she was beautiful. She was tall, her skin a light tan, like Ki-Gor's. She was clean-limbed, slim-waisted, supple. Durga-Rama put down his cup, and heaved his great bulk erect. He walked toward her with a heavy shuffle, viewed her from several angles, inspecting her body with the critical eye of a slave merchant. He laid his hand on her shoulder, and smiled when she shrank from his touch.

"You are Ki-Gor's mate?" he asked, speaking the tongue of the Congo which he knew the White Lord himself understood.

She did not answer, and he went on, as though speaking to himself.

"You, you would be a worthy mate for Ki-

Gor. Tall, and strong, and beautiful. Many men would be glad to have such a woman as you. I know of markets where you would bring a price of two hundred goats—and I certainly could use two hundred goats." He chuckled at that, showing his brown teeth.

He walked close, running appraising hands down her arms, examining the slimness of her naked waist. Then he went back to his couch and sat crosslegged, fingering his straggle of whiskers.

"Leave me!" he said to the blacks. "Wait outside the door." When they were gone, he spoke on to Helene, "Ki-Gor is strong. But strong men sometimes become weaklings—for a woman."

"What do you mean?" Helene cried unexpectedly.

Durga-Rama tossed back his head with a brutal peal of laughter.

"Ha! So you *do* understand my words! It is as I thought." He lifted the wine cup to his lips and drank without taking his eyes off her form. "Yes, strong men are turned into sheep by women. And so will it be with Ki-Gor."

"You have him in your prison?"

"Then you do not know?" Durga-Rama made a wry face at the memory of what took place that afternoon. "For the moment, Ki-Gor has escaped us. But *you* will bring him back."

"I do not know where he is."

"But you know where he will go."

She met his gaze defiantly.

"Yes, you know. And here is what I would have you do. I would have you send him a message by one of my men. Tell him that you can go free and unharmed—provided he sends me a package."

"Package?"

"Yes. A package." Durga-Rama gulped more wine. "And in the package, I must find the head of Brend."

"You're insane."

"No, I am not insane. I am a king. And I plan to remain a king." He laughed at her. "Come, do not put horror on your face. Ki-Gor has killed many things for you—then why should he not kill once again? Why not this worthless child?"

Durga-Rama clapped his hands, and the guards returned.

"Nungo, you will carry a message for me."

The man called "Nungo" bowed.

"You are to go to Ki-Gor——" The amazed expression which crossed Nungo's face made the usurper pause. "Yes, you fool, to Ki-Gor! Why do you put on that look of a she goat?"

"He will kill me, Lord."

In sudden rage, Durga-Rama leaped to his feet. "Is it better to die here?" he shrieked.

Nungo saw the scimitar swing at the last moment. He tried to retreat and bring his lance into action, but the weapon was too long. Its end rammed the wall, and the keen edge of the scimitar struck. Nungo went down with a rattle of death in his throat.

Panthra, who lay in shadow behind his master, came snarling forward, lured by the scent of warm blood, but Durga-Rama seized his leash and held him back.

"Mokotto, take this coward's body and throw it to the hounds."

Durga-Rama returned to his seat, drinking wine until Mokotto came back.

"Who will now volunteer to carry the message to Ki-Gor?"

"Send me, Master!" pleaded Mokotto. "I would have offered myself first had you given me the chance."

"I may need you for another task. Burra, you will carry it." He turned to Helene.

"Tell him where Ki-Gor is to be found."

"I do not know."

"I have ways of helping you to remember. Ways that are quick, and ways that are slow."

"It will do no good to torture me. I do not know where Ki-Gor is. We were searching for him when your men captured me."

"What should I do with you, woman?" he asked.

"Free me!"

DURGA-RAMA roared with laughter, "When I have no further use for you—then perhaps I will free you." He spoke to his guardsmen, "Take her to the little room, and watch that she does not escape. Perhaps she has learned some of Ki-Gor's tricks."

"She will not escape, Master!" said Mokotto.

"Mokotto, I would have a word with you—alone."

Durga-Rama waited until they were all gone except the ugly Mokotto.

"You have always been faithful to me, Mokotto," he said.

"Always, my Lord."

"I have given you rich rewards, Mokotto. When Lungo would not sell his maiden daughter to you last rainy season, it was I, Durga-Rama, who gave her to you and the cost was nothing."

"I am grateful, my Lord. I am the lowest creature of the forest, and you are a god riding on——"

"Enough of that! We are much alike, Mokotto. We are both merciless, both ready to use our knives on the side that is best for us. Good. I like you for that, and not for your double-ended tongue. That is why I am going to give you even richer rewards than ever before. A brown woman for your wife—you would like that, Mokotto."

The black man's eyes gleamed rapturously.

"One of the temple virgins?"

"Perhaps! Were it not for that blind priest, Liike. He would never give a virgin from the temple of Isis to a black man. So you see, he is a thorn in my flesh as well as yours, Mokotto."

"What would you have me do?"

"I would have you dip your knife in Liike's blood. Tonight. It should not be difficult. You are chief among the guards, and you will be admitted anywhere."

"Liike will be dead before that shaft of moonlight moves the length of your foot along the floor!"

Durga-Rama watched as the thick-chested man felt the edge of his machete and stalked from the door. When he was gone, the usurper grunted and spat. A brown maiden for his bed! A temple virgin! Even Durga-Rama would not dare give such a woman to a black. Mokotto was a fool—but he was an excellent assassin. Most assassins are fools, for wise men hire others to do their butchering for them.

He poured wine, and sent for his spy, a sneaking, parrot-faced brown man named Lotob.

"What word have you?" asked Durga-Rama.

"No more than I have already given you."

"Have you been asked to join the conspiracy against me?"

"No."

"Nor will you be. They do not trust you, Lotob. They suspect you are my friend. But keep your ears open, anyway. Find out the names of those who are meeting with Liike. I would know the one I am to execute when the uprising is killed."

VIII

LOT OB LEFT, and Durga-Rama sat on his thatch couch, deep in thought, Panthra was at ease, watching with unblinking eyes. Now that he was alone, Durga-Rama stroked the lion's thick mane and talked to him.

"You are my friend, Panthra. My only friend. We are alike. You alone I can trust."

Panthra fixed him with savage intentness. There was no expression in his eyes—no affection. Only a crystallized hate for all the race of men.

The lamp flame wavered and became small as its font of grease was consumed. At last it blinked out, leaving only reddish coal, and a wisp of acrid smoke. Durga-Rama did not call the slave to replenish it. He sat in the dark, watching the shaft of moonlight creep across the floor until it had gone the length of a man's foot. It was time for Mokotto to return with word that Liike was dead.

He did not come. The moonlight crept on. No sound in the large house save for the bare feet of guardsmen patrolling the hall. He cursed. Mokotto could expect no mercy if he came creeping back with an excuse. Durga-Rama had one way of dealing with failure. The man would die on the blade of the scimitar, just as Nungo had died an hour or two before.

The sound of a heavy thud, followed by rapidly retreating footsteps drew him to the tiny, barred window. He looked out, but the shadow of the wall was very dense. Guardsmen were gathered out there, jabbering excitedly. They carried something around the courtyard, inside, and up the

stairs. Panthra sniffed, and roared to his feet.

Durga-Rama pulled him back as they rapped at his door.

"What is it?"

"It is Mokotto. He is dead."

Durga-Rama flung the door open. A reflected light from the lower room shone on Mokotto's distorted face. He had died not swiftly, but on one of the breaking wheels of the torture chamber. The conspirators had captured Mokotto, and tortured the truth from him.

"Where did you find this carrion?" he snarled at his men.

"He was thrown over the wall, and the men who did it ran before we could tell who they were."

Another spoke, "They were of the king's race." By that he meant they were brown men.

Durga-Rama sent them away. He strode the room, hand closed on the hilt of his scimitar.

The sands were running out for him. He knew that. His friends were few, his enemies many. The enemies had sent him back Mokotto's corpse as a warning. That indicated that they considered themselves strong enough to act. But Durga-Rama was not yet beaten. He had a few friends—those who were growing fat from his kingship. And he had another lot in the game of fate—the power of his black guard, thirty of the strongest warriors of Ramfis.

He sent for them, the thirty, and they arrayed themselves across the room, oiled bodies gleaming in the semi-darkness. He strode the length of the line, and grunted his satisfaction. He issued an order to a slave who brought a casket of copper ornaments. He distributed leg and arm bracelets, rings for fingers, ears and noses.

"You are my men!" he said abruptly when the casket was empty. "I have made your bodies beautiful with copper. I have given you the pick of native maidens for your wives. As long as I am king, these things and more shall be yours. If another should kill me and be king, your wives and riches will be taken away, and you will be spit on like slaves."

The men shifted uneasily, knowing that

Durga-Rama was speaking the truth. He went on.

"Tonight, or tomorrow I will need your lances—to kill some swine." He laughed at this crude joke, hefting his heavy scimitar. "Some swine who walk on two legs and call themselves the race of kings. You will wait below. See to it that no man, brown or black, enters my courtyard."

These guardsmen gave Durga-Rama temporary security. For tonight at least he would be safe enough. And by tomorrow he would find help elsewhere. He knew now that he would not use the white woman to bargain with Ki-Gor. He would use her in a trade with Chong, chief of the cannibal Ta'tamba tribe from across the river.

Chong had two hundred warriors. They were not trained like his own guardsmen, but they were warriors, nevertheless. A hundred of them, added to his own guard, could smash any insurrection that Liike could launch against him. And the loan of a hundred warriors would not be a high price for Chong to pay for so desirable a woman.

Durga-Rama called Nunabba, the guard he had placed in charge of Helene.

"Bring the woman to the river gate. I will meet you there."

He made ready for the journey, dropping a tiny, poisoned dagger inside his kufan, wrapping an indigo cloak high above body and face. He passed through the river gate, and found Nunabba and Helene waiting for him.

"Where are you taking me?" Helene demanded, wrenching at the ropes which fastened her wrists.

Durga-Rama walked close, smiling, breathing repulsively into her face.

"I am taking you to meet your future mate."

"My mate is Ki-Gor! He will——"

"But I have looked, and looked without seeing him. What good is a mate who skulks like a jackal, fifty arrow shots away?"

Helene was led along a footpath through the darkness of the jungle. In a short time, the deep sound of the river became audible, and they caught sight of moonlight shining from its wide, flat surface. Across could be

seen the dark shores of the Ta'tamba domain.

They waded through reeds and stagnant water until Durga-Rama found two concealed dugout canoes. He ordered Helene and Nunabba into one of them, leaving instructions that they should await his return, and set out alone, driving his paddle in mighty sweeps, riding the crocodile-infested waters toward the far shore.

He drew up in an overhung cove where an elephant trail came down to the water. It was still sometime before dawn, so he chewed bethe! nuts and waited. With daylight gleaming from the water behind him, he left the canoe and walked up the trail. The jungle was dense for a while, with hundreds of monkeys watching from the tangled branches above, then it broke away, and he entered a wide area of clearing.

Here a few cassava and yam fields had been scratched away from the encoaching orchilla and elephant weeds by crude implements of forked wood. There was a stretch of cane grass higher than his head, and emerging from that he caught sight of the cluttering huts of a village with roofs of thick thatch looking like toadstools.

Durga-Rama had visited the village only once, and that years ago while on an expedition to punish the cannibal Ta'tambas after they had stolen two women from the Ramfian yam fields. On that occasion, of course, the village had been burned, but this one, built on its ruins, was from all appearances the same.

He walked rapidly along the path. Smoke haze rose slowly through the humid, morning air from the fires where women were baking millet cakes on hot stones. There were no lookouts. He was first noticed by a crowd of naked children who ran beside him, coming close to feel the fabric of his indigo robe. Durga-Rama did not glance to right nor left. He seemed oblivious to their presence. When one of them, a boy of six or seven, tripped and fell in front of him, Durga-Rama merely trod over him and left him wailing on the ground.

He entered the duty path which wound like a crawling snake between two rows of thatch huts, passed a mud-roofed house

from which rolled an odor of putrefied gri-gris, and came to what was evidently the chief's house—one somewhat removed from the others, sitting on a slight rise of ground.

He was stopped at the door by a guardsmen who confronted him with a leveled assagai.

"I would see Chong!"

The guard retreated. He was a coward despite the ferocious appearance of his face which was twisted around a skewer of ivory thrust through his nose.

"Wait! I tell Chong," he said in his guttural language.

He lifted the drape of skin covering the low doorway, and bent double to go inside. He was gone the time it takes a man to breathe fifty times, then he emerged and spoke,

"Chong wait inside."

"Lift the drape for me!" snarled Durga-Rama, his hand closing on his scimitar.

With a surly motion, the man obeyed. Durga-Rama entered, and stood for a moment. The hut was dark after the bright, morning sunlight. Uncured skins of zebras, giraffes and jungle cats covered the dirt, giving off an odor of dry decay. Four squat women of the tribe were crouched in the deeper shadow along the wall, while a tall, bandy-legged Poltuni wench occupied a favored position on a skin-covered heap of thatch. In the center of the hut sat Chong himself.

Chong was large and round-shouldered. He had once been muscular, but some of the muscle had now dissolved into fat from the easy life he led. His face was broad and flat, his skin oily, his head shaved and gleaming like polished ebony.

"Durga-Rama!" he said, not offering to rise.

"You are honored by my visit," growled the usurper.

Chong waited. All his life he had hated these men of Ramfis, and that hatred showed in his face now. But he feared, too, and he was curious about this unprecedented visit. Durga-Rama went on,

"I come to tell you of a woman, Chong. A beautiful woman." With a contemptuous twist of his lips he looked around at Chong's wives. "This woman, she is not

a short, bow-legged wench like those with which you have contented yourself. This woman is tall, and white, like a vision of the gods. Her hair is like copper. Her waist is so slim your two hands would pass around it, and yet her hips and breasts are full as the rising moon. Such a woman would be worth the whole of your wretched kingdom, Chong."

Chong's eyes gleamed with interest in the midst of his flat face. He was a fancier of women. He had always dreamed to have for himself such a one as Durga-Rama described—perhaps a maiden of the race of Ramfis.

"Where is this woman?"

"She is near."

"In the village?"

"Sit down, and hear me out. Hear how you may have her for yourself to keep in your hut until you are tired of her."

"What is this woman's name?"

"The name is no difference. You may name her as you please."

Chong's eyes shifted nervously. The expression of longing left his face, and a twist of animal fear replaced it. He wondered why Durga-Rama would part with such a woman, and now he guessed.

"I have heard that the White Lord called Ki-Gor is roaming the jungles of Ramfis. Ki-Gor has such a mate as you tell about."

"What care you if she is Ki-Gor's mate?"

"Ho!" Chong beat the dirt with his knuckles. "I have heard of this Ki-Gor. He would come to my village, and hurl lightning bolts with his strong-bow which is said to be thick as a man's leg and long as the neck of a giraffe. He would——"

"You coward fool!" Durga-Rama spat among the dusty, rotting skins on the floor. "Your liver is yellow, and you have a woman's breast where your lion's heart should be. Listen, while I tell you the truth of this Ki-Gor: We ourselves captured him. For us he performed in a cage like a captive baboon. We spat on him, and he cringed from terror. Then we freed him, and he ran skulking into the jungle. I myself saw this mighty bow you tell about. These arms of mine drew it back and shot an arrow. You have been

listening to the tales told by the ivory hunters, and they have always been the worst liars in the universe."

It did not occur to Chong that Durga-Rama himself might be lying. Chong was a simple-minded man only a little removed from the apes, and up to this time, each promise and each threat of the men of Ramfis had been carried out.

Durga-Rama said, "Of course, if you do not want this glorious creature for your couch. . ."

"What is her price?"

"A miserable price, or else you could not pay it. I only ask the loan of one hundred warriors for the space of two suns."

"What would the great king of Ramfis need with one hundred warriors?"

"What do you care of my need as long as the woman is yours?"

Chong became crafty. "It is true that the men of Ramfis have taken to wetting spears in each other's blood?"

"Make up your mind about the woman before I take her for myself."

"Our yam fields are low and sour. But the fields on high land across the river grow fine crops. The ancient men of my tribe tell me it has ever been thus, yet the people of your tribe are rich and do not need all their fields. The hundred warriors I will lend you, and I will not complain if half of them die in your battle, but you must give me those fields closest the river, and you must also give me the woman."

Durga-Rama finally agreed as Chong wanted it. He would send Helene when the hundred warriors were delivered to his command. After the issue at Ramfis was settled, the warriors were not to return across the river, but would be allowed to build huts on the area of fertile grassland along the river's western bank.

Durga-Rama laughed to himself as he retraced his steps across the low-lying domains of the Ta'tambas. This Chong he detested. When the insurrection was put down in Ramfis, he would reorganize his guard and slaughter the warriors who had built huts. Afterwards he would cross the river in force, and retake Helene for himself. A white-skinned woman such as Helene would be worth many pounds of

copper in barta with the Arab slave merchants in the north.

Helene was with Nunabba, still bound, still sitting in the canoe. He smiled and said to her,

"I have good news. You are to be a queen—a queen of a cannibal village. You will belong to Chong in trade for one hundred warriors. It is not every woman who is valued at so high a price."

Helene gave no sign of having heard Durga-Rama's words. She sat very straight, looking across the vast stretch of river.

AT THE MOMENT she was helpless, her hands tied securely by the grass rope. There was no point in struggling or pleading. But she would not always be so helpless. Inside the breast of her leopard-skin bodice was tucked a tiny dagger. The dagger blade was scarcely longer than her middle finger, and it folded cleverly inside a golden case shaped like a scarab. Long ago Ki-Gor had found it in the valley of tombs and given it to her. Today, when she was handed over as wife to Chong, the scarab dagger would serve its deadly purpose.

They waited as the morning sun became hot. At length, five dugout canoes so loaded with warriors their sides dipped water, came in sight and crossed the broad stream, avoiding mudbars where swarms of crocodiles lay with backs exposed like stranded driftlogs.

The warriors came ashore, naked save for shields, breechclouts, and decorations of feather, copper and cowrie shells. They were armed with assagais, crude bows, and black-headed poisoned arrows. Durga-Rama bellowed a command, and they lined up for his inspection.

When he was through, the guard who had been at Chong's hut came up and said, "Chong told me to bring the woman."

Durga-Rama nodded a trifle regretfully. "Yes, the woman. Nunabba! bring the white goddess who is the wife of Chong!"

The warrior stared at her white beauty as she walked towards them through water up to her thighs. They did not take their eyes away until the canoe carrying her was a small streak far across the water.

"Come!" barked Durga-Rama. "Let us get to the fighting, and afterward I will show you the fields where you will grow rich and fat."

Helene felt slightly sick when she was thrust through the low doorway to Chong's hut. Hot, putrefying odors struck her. She stood near the wall, her eyes peering through gloom. She made out a squat, heavy shouldered man sitting crosslegged on a zebra skin. His forehead was low, his intelligence obviously little above the apes. He was staring at her, jaw relaxed.

After a while he sucked his breath. He came forward.

"You are beautiful," he said. "More beautiful than . . ."

She recoiled from his touch.

"Do not fear me!" he breathed. "I will not beat you like my other wives. I will not scar your smooth skin. You will grow used to me. I am——"

"You are a fool!" she said, trying to make her voice coldly contemptuous.

He stopped. "I a fool? I am Chong——"

"Yes, you are a fool. Did he not tell you I was Ki-Gor's mate? Do you not know that Ki-Gor will carry death to any man who touches me."

"But Ki-Gor is gone, fled from the wrath of Durga-Rama."

"Ki-Gor left the people of Ramfis in terror, with dead men being wailed in every hut. And soon he will return to find me, and the man who harms me will die like a pig with a javelin through his heart. You are a fool, Chong, or you would free me and save yourself."

Chong's dull eyes became shifty. He rubbed his large, shiny hands together, considering the wrath of Ki-Gor.

"No." He finally said. "I have traded a hundred warriors for you. Is the price not big enough to make you mine?"

"He will kill you with bolts of lightning with his strongbow."

"Agh!" Chong made a wretching movement and spat. "He will do nothing. This is but woman's talk to frighten me. Did not Durga-Rama himself say he had shot Ki-Gor's bow? Are not his arrows but twigs of the assagai tree? I am Chong, and I do not fear him. Let him come seeking you on the elephant men say he rides.

I will make a pitfall and line it with pointed stakes, and I will capture them both."

"You are a fool, Chong. Ki-Gor will leap your pitfall——"

"No. Not even Ki-Gor. The pitfall stands in the passage between two swamps. Men may cross, but an elephant will break through. They will not escape."

Chong grinned around at his ugly wives who were crouched outside, peering through the door.

"Is not my new wife beautiful?" he chuckled, rubbing his hands.

IX

AFTER HIS MEETING with Brend, and hearing from his lips the story of Helene's capture, Ki-Gor left the brown boy and Ngeeso riding on the elephant's broad back, climbed to the high treetops overhead, and swung swiftly from one to the other by means of their ropelike vines. In this manner it took only a few minutes to catch sight of the city.

There were no beating of pursuit drums, no crowds gathered in holiday spirit with bodies bedaubed in paint. Ki-Gor stood on a small branch, close to the swaying top of a lofty tree, and for the space of a hundred breaths his eyes studied the city of Ramfis.

Through the rising heat waves which distorted the picture he could see a cluster of black men near the temple of Isis. He could tell they were warriors by the repeated glints of sunshine on the bronze tips of their assagais. By Durga-Rama's house, another group of men were deployed. There seemed to be no fighting going on, but he could tell that some sort of trouble was brewing.

He gave a grunt of satisfaction, though his fine brows were still drawn together as he puzzled his course. He did not know whether to go openly, or by stealth. To charge in on the back of Marmo, might lead abrupt action by Durga-Rama. He might in his rage plunge a dagger into the heart of Helene. On the other hand, delay did not suit Ki-Gor's impetuous spirit.

He reached for a vine, wrapped one leg, and slid toward earth. He stopped, swinging through air like a pendulum, while his

eyes noted something else. A file of warriors wound its way toward him along the footpath. He listened as their voices came closer. They were talking to one another in the guttural language of the Ta'tamba tribe from across the river.

Ki-Gor first thought they were seizing a moment of civil war to make an attack on the city, but when the column came closer, he saw that their leader was not of the degenerate cannibal tribe. The leader was Durga-Rama himself, regal in a robe of indigo, scimitar flashing at his waist.

Ki-Gor slid down the vine, and dropped with cat's-paw lightness to a thick branch overhanging the footpath.

They passed directly beneath him, so close he could have touched the points of their assagais.

One of the warriors had fallen a trifle behind the rest. He limped, and finally stuck his assagai point down in earth, and bent over to remove a briar from between his toes. Ki-Gor did not move. The warrior stood, and hurried forward to catch his fellows. He did not glance above. He walked beneath the limb, and Ki-Gor swung down, hanging by bent knees. His hands darted, and they closed on the cannibal's throat.

He lifted the fellow from the ground and held him, feet lashing with the desperate impotence of a man on the gibbet. Occasionally Ki-Gor's fingers relaxed so the warrior could suck air into his tortured lungs. At length the sounds of the column died away. Ki-Gor released his grip, allowing the man to fall in a crumpled heap on the ground. He lighted beside him and waited for consciousness to return.

The warrior finally sat up, and blinked terrified eyes at the strange white man.

"Do not kill me!" he gasped. "Do not kill. Me only poor warrior. Me——"

"I will not kill you if you answer my questions."

"I am the lowest of the low," he chanted in one of the fetish tongues, making signs over the gri-gri pouch at his waist.

Ki-Gor made an impatient movement, "Where were you being led by Durga-Rama?"

"I do not know. Chong, our chief, he say we fight. He say we kill who Durga-

Rama say. He say we get rich land on river——”

“Have you seen a woman with skin like mine? A woman whose beauty is like the sun?”

The warrior drew in his breath with a sucking sound, rolling his eyes back in their sockets. After this dumb-show, he pointed to the river with his elongated lower lip.

“At dawn, master, I see the white goddess. Her skin like master’s skin. Her ——”

“Where is she now?”

“Perhaps they have taken her to Chong’s village.”

The sudden rage of the white man which followed these words made him lower himself belly down in the footpath.

“It was not my will, Master. I was——”

Ki-Gor seized him by the scruff of the neck, lifted him to his feet.

“You will lead me to this Chong?”

“Yes, Master!”

Ki-Gor started back, keeping his captive running ahead of him until at length he caught sight of Marmo.

Marmo came to a halt, and at Ki-Gor’s command held his trunk for the cannibal black to mount, but the fellow fell on his knees in fear of the great brute, and no urging from Ki-Gor could make him walk a step closer. Finally Ki-Gor said a few words in Swahili, and Marmo wrapped his trunk around the man’s trembling body, and lifted him to his back.

Guided by Ta’tamba, they soon reached the swampy edge of the river. It was a wide and turgid stream, brown with a cargo of sediment gathered from the black heart of Africa. Here and there were mudbanks with bushes clinging to them, and dotting their edges were the slimy bodies of crocodiles.

“Forward!” said Ki-Gor, barely hesitating at the brink. “You have crossed such rivers before, O Marmo!”

THE BEAST TRUMPETED softly in answer to these words from his beloved master. In a moment he was belly-deep in ooze among the rushes of the shore. He struggled on, slowly, like some huge ant caught in a sea of heavy syrup. At last the slow current of the stream rippled

along his broad sides, his back sank almost from sight, and he swam.

Ki-Gor slid from his head and struck out in the lead, his knife in his teeth as protection against devilfish and crocodiles, watching for whirlpools and shallow stretches where quicksand might trap the great brute. He passed close to mudbanks with the eyes of crocodiles fastened on him like god-forgotten eyes of prehistoric monsters.

At midstream, one of the reptiles, larger than the rest, slid from a bar and swam towards him with a swift, sinuous movement.

Ki-Gor speeded. He did not wish to be delayed by a fight. The crocodile drove for him, snapping at his feet. A quick roll by Ki-Gor made the attempt miss him. He kept the knife in his teeth, and trod water for a few seconds while removing one of the heavy arrows from his quiver and breaking it in half.

He waited, missing no move of the crocodile, remaining suspended in order to tempt its speedy return. The crocodile rolled over, disappearing. Only a ripple of distortion on the surface of the water served to mark his progress. Swifter it came, and swifter. Suddenly the long head broke water, eyes on Ki-Gor, mouth open showing the jagged fangs. The mouth was ready to close and cut Ki-Gor in two like a mighty scissors.

Marmo saw and trumpeted shrilly. There were mixed screams from Brend and Ngeeso. Ki-Gor did not move to place himself out of reach. Instead, at the final moment, he twisted forward through the water, and as the jaws snapped shut he thrust the broken half of the arrow, wedging it to prop open the reptile’s mouth.

With a quick sweep of his arms, Ki-Gor was away, avoiding by inches the lash of the crocodile’s tail.

The huge amphibian turned over and over, beating the water to a brownish froth, shaking his head, trying vainly to free his jaws from the torture of the arrow. But it was propped there as solidly as Ki-Gor’s strength could thrust it, and the harder he fought, the deeper sank its keen point in the roof of his mouth. Around him the froth turned pinkish from blood, and sud-

denly the reptile rolled over with muscles trembling. The arrow point had worked through and found his brain.

Downstream other crocodiles were showing an interest, tasting blood in the water. They slid from their resting places and came in dozens, but Ki-Gor had reached deep water, and was swimming with powerful strokes toward the shore.

He waded through shoulder-high rushes, and found an elephant trail showing the marks of new travel.

"Is this the way?" he asked the Tamtamba.

"It is the way, Master."

The trail led through low-lying jungle where the air was heavy with odors of fungus, miasma, and the damp-rot that clings like leprosy. Orchids grew in fiery splendor suspended from trees, their roots absorbing moisture from the steamy atmosphere, but animal life seemed to be lacking. It was not a good country, this domain of the cannibal blacks.

In time, the trail led to the edge of a swamp where trees stood with half their root systems above water, reaching down like clutching hands. There was a second swamp at the left. This one cut in until the footpath followed a shoulder of land only forty or fifty paces in width.

Marmo suddenly drew up, lifting his trunk in a manner which showed there was something close that did not meet his approval. Ki-Gor saw him, but his hurry was too urgent to pause. He ran ahead, senses drawn to a fine point, while the elephant lumbered in a half-gallop behind.

Ki-Gor's eyes were keen along the ground to pick up a warning spoor, and they roved the solid jungle walls for the tiny leaf movements that would be his warnings of ambush.

The warning came. Perhaps there was no real movement. Perhaps it was only an instinct passed down from the primitive that lays dormant in all civilized men, but had been reborn in Ki-Gor through his years in contact with nature.

He leaped to one side. Up there the glossy leaves trembled. Whether it was a man or lurking leopard he did not know.

Marmo came on, slowly breaking his speed. Ngeeso was leaping back and forth

on his head, jabbing him with his short assagai.

"Stop him, Ki-Gor!" he shrilled in his pigmy tongue. "Stop this foolish mountain. They have set a pitfall for him."

Ki-Gor could not see the pitfall from his position on the ground but it was plain to Ngeeso above. A pit had been tunneled beneath the footpath, leaving the original beaten earth in a fragile bridge over the top. The bridge of earth was thick enough to support several men, but the elephant would have plunged to his death on the pointed hardwood stakes that most certainly were driven below.

Marmo came to a stop at the final instant, setting his feet as the edge caved away. He trumpeted in a high scream, rearing back to his haunches. The ground still crumbled, but the great animal rolled to his side, spilling his human cargo back among the bramble of thorns. For a second he lay there on the brink, then he rolled, taking small trees down as he went, and thus gained the assurance of solid earth.

Ki-Gor saw all this from the side of his eye, for at the same moment Ngeeso shouted warning of the pitfall, an arrow whisked by so close its bit of feathered tail brushed the flesh of his arm.

For a fraction of time the ambusher was barely visible through the leaf-tangle. Ki-Gor's muscles responded like automatic mechanism. With stunning swiftness the strong-bow came from his shoulder. An arrow was fitted, drawn, released. The bowstring twanged with a bass sound, and like an echo came the thump of metal arrowhead as it struck through the bony framework of a human chest. A man uttered a wild, wavering scream and plunged head foremost from his place atop a limb.

ANOTHER POISONED ARROW stabbed the earth nearby. Then a dozen of them, winging in a shower. But like the arrows of most native archers, they were woefully inaccurate. Ki-Gor did not try to answer any but the first. He swung up among the branches, bounded crouching along a limb as thick as a man's body, and in a matter of seconds was looking down of his would-be killers.

So quick and silent had been the man-

ever that most of them thought he had simply vanished in air. He balanced with toes holding the smooth bark, drew a half-dozen arrows from his quiver, and in rapid succession he loosed them.

Two of the Ta'tamba fell before their companions realized where the hail of death was coming from. They screamed in terror at the great white man poised above, his hand loaded with winged destruction. They dropped their weapons and fell scrambling to the ground.

They were gone, and Ki-Gor expected no further trouble from them. He turned his attention to Marmo, shouted in Swahili, and the elephant trumpeted in answer. Ki-Gor gave the word which instructed him to go right. He obeyed, crashing a way through the undergrowth. He followed the soft edge of the swamp safe from the deadfall, and climbed once more to the footpath beyond.

Ki-Gor swung rapidly from tree to tree, watching the country ahead. The jungle ended, and he looked across a broad park area, dotted here and there by poor yam fields. Beyond the fields were the round-topped huts of the Ta'tamba village.

He waited until Marmo came near, and dropped to his head. He crouched on knees, urging the huge beast to greater speed, guiding him with the point of an arrow.

Marmo had not taken time to lift Brend and Ngeeso once more to his back. Ki-Gor could hear the voice of the pigmy coming to him from the edge of the jungle. "Wait for me, Ki-Gor!"

But Ki-Gor did not wait. Ngeeso and Brend would only be a hindrance. The ambushers had already fled across the yam fields and were in the village, shouting the alarm.

On reaching the one street of the village, Ki-Gor urged the elephant to a charge. Warriors were running from huts, having seized their lances and their painted leather shields. They saw the thing that was charging down on them, drew up for a moment's consternation, and fled for cover like mice scurrying from a falcon. One of them rose from a pit beside the path, poised a javelin, and hurled it.

The weapon flew true, sinking its point

in Marmo's thick hide, but whether or not the beast even felt it was a question. He ran without flinching, while the long shaft whipped back and forth, hanging by its barbed point.

Ki-Gor stood, balancing himself on Marmo's pitching head. He struck himself on the chest, and lifted his strongbow high, and his voice rose in a cry as it did that night on the ridge when he killed the great ape.

Fifty arrows and javelins were ready to be loosed, and out of such a shower it would be a miracle to ride unscathed. But his name seemed to take the fight momentarily out of them, and in these brief seconds of respite, the jungle man guided his elephant up the footpath to the large hut he correctly supposed was the hut of Chong.

He could have charged into the hut and left it a heap of tangled rubble, but he feared for Helene who might be inside.

He leaped to earth, tore the skin drape from the low doorway, and strode inside.

Helene screamed as she saw him. He could see her only vaguely as his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom. She started for him—stopped. A man rose between them, a huge beast of a man with bowed legs and the chest of a gorilla. He had tripped and fallen, and his hand was clutching his chest, his fingers glistening with blood.

The man was Chong. Helene had struck him with her tiny, scarab dagger, but he was built on a more massive scale than most men, and the short blade had failed to reach his heart.

Chong looked at Helene with dull eyes, then he spun to face Ki-Gor. After a stunned moment, he realized who the god-like white man was.

"You!" he muttered through his heavy lips. "You—Ki-Gor!"

"Yes. I am Ki-Gor."

"Do not kill me!" he whined. "I am your friend. I will tell you of your enemy. Durga-Rama. Listen while I tell—"

As he spoke, Chong backed slowly across the hut. He reached the wall, paused there, hands feeling behind him. Ki-Gor stood, waiting, with only his knife in his hand. His bow was on his shoulder, the

arrows in the quiver. For the moment it appeared to the crafty Chong that he was quite helpless.

With a swift movement unexpected of a man of his weight, Chong whipped an assagai from the wall behind him, swung it high, and drove it at Ki-Gor's naked chest.

But Ki-Gor was ready for this snake-like move. He pivoted to one side, hitching his body from the way as the shaft fanned past and disappeared through the wall of the hut.

He pounced forward, knife lifted high. Chong could escape to neither side. The wall was at his back. He seemed prepared to meet the rush, then he flung himself backward, striking the heaped robes with his shoulders, legs doubled.

Ki-Gor stopped as Chong's legs uncoiled, but not in time to avoid their impact. They sank into his groin.

The blow was brutal, and for a moment the jungle man was staggered. He recovered his balance, and once more advanced. Chong was ready for him now. He had found a weapon, a native machete with a blade two feet long.

Chong swung the heavy knife with both hands gripping the handle as if it were an axe. But Ki-Gor was himself now. He shifted his body just enough to make the deadly stroke miss. In missing, Chong staggered off balance.

Ki-Gor pounced. His left arm was up as though to guard. The knife in his right hand was ready. Chong managed to regain his balance. He rolled the knife in his hands, and swung it back. Ordinarily that maneuver would have kept an assailant at a distance, but Ki-Gor moved with startling rapidity.

He avoided the knife's murderous point, and sprang, his left hand darting to seize Chong's wrist.

For the second, Chong was helpless as though in the grip of a steel trap. He wrenched once, and that was all the time that was given him. The knife swung up and descended with speed faster than sight.

Chong was struck. He rolled over his toes and plunged face foremost, raising a cloud of dust from the floor.

HE WAS DEAD as he fell, pierced through the heart. Ki-Gor looked at him without regret, without pity. He had killed through necessity, through the operation of the only law he understood—the law of the wild. He turned, and Helene ran to his arms, pressing her soft cheek against his chest, wetting his bronzed skin with tears of thankfulness.

"You are unharmed?" he asked.

"Yes, Ki-Gor."

The scarab dagger was still open in her hand. She closed its slim blade and slipped it inside her bodice.

"You stabbed him, Helene?"

"Yes."

"But you did not kill him." Ki-Gor smiled. "I am glad. I would not want even the blood of a swine on your hands."

He held her for a moment, then he put her away and stepped from the door of the hut. He had been inside for the time it takes to breathe sixty times, and the tribesmen had overcome their first amazed terror and were organizing themselves into a sort of army. In a few moments the air would be filled with their deadly little arrows, so it would be wise to leave quickly.

Marmo was waiting. Ki-Gor issued a command, and the great beast bent his knee for Helene. When she was safely on his back, Ki-Gor vaulted beside her.

The Ta'tamba warriors saw him and loosed their arrows at long range. Twenty or thirty of them had taken positions among the huts at the lower end of the village, waiting to fire their shafts as Ki-Gor and Helene rode by.

Marmo set off at a heavy gallop. For a while it seemed that Ki-Gor would take the beast directly through the deadly gauntlet, then he uttered a command, and Marmo turned sharply to the left.

Huts stood there in a solid line with scarcely room between them for a man to pass. Marmo did not hesitate. He charged directly at the nearest of them. He tossed his head and trunk high, smashing the flimsy structure. Ki-Gor pulled Helene flat beside him so as not to be swept off among falling debris. There was a crunch of rending bambo, a roll of dust from the moldy thatch, and the hut collapsed, with terrified natives darting

away like ants from an uprooted hill.

Marmo went on, plunging shoulder deep in cane grass on the soft ground that separated yam fields and village. He trod deep ooze, swung back in the direction of the footpath.

At the edge of the village, warriors were dancing, waving assagais in impotent rage. One of them followed on the run, catching up as Marmo was slowed by the heavy ground. He dropped to one knee, and drove a poisoned arrow from his bow. Most of the Ta'tamba were pitiful in the use of bow and arrow, but this one, through skill or accident, fired straight toward Helene's back. With a rapid movement, Ki-Gor thrust his elephant-hide quiver in the arrow's path, and the leather stopped its vicious little point.

Ki-Gor balanced himself, set an arrow in the string of his strong-bow and shot the warrior through. He fell, threshing the earth in death-agony, and sight of him was sufficient to discourage the rest. In a few moments more, Marmo had carried them out of range. Brand and Ngeeso were waiting halfway across the fields. Ki-Gor paused for them, and continued at an easy pace toward the river.

X

DURGA-RAMA marched his Ta'tamba warriors directly to the river gate of Ramfis. No one seemed to note their approach. It was only a few strides from jungle to gate, and the gate was concealed from the rest of the town by his house and the collapsed arena.

There was no watchman on the gate. With the help of two brawny warriors he broke it down.

Once inside he could hear the sound of shouting men. A battle was in progress.

He ran past the stockade of his house, and drew up suddenly as an arrow drove its head in a picket close beside him. He retreated in cover of the stockade, then climbed and thrust his head cautiously over its top to survey the scene.

Five of his black guardsmen and as many of the enemy force lay dead in the open space in front of the gate. There must have been a hand-to-hand struggle,

after which the other guardsmen had taken refuge behind the stockade where they were standing off the attacking Ramfians with arrows.

He shouted a few words of instruction down to his barricaded men, and a cheer came from their throats. He had returned! They had been on the point of surrendering with a plea for mercy, but they had no thought of surrender now. To their minds, the leadership of Durga-Rama made them invincible.

Durga-Rama retraced his steps. He paused, hands on hips, to look at his Ta'tamba warriors who were chattering excitedly to one another, barely restraining the impulse to retreat. He quieted their tongues with a sweep of his arm. Beast that he was, he was a natural leader, otherwise he would never have secured a concerted attack from such a draggle-tailed army.

"Forward!" he bellowed. "Death to those few wretched ones hiding by the temple!"

His manner showed only contempt for the enemy. By his confidence the Ta'tambas assumed they had before them only the slaughter of a dozen or so. With sudden enthusiasm they shouted their war cries and rushed forward.

Durga-Rama waved them past. As they rushed into the open beyond the wall, his finely trained guardsmen emerged from hiding, whipping a sudden fury of arrows to keep the revolting army under cover.

The Ta'tambas swarmed along the path. The onslaught was unexpected. Liike's men, who had taken cover near the temple, saw them at the last moment, rose to meet them. Fighting was close, assagai against assagai. One of the cannibals, seeing it was not a slaughter of helpless men as he had anticipated, broke and ran. His action could have caused a stampede among his fellows, but Durga-Rama saw the danger, leaped forward with a long stride, and cut the man in half with one mighty swing of his scimitar.

"Death to the man who retreats!" he bellowed.

The Ta'tamba feared him more than they did the enemy. In a moment the struggle had so engulfed them that the possibility of retreat no longer existed.

It was fight or die, and they fought like cornered rats. For a while it was thus, with the battle see-sawing.

Above the uproar, Durga-Rama could be heard ordering his guardsmen from the courtyard. They came running, and formed a close group, three abreast, as he had trained them. He waited the correct moment—the moment when the apex of the battle was reached, when a sudden onslaught would tip the balance one way or the other.

The moment came. His soldier's instinct perceived it. "Forward!" he cried.

His guardsmen came in a solid array, bristling with leveled assagais. They cut the battle in two segments, then turned and tore the heart from the Ramfian army. When the enemy tried to retreat to the temple of Isis, a group of archers who had formed the middle men of the column shot them down with a shower of arrows.

This completed the rout. Every man tried to save himself. Liike, the blind priest, was led from the door of his temple.

"After him! Death to the high-priest!" roared Durga-Rama.

A couple of his guardsmen charged around the temple, but they were cut down by javelins. A little group of brown men formed a knot around Liike, protecting him until they reached the far wall. Perhaps thirty of the revolting army reached that wall and escaped. They paused for a while, trying to reform a line, and then retreated slowly toward the protecting cover of the jungle.

Durga-Rama left an order for the wounded enemy to be executed, encamped the Ta'tamba forces in the native village, and posted his black guards along the walls. The city thus firmly in his control, he went to his quarters to refresh himself with wine.

He rested through the hot hours of afternoon with Panthra at his side, then he arose, anointed his massive body with civet perfume, and donned a robe of silk for which he had once traded two young female slaves to the Arabs of the north.

He looked at himself in a mirror of polished silver, and grunted satisfaction. He was handsome enough now to win the love

of any woman. For a moment he regretted that it had been necessary to trade Helene to that swine of a cannibal chieftain, but a victim of Arlenna's young beauty came to console him. He smiled in contemplation. He had waited long for this day. He had watched Arlenna grow to womanhood, he had longed for her these many years, and now, this very afternoon, he would take her for wife.

He struck a triangular bronze gong four times, and Kadala, a big-boned slave woman, entered and bowed.

"Kadala, go to the house of Aknor, and tell them I would have you prepare their daughter, Arlenna, for the marriage feast."

"You would have me bring her here?" asked the woman in a coarse voice.

"My tepoi will meet her at the door of her house. She will be carried down the street of the native village as is the custom. We will drink the marriage cup in the temple. Then you will bring her here."

"Yes, my lord."

Durga-Rama issued more orders—orders for feasts to be prepared, orders for casks of wine to be opened in the native village. This completed, he paced the room, pausing frequently to look from the tiny, barred window at the house of Aknor.

ARLENNNA had concealed herself in terror while the battle was going on. Finally her nurse, an old slave woman named Raga, came with word that the battle was over, and that Liike's forces had fled.

"I heard the voice of Durga-Rama—was he among the fallen?"

"No, he still rules the city."

Arlenna was not cruel, but she prayed for the death of Durga-Rama. She detested the man and feared him. Many times she had dreamed of being made ready for marriage to Brend, but marriage to Durga-Rama seemed like a nightmare.

Raga patted her hand, "But your brother, Relknes, escaped."

This news brought Arlenna some assurance. She came from her room and passed the time by plucking the silken strings of a *kobnoor*.

There was a sound at the door, and Raga went to answer it. She ran back and

looked at Arlenna with what seemed like terror in her eyes.

"Raga! What——"

"My child! It is now—today!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Kadala has come."

The significance of her words gave the girl a sinking feeling. Kadala's arrival could mean only one thing. The marriage would be this very evening. It would be Kadala's task to perfume her body, and make her ready for her master.

"No," said Arlenna, backing across the room. "Tell her I am not here——"

Raga shook her head. "No, child——"

"Save me, Raga. Keep her out there while I leave by the back way."

Raga hesitated. She feared Kadala, but she loved her young mistress.

"Go then. Run!"

Kadala strode to the draped door of the room. Raga seized her and tried to keep her from entering.

"You must wait——"

"I do not wait. I come from Durga-Rama, the king. Did I not hear the sound of a *kobnoor* being played?"

Kadal flung the old woman aside and strode in. She glimpsed the girl through the flimsy, bamboo partition and rushed after her. Kadala seized Arlenna by the wrist and led her in. The girl wept, and tried vainly to free herself, but Kadala's strength was like a man's.

Kadala was a slave, but not a slave in mind. She was strong, and domineering, as the leading slave of a tyrant is likely to be. She had Fulani blood, and hence considered herself superior to these brown men of Ramfis, and her bondage had turned that feeling into hatred. She especially hated this girl with her soft cheeks, and her eyes that seemed ready to dissolve into tears.

"You will come!" she said, bowing as a slave must. "I am here to make you ready for your marriage."

Arlenna tried to say something, but her throat was constricted and no words came. Kadala looked at her cotton robe.

"You cannot go to the tepoi of your lord in such a garment as that!"

Raga, the ancient slave, had fled. Kadala shouted until another slave woman

appeared. "You! Tell me, has this girl no other robe than this thing of cotton? Has she no robe of purple so she will be made beautiful in the eyes of her new lord?"

"She has a robe of blue——"

"Then bring it! Bring it before I have the dogs of Durga-Rama turned loose on you. And when you return, bring also the oils of palm, and some scent of musk."

Arlenna stood with eyes closed as Kadala annointed her according to the Ramfian custom. Her hair was brushed with pulverized red mica until it sparkled with a thousand facets, then the blue robe was draped over her shoulders, fastened close around her throat.

The task finished, Kadala strode to the door to look for the tepoi. It stood on the ground with eight powerful blacks waiting to carry it on their broad shoulders.

The tepoi was large and ornate. It had a canopy of purple silk, curtains of white gauze. There were bangles and ornaments of copper and cowrie shells. Its handles were made of carved tusks.

Arlenna hesitated at the draped entrance, but Kadala followed, urging her. She lifted the curtain and crawled inside.

The interior was a couch, strewn with Arabian pillows. She sat for a while, but the ceiling was low, so she reclined on one arm. Things were visible through the white gauze as through a fog. She recognized the brown men who had not fled after the battle, she saw the blacks drunk on sweet wine, resplendent in barbaric finery.

The tepoi moved with a gently swaying motion as the blacks carried it along. It paused, and was lowered to the ground. She wondered why—then she saw Durga-Rama coming with long strides, sunlight flashing on his bright, silken robe.

He parted the curtains. She was conscious of his strength, of the massive bulk of him. She smelled the civet and oil with which he had smeared his body, and it made her sick. He came inside, and the drapery fell.

OUTSIDE, people were cheering, but the sound seemed far off, like a part of a nightmare. Arlenna forgot time and

place. Her only sensations were fear coupled with loathing for the man who was lying, so close to her.

On one elbow he rested, body relaxed and moving easily with the swing of the tepoi. He looked at her for a while, then he reached with his broad hand, its width almost as great as Arlenna's slim body, and laid it on her shoulder.

"I treasure you even above my crown, Arlenna." He waited for an answer, but the girl merely lay there, fixing him with her wide eyes. "You are beautiful, Arlenna. You will be the first among all my wives. You will bear me a son, and that son will reign as king. It is a great honor to be the bride of Durga-Rama."

When still she said nothing, the usurper twisted his strong lips in a smile. "You have not caressed me, Arlenna."

"No!" she whispered. "Please——"

"I will wait. Soon the magic waters of the altar of Isis will touch our lips, meaning that we are mates."

The tepoi was carried to the edge of the native street, then borne back to the temple of Isis.

Durga-Rama stepped from between its draperies, carrying Arlenna in his arms. He took her through the door toward the altar where incense was still smoldering though the priests had fled. He filled a golden chalice with water and held it to the girl's lips. She sipped once, and he quaffed the remainder. He slammed the chalice down and wiped his lips with the back of his hairy hand, and he looked at her with an added possessiveness. By this act, the ancient laws of Ramfis said she was his.

He bore her back to the tepoi and left her there. As the custom of Ramfis willed it, she would be taken to the rooms of her husband to wait, while he celebrated his marriage in flagons of wine with his chiefs.

The sun dropped from sight, and darkness crept in from the jungle, covering the city. There were not many of the brown men left, most of them having joined the rebellion, but these cheered the tyrant, and drank his health.

The drinking finished, he strode to the courtyard of his house.

There he paused to inspect his guards-

men. Ten of them were patrolling the stockade.

"There is need of extra caution," he said. "That coward army of Liike's may sneak back like jackals in the dark. Or perhaps Ki-Gor himself, looking for his mate whom I sold to the Tamtamba. Watch for them, and let no one disturb me. You hear?—no one!"

He climbed the stairway to his rooms. Panthra was guarding the door. The lion rose, fixing Durga-Rama with his savage eyes. Durga-Rama opened the door, taking the beast inside with him. He stood for a moment, looking around at the room as it was revealed by the flickering grease lamp. Arlenna was there in her robe of blue silk, sitting on the edge of a skin-covered pallet. He closed the door, dropped its bar of ironwood in place, looped Panthra's leash to a peg. Then, with heavy lips twisting in a smile, he advanced toward his bride.

"My dear!" he said, looking on her, "My dear, I have come to you. Do not fear. I can be cruel, but I can be gentle . . . to those who are beautiful . . ."

XI

CROCODILES still lay on mudbars, but they were too drugged by the heat of the afternoon to move when Ki-Gor and the others recrossed the river.

Ki-Gor called a halt at the far shore, and the party rested. Helene sat with her hand closed in the hand of her jungle mate. Today there was something bothering her, and Ki-Gor, with his keen perception, noticed it.

"What is it, Helene?" he asked.

"It is Brend," she said in a voice that the boy could not hear. "Have you forgotten that he is in love, too?"

"I have not forgotten. But neither can we fight Durga-Rama in the open, by ourselves. Tonight I will make another journey within the walls. Perhaps this time I will be able to plan a course of action with Liike."

For a time Ki-Gor lay stretched on a tree limb, sleeping in the manner he had grown used to when a boy. He awoke with long shadows creeping through the

jungle. Helene and Brend had already made out a supper on bananas and a variety of small breadfruit they had found growing in a bower of okume trees. But such foods were not the kind to satisfy either Ki-Gor or the pigmy chieftain, Ngeeso. They shared a man's craving for meat, and in a few minutes hunt they had found it—a tiny, moloko antelope which Ki-Gor empaled on an arrow. They ate the fresh, red meat, and it gave them instant strength—lasting strength of the kind Ki-Gor well might need before that night was finished.

With shadows settling over the jungle footpath, they again made their way toward Ramfis.

As was their custom at such time, Marmo served to carry all except Ki-Gor, who ranged ahead, watching the jungle to make certain that no trap had been laid.

Ki-Gor had been gone for a considerable time, and Helene was lying on her back, watching the branches above, expecting momentarily to see him come dropping from nowhere, when suddenly Marmo came to a stop. Ki-Gor was standing in the path, holding an old woman by the wrist.

"Can you talk to this woman, Brend? I found her running from the direction of the city, and she will say nothing in a tongue I can understand."

"Raga!" cried Brend, sliding down Marmo's broad side. "Why, this is Raga, a slave in the home of Arlenna. Rago, do you recognize me? I am Brend!"

The old slave woman almost wept when she saw him. "They said you were dead. Durga-Rama told Arlenna you were dead . . ."

"But I am not dead. Here, I will let you see for yourself I am no sorcerer's vision. Feel my flesh, Raga!"

The old woman ran her dry hands over his arms, muttering tearfully all the time.

"What are you doing running through the jungle at night, Raga?"

"Aii! He has taken her from us!" she wailed. "That evil woman whose soul has been eaten by the *jin*, she came for her this afternoon—"

"Tell me the one she came for!"

"For Arlenna. That Kadala came, and

said I must anoint Arlenna's body so she would be ready to go to Durga-Rama. The girl begged me to help her escape. I tried. I tried, Master, but that sorceress Kadala was waiting. She would have killed me. She would have thrown me to the hounds and had the flesh torn off my ancient bones had I not run from her. I crept from the gate while they were carrying out the bodies of those who fell in the fighting —"

"Then there was a fight?" asked Ki-Gor who had now picked up the peculiarities of the slave tongue.

"There was a fight, Master!" she said, backing from fear of him, for she had seen him battle in the arena, and still regarded him as some strange avenging messenger of the gods.

Ki-Gor said, "There was a revolt, and Durga-Rama broke it with his own guards and a hundred of the Ta'tamba—is that not true?"

"Yes, Master!" she whispered, thinking him more than ever a god.

"Has the marriage feast been yet?"

"They would have now drunk the marriage potion."

"And Arlenna was to go to him immediately?"

"It is the custom for a bridegroom to drink wine with his warrior friends until nightfall."

"But nightfall is still not here!" said Ki-Gor grimly, his hand closing powerfully on his hunting knife. "Perhaps with the help of twilight and the gods, there is yet time."

"What is your plan?" asked Helene, sliding from the head of Marmo to stand beside him.

"We cannot give the maiden to that beast. I will go in alone—"

"Not alone, Ki-Gor. I cannot let—"

"Yes, alone. It is the safest way."

When he spoke in that manner, Helene had learned the futility of argument. She knew, too, that in such matters, Ki-Gor was invariably right.

He turned once again to the slave woman, "How many were killed in the battle?"

"Perhaps ten of Durga-Rama's men, and twenty of those who followed Liike."

"And how many of Liiffe's men escaped?"

"As many as the fingers and toes of two men."

"Forty. With the help of Marmo and myself, those forty should be enough."

"And me, Ki-Gor. Do not forget Ngeeso!" said the pigmy chief, trying the points of his sharp little arrows.

Ki-Gor nodded, "And you, my brave Ngeeso!"

"But they are gone!" wailed Raga, beating knuckles against her old, flat breast. "They are gone, and Ramfis is lost."

"Gone in what direction?"

"Across the fields toward the high ridge."

"Brend, you know the trails of this valley. You will go with us to the edge of the clearing. From there you will circle alone, and follow the trail left by the army of Liike. Helene and Ngeeso will stay in the jungle while I find an entrance to the city. With good fortune your army will return, and with the help of Marmo we can drive that hireling army of Ta'tamba cannibals into the river."

KI-GOR tossed Brend to Marmo's back, and in a few minutes they could see the big dancing fires of Ramfis through the gathering twilight. Tom-toms were beating, and voices came with a high-pitched chant, indicating that the blacks were celebrating the marriage of Durga-Rama. Several guards could be seen pacing back and forth along the wall surrounding Durga-Rama's house. Upstairs, lamplight shone with a reddish glow through a tiny, barred window.

In accordance with Ki-Gor's instructions, Brend started off at a swift trot to circle the clearing. Helene and Ngeeso waited beside Marmo. Even the mighty tusker seemed ill at ease, as though he, too, wondered how Ki-Gor would gain entrance without falling victim to the sharp assaigais of Durga-Rama's guards.

Ki-Gor disappeared for a moment, then came in sight again on a branch above. He climbed higher and higher until he was close to the swaying top of the tallest baobab tree. There he found the vine he had fixed the evening of his first visit, and

tested its strength.

With the end of it in his hand, Ki-Gor swung slowly, higher and higher, toward the wall, and far back in the bowers of the jungle. At the apex of his swing, he could have released his hold and sailed over the stockade wall of the brown men's city as he had done before, but tonight, with guards thick around Durga-Rama's courtyard wall, such a leap would not be sufficient. He must not only gain entrance to the city, the leap must place him on Durga-Rama's house itself.

He hesitated for a while, waiting for the twilight to thicken. When night descends, there is a flickering moment of neither light nor darkness, a moment when a man's eyes will tell him things he does not believe—a time when darkness in a heavy layer along the earth, with a flare of light still lingering along the western horizon. That was the moment for which Ki-Gor waited.

The moment came. He leaned forward, judging the course of his swing. His feet left the branch. Down he went, the vine swinging through air. He was an uncertain blur through darkness as he lifted his legs at the bottom of the arc to avoid the tops of low bushes. He swung up and out, far over the wall. With timing developed by years of jungle travel, he judged the exact fraction of time, and relaxed his hold. He seemed poised, a dim object against the dim sky, then he plummeted down, and his feet touched the thatch-covered ridge-pole of Durga-Rama's house as silently as the velvet paws of a leopard.

Ki-Gor moved stealthily along the ridge-pole, shifting his weight as though the house were some delicate scale, and he feared tipping its balance. It was not the sound of his passage across the soft thatch which he feared would be noticed below—it would be bits of grass sifting down to tell of his movement.

He found the place through which he forced his way the evening before. It had not been patched. A ragged bit of light showed from Durga-Rama's rooms. He laid full length, peering down. Nothing was visible except an area of floor covered by woven raffia mats, but he could hear

sounds of footsteps approaching along the stairs, the complaining squeak of wooden hinges as the door opened. Something about these sounds told him it was Durga-Rama who had entered.

Ki-Gor heard the sudden drawing in of Arlenna's breath. Then Durga-Rama again,

"Do not fear me, my dear."

Ki-Gor could tell by the shadows that she was retreating from him.

He lowered his head and shoulders through the opening in the thatch, and for the first time caught sight of Durga-Rama and the girl. He had seized her by the wrists, and twisted until her lovely young face was drawn with pain. She sank kneeling before him.

Panthra snarled, and slammed the end of his leash, his nostrils having warned him that Ki-Gor was near. The sound broke Durga-Rama's preoccupation. Still gripping the girl's wrist, he turned to see what had disturbed the lion. Ki-Gor knew he must act.

He went head foremost through the roof, caught a bamboo beam flipping himself over in the air so that he landed on his feet, crouching.

Durga-Rama snapped the girl by her arm, flinging her at Ki-Gor. It was a brutal, unexpected movement.

Durga-Rama seized a long-handled battle-axe and swung it high.

KI-GOR had no time to draw his knife. He moved close. The axe swung past his head, he caught the handle on his shoulder. With a quick movement, he seized the big man by wrist and the front of his robe, lifted him overhead, and hurled him across the room.

Arlenna screamed, eyes on the door. Ki-Gor saw the lion at the same instant. He had cut his leash with his teeth, and had launched himself into air, fangs bared for Ki-Gor's throat.

They collided with the wall, and Ki-Gor went down with Panthra straddling him.

Ki-Gor kept his grip on the lion's throat. Their strength was balanced. Then slowly, by infinitesimal degrees, the jungle man's superb muscles made themselves felt.

Ki-Gor thrust the lion back to the length

of his arms. With a twisting motion, he rolled over. He snatched his knife that had fallen to the matting, crouched, the blade ready.

Panthra let out a raging snarl. He located Ki-Gor, and did not hesitate. He sprang again, and quick as a released arrow, the knife came around.

Ki-Gor leaped, straddling his back. He braced his legs, lifting the animal in the air. His knife swung up and descended. Panthra stiffened, and then fell backward at the feet of the jungle man, blood coming in rapid spurts from the wound.

Durga-Rama had now risen to one knee. The scimitar was in his right hand, his eyes were on Ki-Gor. He twisted his lips in a smile, keeping his little swine eyes on the knife in Ki-Gor's hand.

"We will throw aside our weapons as I count thrice, agreed?"

"It is agreed."

At the word "three" he made a movement as though to toss away the long scimitar. His quick, crafty eyes saw Ki-Gor's knife start through the air. But instead of dropping his own weapon, Durga-Rama merely let it roll in his hand, and then recaptured it with a practiced motion.

One step Durga-Rama advanced—two. The time was right. He sprang, swinging the scimitar with a horizontal stroke—the same powerful stroke that had chopped the retreating Ta'tamba completely in half that afternoon.

But Ki-Gor was no longer there. He had vanished like some genie seen in a witch-doctor's fire. The scimitar sang through the air, its heavy weight whipping Durga-Rama around.

He fought for balance, and he saw Ki-Gor, crouched, hand between his knees, gripping the knife.

Durga-Rama backed towards the door. Triumph had left his eyes. There was only fear there now—the primeval fear of death. He reached behind him for the ironwood bar, but Ki-Gor moved, and Durga-Rama dashed along the wall to avoid him.

"Help me!" he bellowed to his guards. "Hear me down there! A white devil you have let in! Break the door and help me!"

Men commenced shouting below. Bare

feet thudded the stairs, assagai points rattled along the wall. Someone tried the door and found it barred.

"Break in the door, you fool!" bellowed Durga-Rama, moving along the wall like a caged hyena. "It is Ki-Gor! Dropped down on me from the roof while you dogs were sleeping."

More guardsmen were coming. Ki-Gor could hear them jabbering to one another. They flung themselves against the door, but for the moment its timbers held firm.

An assagai stood against the wall. Ki-Gor seized it, held it poised. Durga-Rama, believing it was to be hurled at him, plunged for cover. Ki-Gor laughed. He would not kill the man with an assagai. It would be too easy. He would kill him with the knife. Instead he aimed the shaft at the door.

That assagai stopped the others from smashing the door, but they could fire poisoned arrows through the rent it had torn. Durga-Rama was still on the move. He saw his chance as Ki-Gor leaped to avoid an arrow, and charged, swinging the scimitar like an axe.

For a fragment of time Ki-Gor caught the blade on the guard of his knife. He stepped aside as the scimitar swung toward the floor. Then he leaped in, striking for Durga-Rama's heart.

Durga-Rama saw the blow coming. He twisted a trifle, trying to avoid it. The blade struck, but it missed his heart. He let fall the scimitar and reeled across the room, clutching his breast.

Ki-Gor did not stop to finish him. No time for that. The black guard saw his shoulder turned and commenced smashing in the door. He saw Arlenna, held his arm for her. She came to him. For a moment he held her close against his perfect body, and he could feel her sweet, warm breath against his arm. Then he sprang, reached a rafter, and swung with the skill of a great ape, hooking it with his legs, still holding the girl with one arm.

Panthra, his life blood pumping away through the chest wound, dragged himself up, his untamed eyes fastening themselves on Durga-Rama.

Durga-Rama had captured him as a cub. Through fear, the lion had come to

recognize him as master. He paid him obedience that the man mistook for love. But there is no space for love in the heart of a great cat. Durga-Rama was down with warm blood flowing between his fingers, and he was master no longer. The hate that had always lurked in Panthra's heart flamed now unchecked. With his final resource of strength, he sprang, setting his terrible fangs in Durga-Rama's unprotected throat.

Ki-Gor swung close to the ridgepole, helping the girl through the roof opening. Flames were already turning the room into a furnace. They roared with new draught as the guardsmen smashed open the door.

Then from the edge of the jungle came the high-pitched trumpeting of Marmo—the charging cry of the African bull elephant.

Ki-Gor waited as flames licked closer, holding the girl so her body would be protected from arrows. It was a few seconds before the guardsmen realized what was thundering towards them. The outer stockade crashed beneath Marmo's avalanche of muscle. Light from the burning house shone on his sweeping tusks.

At that moment, with every eye drawn away, Ki-Gor lifted the girl and sprang to earth. He placed her behind him, whipped the strong-bow from his shoulder, and drove arrows in a deadly stream as guardsmen fell over one another to escape the wrath of Marmo.

Ki-Gor caught Marmo by one of his fanlike ears. The beast stopped. Helene and Ngeeso were on his back, and he wanted them to take no chance with poisoned arrows from the guards who had fled to the native village.

The house became a torch, sending its flames higher and higher. Then it slumped, and as quickly became only a heap of coals.

Brend came a few minutes later, leading Liike's army at a swift trot. His men paused a few strides distant, still fearing the White Lord although Brend called him friend.

"Arlenna? What of Arlenna? You have saved her . . .?"

"We have saved her, and the usurper is dead. I think you will have little more trouble in Ramfis."

THE LONG FEAR

By WALTER JAMES SHELDON

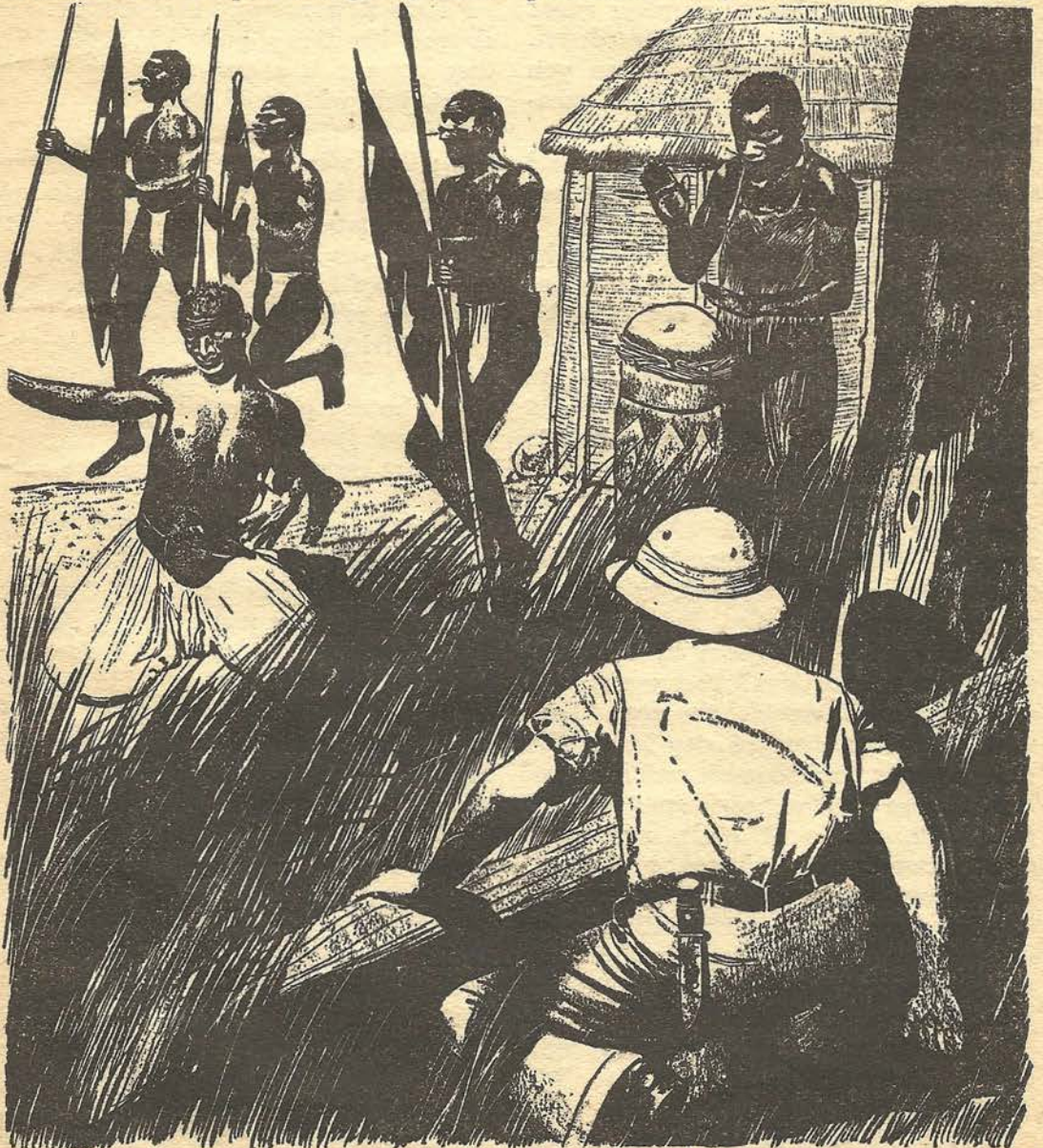
"In the native villages John McDall had seen white men with the long fear, broken with fever, perpetual terror in their eyes. It didn't take long once it began . . ."

WHEN the sun dropped, the T'hoki chanted in the near distance. Petrius Corput turned to his guide, and said: "That is what I want."

The guide frowned. He changed his position in the deck chair and tamped a pipe that was already set to smoke. He was leaner than Corput, this guide, much

leaner; his skin was as brown as the winding Tshuappa, and his eyes yellow-gray like the sky near the horizon in hot countries. He had been recommended in Coquilhatville.

"Not tonight," frowned John McDall. "And why not, may I ask?" When Corput raised his eyebrows it was as though



Wazala rolled his eyes and called out a mad, screaming death chant . . .

to lift them out of the reach of ordinary people. They were sparse and blond. Corput, himself, was big; heavy; his skin seemed inflated with flesh. He had a booming voice and just enough of his Dutch accent, McDall supposed, to make his travel lectures intriguing.

McDall nodded toward the bow of the long flat-bottomed boat. The blacks were gathered there in a squatting circle about Jobi, the little twisted one, listening as he muttered and gestured and rolled his eyes and threw in words of *manoc*, the witch doctor tongue that no white man had ever learned. "They're too keyed up tonight," McDall said. "Making a recording might set them off—they'd probably desert. They don't like recordings. When you take away men's voices, you take something of their souls."

"So?" Corput grinned, showing a gold tooth. "Maybe you, yourself, believe that?"

McDall looked at the big man sharply. That was the way with Corput—he sensed the deepest of your fears, and then his words became probes, seeking nerve ends. McDall hadn't wanted to take him to Ngani country in the first place. But then, this was his last trip; he wanted to get it over with . . .

His last trip. The thought made champagne of his blood. After fifteen years he hadn't the fortune he came for, but he had enough, at least, to go back to the States and retire. It was almost done, now. They had been on the Tshu-appa for — ten days? two weeks? He would have to consult the log. Days went by with a drugged step here. The river was flat and sluggish and it wound like a huge python, sometimes through great, flat carpets of reeds, and sometimes through thick, choked, musty jungle. Always the sun and the river, sucking the spirit from a man. Was it any wonder that after fifteen years one spoke quite offhandedly about such things as juju?

"The boys believe it, that's the point," said McDall. He began finally to light his pipe.

Corput leaned far forward, making the canvas chair creak. "Now you lis-

ten to me, Mr. McDall," he said. "I let you have your way from the first day because I was told you knew what to do. But you have been too slow, and too lenient with these blacks we hire. I think you were foolish to allow this Jobi, this little hunchback, to come along——"

"Jobi's valuable," McDall said quickly. "True, he can't pole, or carry much, but he does little jobs that would be beneath the others' *mpifo*—that prestige of theirs. Besides, they like to have him. He knows some of the witch doctor's art and he has influence with them. He's helped me out with that on other trips."

"Then it is simple," said Corput. He clapped his fleshy palms together. "If they do not like our recording of this chant, Jobi will pacify them."

McDall met the lecturer's watery, blue eyes; they were set so far into Corput's cheeks that he had to dig them out with his own stare. "Why *this* chant? This particular one? This is only T'hoki country, and we'll pass through it soon. Now, when we reach the Ngani——"

"My friend," said Corput, tapping the guide's knee, "will you accept the fact that I know my business? This chant we hear now is—well, dramatic. It sounds like what people would expect of a native chant."

"And do you realize what it is?" asked McDall.

Corput shook his head. "I don't care what it is. I can make up any story for it I choose. It is the *chant* I like. And we are going to record it." He rose suddenly, with disconcerting agility for his bulk. He moved to the tent-like cabin amidships and began to unsnap the cover of the Presto recorder.

McDall puffed his pipe just a shade faster. Wrinkles formed near the bridge of his nose and pulled at his heavy brows. A faker, this Corput, and his worshipping audience never dreamed it. A man who breezed through far-off places gathering just enough dust to show he'd been there. Was it to be deplored? Corput was nearly a millionaire and John McDall had only enough to retire modestly.

Perhaps juju had an answer for such things.

McDALL frowned. He would have to watch those thoughts about juju. A man could believe too strongly after too many years; a man's fear could grow. In the towns, McDall had seen white men with the long fear, broken with fever, perpetual terror in their eyes. It didn't take long once it began . . .

Corput was watching the volume indicator and setting the level for the recording machine. He had the microphone, with its parabolic shield, atop two wooden cases, facing the jungle. He grinned as he moved the cutting stylus to the inside of the record. "Perfect," boomed his deep voice. "This lecture will have all the elements of a best seller, eh? I will call this a fertility chant."

"It's hardly that," said McDall dryly, raising his eyes.

"So?" Corput blinked. "What is it then?"

"It's a T'hoki curse on their enemies, the Ngani. The two tribes have always hated each other. The T'hoki belong to the river spirits and the Ngani to the forest. The T'hoki are agricultural, the Ngani, hunters. It's strange that the T'hoki manage to keep the Ngani away as well as they do. Their river gods probably have some pretty strong juju."

Corput laughed heartily and shook his head. "By Joe, you *do* believe it, eh? Well, take it from me, it sounds more like a fertility chant. And that is what I shall call it."

Corput swung the stylus down to the shiny, acetate surface. The record began to cut.

Jobi, the twisted one, stopped his soft exhortation of the others, and stared at the recorder. His black eyes, ringed with white cornea, moved toward the jungle, then, and pulled his round head with them. His mouth was closed tightly. He stared into the bottle green thickness that came all the way to the river's edge, where the boat lay; he stared as though able to see through it all the way to the T'hoki village. He stared as though watching the council gathered at the hut of the medicine man, as though he could see the latter's painted, grill-like mask, and watch the gnarled hand strike in

subtle cadence at the wooden drum. Boom. Boom-boom. Boom. Boom-boom. And wound around the beat, like a serpent on a limb, the sinuous chant. *Yo. Yo. Nutufya Ngani. Yo. Yo. Nutufya Ngani.*

Jobi suddenly left his place and scuttled, crab-like, to the stern. He squatted at the side of McDall's chair. His great eyes, torches in a midnight face, looked up at the guide. "Evil, *Bondela*," he said in the native tongue. "The fat white man steals the T'hoki juju. The T'hoki river gods will punish all of us."

McDall nodded quite seriously. You couldn't laugh at these children; you couldn't even pretend not to laugh. They would sense that. You had to adjust your own mind to theirs while you talked to them, and that was the only way that there would be communication.

"Jobi," said McDall, "you know the huts where gods live, the trails where gods pass. You must ask them not to punish us."

Jobi shook his round head, "The fat white man must not steal T'hoki juju."

"The fat white man is my *bondela*. I cannot tell him."

"*Aiee*," said Jobi. "I will talk to the river gods."

McDall turned his eyes toward Corput, and saw that the big man had been watching, and that he was shaking his head sadly. The chant and the drum beat still came from the jungle. The hot, humid night held time and the senses in suspension; only the brown river moved, and this so slowly that it made no noise, nor look of moving. McDall felt a drop of sweat roll down the side of his body, under his loose, khaki shirt. He shuddered, and was angry for it.

The next morning they were moving up the river again—out of T'hoki country, on toward the Ngani stamping grounds—and McDall thought this: *How could I have been so foolish?* Corput had recorded his chant, and nothing had happened, nothing at all. Of course, nothing had happened. The only thing to fear was the long fear, itself, the purely imaginary thing in McDall's mind.

Corput had eaten a hearty breakfast and he was outlining his Congo lecture

on the portable typewriter. He had never looked healthier. The blacks were poling, their shoulder-blades rippling under dark, glossy skin; they were laughing and joking among themselves.

Jobi squatted in the bow and mended canvas. There was nothing in his face but a happy concentration on his immediate task.

And John McDall knew then that he must not delay in leaving the Congo. That this must, in truth, be his last trip; that he must not succumb to the temptation to go upriver again. Reality, and unreality were fusing much too closely together in his mind; he was thinking native, and before he knew it, he would begin to act native.

HERE. Here was the perfect example. They were at the edge of Ngani country, already. And without seeing any signs, without seeing anything but the broad river and the dense jungle, without hearing anything but the slip-slap of the water and the flurry of an occasional reed bird, John McDall had suddenly become tense and uneasy. There was no reason for it. Oh, he'd have a mountain to clear away when he returned to civilization. And he must begin to realize now that there was no juju, that what seemed magic was only cause and effect and no more mysterious than Corput's clacking typewriter, or the recording machine—

Corput, damn him, had noticed again. He had seen the way McDall was thinking; his typing had stopped and he was holding that fat, superior smile upon McDall. "Why do you not cheer up my friend?" Corput boomed at him. "You know you have much to be thankful for. I understand this is your last trip. And certainly I make it an easy one, eh?"

McDall shrugged. "You don't exactly knock yourself out in your quest for knowledge, if that's what you mean."

It amused Corput. His chuckle sounded like a small waterfall in his chest. "You are a sentimental fellow," he grinned. "But then that makes you not much different from most people. Myself, I look always at the cold logic of a thing. You

probably think I am a faker." He clapped his hands together. "You know—I am. And I also enjoy myself and make lots of money while a hundred learned professors must worry about their grocery bills. You would like further proof? Look at you. The way you sit there—and your face says that you are afraid. But you don't know what you are afraid of—"

"I was thinking about the Ngani, that's all," said McDall, stirring uncomfortably. "They're tricky people. We probably won't have any trouble with them because we won't stay long enough, and I'm sure you won't try to learn very much from them. Just the same, they're strange, and you can't tell what they'll do next. They're insane by our standards." He smiled slowly. "Of course, we white men are insane by theirs."

"That's difficult for you, eh?" said Corput, holding the guide with his pale eye, "to have the natives think you are not like them. That is hard, eh? Mr. McDall, you have been in this country too long."

McDall drew a deep breath and stifened himself against the anger that pounded at his ear drums. He must not quarrel with this man. His purpose was beyond that. He must finish this last trip of his, and then go home as he had planned. No emotion must interfere.

AND JOHN McDALL, for the next few days, found it increasingly difficult to keep from exploding against Petrius Corput. The man had a malicious, evil intelligence; he understood completely the tortures of a human soul, but he had no sympathy, none at all. He was a mental bully. He took every opportunity to suggest that McDall was succumbing to the jungle, to the long fear; he twisted every little act into evidence of it—if McDall would so much as frown at his food before eating it, Corput would ask if he were searching for evil spirits. This was the way Petrius Corput amused himself as the days and the river went by and behind them.

McDall, on his cot at night, more than once had the sudden feeling that an evil spirit had got into Corput and was using him to bedevil McDall. Every time that

thought came to him, he would strain to drive it away. He would curse himself and tell himself that he couldn't think logically, like a white man, anymore . . .

They shored the boat, finally, in the heart of Ngani country. The land, the river, and the sky had changed gradually, so that they hadn't noticed, and didn't realize it until they began to wonder what was different, and then looked about them and saw. This was higher country, and everything was bigger; the reeds, the creamy thunderheads every afternoon, and the jungle itself. The crocodiles that slipped abruptly from the shore into the brown water were longer, the birds that startled them were shriller and more brightly plumed.

Their own natives laughed and joked less, and seemed not so much like children anymore. When Jobi talked to them his voice was lower than ever. He used more of the *manoc* words.

They had seen none of the Ngani, yet, but at night they heard the drums. Several times they thought they saw distant fires in the jungle. That the Ngani knew they had come, they had no doubt.

McDall, for the first time, broke open a bottle of brandy for himself. And Corput roared with mirth, and pointed his fat finger when he caught him at it.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, the sky was clear and the sun merciless. There was a great stillness, as though this part of the world had been thrown suddenly into a state of suspended animation. The blacks lay, sleeping or just staring, along the gunwales, seeking tiny spots of shade. Corput was under the canvas awning correcting with pencil some of his typewritten sheets. McDall sat nearby carefully oiling the rifles against the terrible damp of the Congo. He watched a three inch cockroach nibble at the callouses of a sleeping native's soles, and felt too stifled, too detached to do anything about it.

Weary, listlessly, he turned his head to where Jobi usually squatted in the bow. The hunchback was still squatting, but raised a little, and on the tips of his toes, as though about to spring at something. His spidery arms hooked the edge of the gunwale. He had his bent, rounded fea-

tures turned toward the jungle. His head was cocked slightly . . . listening . . .

"What do you hear?" asked McDall, in Jobi's tongue.

The query startled the little native. He jerked his head toward McDall and showed white-ringed eyes. His mouth was slightly parted and the breath went through it with a low, harsh sound. "Ngani," he said.

Corput looked up and grunted, making the grunt say all the contemptuous words he knew.

"If Jobi says the Ngani are near," McDall said, "you can bet that they are. He senses these things. I've seen him do it before."

It was no longer necessary for Corput to say in so many words that McDall was bush crazy. All he had to do now was smile and lift his eyebrows.

McDall tried to ignore it. He tried to keep his voice even. "Let me warn you once more, Corput. You may have more than you bargained for with the Ngani. There's a reason why so few white men have ever seen them; they're entirely too mad and unpredictable. I don't like the way it's going."

"The way what is going, my friend?" Corput blinked with deceptive mildness.

"Everything. The—well, the feeling in the air around here." McDall gestured vaguely. Then he deepened his scowl and moistened lips which were suddenly dry. He knew he must sound like the greatest of fools. He wished he hadn't tried to explain what he felt, for he knew now that to Corput it would be inexplicable.

Corput slapped his fat knee and roared with laughter. "Ah—you are more native every day! The feeling in the air! The evil spirits, eh? Admit it, McDall, that is what you were trying to say, was it not? You *believe* in them. You know you do!"

McDall heard a noise that was like an explosion inside of his skull. For the smallest part of an instant a red curtain flashed in front of his eyes. The big artery in his neck became choked with angry blood. "Damn you, Corput!" he swore. He sprang from his chair, dropping the rifle to the duck boards. He

thrust his hands forward and saw that his fingers had formed themselves into claws. *Kill, kill! Kill with the hands . . .*

He gasped hungrily for breath. The choking sensation had gone away. He realized that he was standing there, a step away from Corput, trembling all over. Corput was just losing the momentary fear that had been in his pale, sunken eyes.

"You *are* in a serious condition, my friend," said Corput, frowning with a sympathy that McDall knew could not be real. "You had better sit down . . . relax. Perhaps it's the heat . . ."

There was a sudden commotion in the boat. The boys were rising, crowding the shore side, jabbering and pointing toward the jungle. As McDall and Corput, too, looked in that direction they saw the first of the tall warriors emerge from the trees.

"There they are," said McDall. "The Ngani."

Corput moved his bulk immediately to the side of the boat. He stood there, huge, looming, his pink-skinned arms folded across his chest, and he frowned mightily at the tall, black men who came toward him. There were twelve of them. They carried shields and spears, and all were painted with white and blue paint. The man at their head, the tallest, wore feathers and bones on his head. He stopped, raised his hand, and said: "*Endoko tofa la bonyolo!*"

"Here we have no chain to bind you," translated McDall. "He means that you are welcome to his country."

CORPUT grunted. "All right. Tell him thanks, or whatever one is supposed to say. Tell him I wish to visit his village. Tell him that I have gifts, and that we will exchange. I must bring something back from this place. Do they know about cameras? See what you can do about my taking pictures."

McDall looked at Corput oddly for a moment, then turned to the tall native and uttered a brief phrase. The Ngani leader replied just as briefly.

"What did he say?" asked Corput.

"I asked him his health, and if he had many wives," McDall answered. "It

would be very impolite to get down to business just yet."

"Fools," said Corput sadly, shaking his head. "No wonder they are savages. All right, Mr. McDall, you handle it your own way. But I want to get to their village as soon as possible. It will be just another stinking native village, but no other white man has ever been there, and that makes it good material." He added a short, cynical laugh.

McDall and the Ngani leader talked some more. The native had narrow, almost Caucasian features and eyes with a suggestion of Oriental slant. He spoke in a slow, quiet voice, with great dignity, but with a feeling of suppressed tension. Every once in a while his eyes would wander from side to side as if to confirm a thought with the other men who accompanied him.

McDall continued to translate each remark, knowing that the Ngani expected it. "His name is Wazala," he told Corput, "and he is chief of the Ngani. He says he knew we were coming, but that the spirits had also told them that the T'hoki might make war soon. That was why they didn't greet us before."

"Come on, McDall, never mind all that. Let's break open the gifts and get him to take us to his village."

McDall looked back for just a suspended instant. "I wouldn't go there if I were you," he said.

"What? Why not?"

"There's something wrong. They're not acting just right. I don't know what it is, but they're up to some trickery. We'd better stay here and let them show their hand first."

"McDall, please do not be foolish," sighed Corput.

"I'm serious. Deadly serious. You'll have to take my word for it—but I can *sense* that something's wrong. Nothing I can tell you in so many words, but I know it just as surely as I know your name and mine."

"Mr. McDall," said Corput slowly, fixing both eyes on the guide, "I am going to the Ngani village. Alone, if necessary. I will thank you to do the job for which I am paying you and arrange this matter

as soon as possible."

"All right," said McDall quietly. "All right, Corput. You're the *bondela*." He turned and palavered at length with the Ngani chief.

The boat boys and porters, meanwhile, had pressed themselves into a tight group near the bow and were staring at the Ngani delegation. There was wariness which bordered on fear in their eyes. Jobi watched the tall warriors carefully and muttered to himself in the quietest of tones. McDall felt one with Jobi and the others. There was evil in the air here and it was the worst kind of evil because it could not be seen or heard or smelled or touched with the fingers, it could only be felt inside. McDall could feel it. The only difference between McDall and the boys was that he could keep it from showing in his eyes.

He caught a phrase from Jobi's muttering. "*Ibwa wete joi ja nkakamwa*." Death is a strange thing. And he had all he could do to keep himself from nodding and repeating the phrase.

He finally faced Corput and said, "Wazala will have you as his guest in the Ngani village."

"Good," said Corput, "now you are being sensible." He swung his bulk back to the awning, slung the camera over his shoulders and then stepped out again.

"I'd take a pistol," McDall said.

"You take it. I have enough to carry already."

"I'm not going," said McDall.

"You are not going?" Corput's eyebrows rose for a moment, then fell again. He shrugged. "Be a fool, McDall. But let me make a prophecy like your witch doctors, too, eh? Let me say that you will never leave this country. You will rot here with the mind eaten from your head. Rest well, while I am gone, Mr. McDall, and try to stay sane at least long enough to get me back to Coquilhatville."

A moment later John McDall stood in the sun and watched Petrius Corput, surrounded by tall Ngani, disappear into the hot, heavy darkness of the jungle. He stood there and looked at the spot where they had disappeared. He watched for the time that it took him to fill his pipe

and tamp every last flake of tobacco carefully into place with his thumb. When he finally turned to go back to the awning, he saw that Jobi was still staring.

He smiled a little. "There is sun always the next day and the next," he said to Jobi in native dialect.

Jobi didn't answer. McDall wasn't even sure that he had heard.

THAT NIGHT McDall deliberately made himself busy so that he would think as little as possible. He cleaned the guns twice over, and he did the same with Corput's typewriter, and then began to go over the recording equipment. The disc bearing the T'hoki chant was still on the turntable where Corput had left it. Frowning at the man's slovenliness, McDall himself brushed away the fine, acetate shavings from the grooves. He felt that someone was behind him, looking, and he turned and saw Jobi.

"Juju," said Jobi. He looked around him. "In air."

McDall nodded. "Yes. I know." He was quite serious. He wasn't humoring Jobi at all.

The boat boys stirred and whispered among themselves. Something splashed far up the river; only a croc or hippo—but then it was well known that the evil spirits sometimes took the form of these creatures. Although there was no breeze, the limbs of the trees could be heard slithering. A bird screeched.

Then they heard the drums begin, and the boat boys suddenly stopped whispering, and all around them the jungle became still and listened, too.

Boom. Boom-boom.

McDall knew, almost from the first note, that it was a different rhythm this time. He turned his head slowly to look for the answer in Jobi's face. Jobi was frowning, concentrating.

"What do the drums say?" McDall asked.

Jobi waited for a long moment before answering. "The fat white man brings with him a T'hoki river god. It is foretold that the T'hoki invade, and the fat white man must die."

Years ago McDall would have asked

the hunchback how he knew; how he could possibly know all that just from hearing the drums. He would have done that, or else he might have laughed at him, and disbelieved him completely. Now he only nodded. And in Jobi's own language—thinking it, not just speaking it—he said: "The gods use the Ngani to punish the fat white man."

"It is so. Death is a strange thing," answered Jobi.

McDall's own mind seemed to be swimming. It seemed not to be his own mind, but a very different one that had been formed separately from him by the steaming jungle and then somehow magically exchanged for the soul that he had originally brought here. The feel of the air was different now. He was floating through endless, damp time, and there was nothing but the jungle and the gods who passed about and through it. There were no tomorrows and no yesterdays. There were not even words for them in the language in which he thought. He saw that he had been cleaning the recording equipment, and of a sudden that seemed silly to him. Insane. There was no reason to work now. One did not starve. One might work a little for *jilo*—meat hunger—one might vie with his friends in hunting, fishing, fighting, hewing the canoe, but one did not exert himself oftener than he had to.

The drums were still going.

Yes, Jobi was right. That was what they were saying. That the fat white man brought the T'hoki river god, and that the fat white man must die.

There! He could understand the drums!

Now he was one of them. Now he was like Jobi, and Wazala and all the rest. Oh, the white men would laugh and scorn and point to him now, and shake their heads and say: "Too long here." But it didn't matter. *Bendele bafa banto*. White men weren't people.

There was something warm in his hand. He looked. The pipe bowl, with the spot of pink fire smoldering in it. A strange thing. A white man's pipe. He put it into the corner of his mouth and drew upon it. Something happened. Something

clicked within his mind, and suddenly he couldn't understand the drums any more—

John McDall stood and shook as though with fever. The sweat ran in sheets down his brow and cheeks, and it wasn't a warm, natural sweat. Almost desperately, he took another long pull on his pipe.

That had been close. For a moment he had gone native, bush crazy—whatever you wanted to call it. He must get out of this land. Quickly, quickly. But there was a job to do first. He was still a white man, and there was a job that a white man must do.

"Jobi," he said, "listen with care. There is something you must do for me. And you must not fail."

Jobi gave the standard native answer, the formality: "*Mpo-kuseya*—I can't." But he answered that he was the brother of *M'Daw Bondela*. And then he paid strictest attention as McDall outlined what he wanted in the most careful and thorough way. He went over it three times so that Jobi would be sure to understand.

MINUTES later McDall had left the boat. He was trotting through the moon speckled dimness of the jungle, and keeping his steps turned toward the sound of the drum. It was getting louder and McDall knew that it could not be far away. He followed the native path that was already cut through the thick growth; the narrow corridor with room for only one man to pass, and he kept on it in the semi-darkness partly through feeling ahead of him and partly through long experience in traversing the jungle.

The creepers, the leaves and grasses slapped at him from both sides of the path. A vine caught the canvas belt from which his pistol and bush knife hung. It stopped him short, nearly throwing him flat on his back. He untangled it carefully, then kept going. Perhaps his years in this country had worn his mind, but they had made his body wiry and tough, and they had adjusted his lungs and heart to the warm, syrupy air. He could go on like this through the forest, always keeping that steady trot—whereas most white men might have fallen exhausted after the first few hundred yards.

Now the drums were loud, pressing at his ears. He could feel the vibrations in his feet. He was near, dangerously near to the Ngani village. The jungle was thinning somewhat; the green tangle on either side of the path was more penetrable.

He left the path and pushed on through the underbrush.

He reached the Ngani village so abruptly that he almost walked out into it before he saw it. He drew back quickly into the shadows again, he crouched and looked.

All about the fire they were, the tall, snake-like Ngani in an undulating circle, their arms linked, the paint on their faces gleaming with the flickering light. They were in a large, open space between the huts of split reeds, and just beyond the fire, under the racks of dried meat, squatted Wazala, chief of the Ngani.

Wazala rolled his slanted eyes upward and called out a mad, screaming chant. The line of warriors barked a response. The women, in the line beyond that, shrilled horribly. Nothing on earth can be quite so shrill as a Congo woman.

Now McDall saw Petrius Corput stretched horizontally between two logs, his face and belly toward the black night sky, his limbs spread.

Corput screamed, then sobbed. He was babbling things, but they were completely unintelligible.

McDall shuddered. But he stayed where he was, crouched, waiting. There was nothing else he could do. He shifted his position every once in a while to keep his joints from aching and his circulation from going away. He kept his eyes on the unfathomable ceremony of the Ngani—the ritual of which he understood only one thing; that it would end in Corput's death.

An agonizingly long time went by—just how long, though, he didn't know. He had forgotten to check his watch at the beginning. He glanced at it now and it was near midnight, but that didn't mean anything because he didn't remember what time he had left the boat. His bent knees ached after a while, and he had to sit, clasping his hands on his knees. In his mind, he traced carefully every move he

would make in case what he expected didn't happen. The moment that the Ngani seemed ready to kill Corput he would have to draw his gun and run forward, crouched, shooting as he came. It would be perfectly useless, of course. He would kill a few of them, perhaps one with each of the ten bullets if he were lucky. Then they would overwhelm him and stretch him between two logs, also. And the death that finally came would be as nothing to the maddening dance and chanting over his still live body . . .

This was certain as anything could be. Yet he knew he must make this attempt to rescue Corput, no matter how hopeless it might seem. He must do that because he was still a white man. And that was the white man's insanity.

As he sat there he realized that he had been hearing the soft beat of other drums for some moments. Faint, in the distance. And with them a chant. *Yo. Yo. Nutufya Ngani*. Other drums . . .

Now the Ngani had heard them. The line of dancers had stopped swaying. Wazala had stopped waving the rattle in the air, he had stilled his unearthly calls. He was rising, prying apart his slanted eyelids and staring in wonder.

The Ngani drums ceased.

Wazala stood, tall, commanding—but perhaps a little afraid in this moment. He raised his arm, then swung it in a slow semicircle toward the river. That was where the other chant came from. He stood like that for another moment, then snatched his shield and spear from where it leaned against the drying rack, and trotted off in that direction. He called, and the line of dancers followed. Someone gave a gurgling war chant, and the rest took it up, giving it rhythm and form . . .

The clearing was suddenly empty. Wait—it seemed empty now that the dancing warriors were no longer there, but there were still a few old men and women, moving about like bewildered ghosts among the huts. One hag had come to the fire and was poking scattered, burning sticks back into it. Corput groaned at her and she spat in his face.

A voice called from the opposite end of the clearing—a joke apparently, for the

old woman laughed as she looked in that direction and replied. And then McDall looked, too, and saw one of the tall Ngani warriors squatting, holding spear and shield in the crooks of his arms. He had obviously been left as a guard.

McDall allowed himself the luxury of one deep breath. Then he broke from the concealment of the undergrowth and began to run across the clearing. Surprise, that was the thing. He was depending on surprise. The old woman at the fire looked up, saw him, and simply stood there looking, not comprehending. He kept running.

A SHARP CRY came from the hut where the guard squatted. McDall hoped that it would not be heard out there in the jungle by the other Ngani. He hoped that they would be too far away, or perhaps too busy to hear it. He kept running, paying no attention whatsoever to the guard. He would handle him when and if, some time in the next few seconds, the need to handle him became more urgent. Right now he must get to Corput.

He passed the fire, circling slightly to sidestep it. He was at the drying rack, then, near the line of drums. There were the two logs, and taut between them Corput's blubbery form. McDall stared at Corput. He saw watery eyes, no longer deep in the cheeks, but bulging now. He saw fleshy lips tremble.

"Don't ask questions," said McDall. "Just follow me when I cut you loose. The Ngani are out there in the jungle, but with luck we might miss them." As he talked, he drew the bush knife and slashed at the rawhide bonds which held Corput's wrists and ankles. The lecturer tried to stagger to his feet, and fell, groaning with pain.

The old hag started screaming suddenly. She pointed at McDall and jabbered. McDall saw the fallen rattle, lying where Wazala had dropped it; a worn thing of feathers, a gourd and an esese branch. He snatched it up and waved it at the woman. Terror crossed her face and she began to back away toward the huts.

Movement touched the corner of his eye. He whirled, and saw the guard com-

ing toward him, spear raised. At first impulse his hand trembled toward the automatic pistol at his side, and then he remembered that the Ngani out there in the jungle would surely hear the sound of the shot, even if they had missed the cry of the guard and the screaming of the old woman. The bush knife was already in his hand, and he raised this instead. And with his other hand he turned the rattle toward the guard, shook it once.

The warrior was not as frightened of the rattle as the old woman had been. He had the narrow face of the Ngani, and eyes even more slitted than Wazala's had been. Three tiny ceremonial scars were embossed on each of his cheeks. And as McDall pointed the rattle, he saw those cheeks work in and out, saw the wide mouth part slightly. No, the warrior wasn't afraid of the rattle in McDall's hand, but it was still an implement of juju, a sacred and disconcerting thing; the warrior chose that moment to throw his spear, but he threw it hastily and with a touch of desperation. The spear passed inches to one side of McDall.

McDall leaped forward. He swung his bush-knife, saw the warrior's shield of crocodile skin come up to parry the blow, and he changed the direction of his swing. It cut deeply into the warrior's other shoulder. He drew it back again, and chopped backhand. The blade struck just below the man's ear . . .

McDall staggered back, feeling a little sick. The jungle swayed around the field of his vision and he shook his head viciously to knock the nausea from it. He turned, and trotted back to where Corput had been. Corput was on his feet, swaying. He took his arm roughly and made him stumble across the clearing toward the jungle.

SOMEHOW—in some unreal, dream-like way—he made Corput move along with him. He cut his way through the jungle, no longer trying to be silent, and when he reached the trail that led to the river he could only hope that there would be no returning Ngani upon it. He had to take the chance that they would have another route, perhaps one wider



than this. He was too exhausted to worry about it, or even to care very much any more . . .

He scarcely remembered reaching the boat, leaning on strong black arms and then moving out on the broad, flat river. When awareness of things came back fully he was under the canvas, in one of the camp chairs, and Corput was seated on the duck boards, his head in his fat, crossed arms. He was sobbing and shuddering.

Jobi, the twisted one, was standing beside McDall's chair. McDall heard Jobi say: "*Ibwa wete joi ja nkakamwa.*" Death is a strange thing. He looked up and saw that Jobi was staring at Corput.

McDall leaned forward and touched the fat man's shoulder. "Corput," he said, "snap out of it. It's all right. And you can thank Jobi for it. He played that T'hoki chant of yours on the recorder, and the Ngani heard it. That's what made them break up their little party and go looking through the jungle—"

Corput looked up slowly. It seemed

as though someone had opened a valve and let all of the flesh out of his cheeks. The loose skin along his chin bone trembled. Saliva glistened in one corner of his mouth. He opened his eyes wide, smiled foolishly at McDall and then suddenly began to laugh. He sat there rocking and shaking and laughing without the faintest trace of mirth.

In the towns McDall had seen white men with the long fear, broken with fever, perpetual terror in their eyes. It didn't take long once it began . . .

The blacks kept poling, and the dark river moved by. Corput stopped sobbing and laughing after a while and just sat there, staring vacantly. McDall filled his pipe. Perhaps the white man's medicine would help Corput when they reached Coquilhatville. He didn't know. He knew only that there *was* juju, and that things did move in mysterious ways, but that white and black men had different names for it. Corput had called it logic.

McDall lighted the pipe and dreamed of the boat back to the States.

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WATCH FOR IT!

SERPENT'S FETISH

By JAMES BLISH

What ancient monsters would prowl jungle trails when
terror unlocked the Valley of Dragons?

KIT KENNEDY stepped out of his lodge onto the springy turf and took a deep breath. All around him the baobab trees towered, except directly back of the lodge, where the mountain began. Pearly morning light filtered through the leaves and the deep, rich green of the loam. Over the sonorous whispering of the nearby river, there came a chittering of monkeys, and the sound of a scampering game being played invisibly high up among the leaves.

Kit exhaled with a satisfied sigh. Here, in the deep Gunda province, it was cool and clear most of the day. The coast was the steaming country, where white men wasted and died quickly, yellow with quinine and alcohol. Kit was a white man, but he had almost forgotten it—it had been eleven years since he had seen Kansas. That would seem like a foreign country to him now. He was K'Tendi—the other titles the natives had given him didn't matter, it was enough to belong to the jungle.

The wind shifted slightly and Kit felt a delicate pulsing in his ears, as if tiny palms were pattering at his ear-drums. He stiffened. Sure enough—the jungle telegraph was in operation, somewhere down by the Luberfu. A moment later, the thrumming became stronger as the Wassabi village picked up the message and passed it on.

Over Kit's head the foliage stirred, and a great, flat head dipped down to regard the white dweller. Kit looked up.

"Hello, Manalendi," he said gravely. "You hear them too, eh?"

The python shot out a forked tongue with lightning quickness; obviously the huge beast was alert to sounds no human could hear. His head wove questioningly. Kit grinned. Few men see anything but menace in a great constrictor, but to Kit Manalendi's overwhelming curiosity was

funny. The creature had been hanging around the lodge for nearly a year now, following Kit wherever he went, departing only on brief trips to snatch a chicken from the Wassabi.

"I wish you could tell me what *you* hear," Kit said. "But you can't understand the drum message, so we're even. There are white men coming here, Manalendi. And that means trouble."

The snake did not understand that, either, but perhaps he didn't have to be told that the drums often brought trouble—if he were lucky, interesting trouble that would wind up in a fight. Manalendi was not vicious, and most of the jungle creatures big enough to match him left him strictly alone; it was, Kit supposed, a dull life for the most part.

But the python was a hole card which Kit sometimes had reason to play; no use betraying it ahead of time. He gave the snake the one word-command which he had been able to teach it.

"Upstairs, handsome."

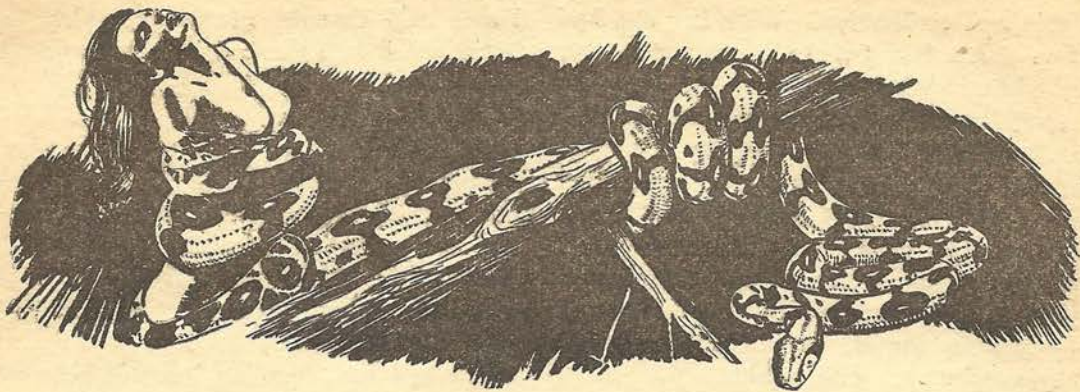
Manalendi pulled in his tongue disgustedly and withdrew, his dappled blue body blending with the shifting leaves. Kit looked speculatively at the drum which hung, its draw-strings flaccid, from the eaves of his lodge. No; if the matter were urgent enough to arouse M'Tombu, he'd already be on the way—the Wassabi tribes had heard the message before Kit had—

The thought had barely entered Kit's head when he saw the brawny body of the black chieftain sprinting silently down the trail toward the lodge. Kit raised his hand in greeting.

"Long life, M'Tombu."

"A thousand years," M'Tombu said automatically. Then, "K'Tendi, there is a safari coming here, a great one, with many guns, and many boys. They have whips."

"Whips! Not just the *sjambok*?"



"No, *bwana*, long plaited whips such as white men use for horses. Already they have had desertions; the deserters claim such cruelty as might frighten a Belgian."

This was one of M'Tombu's rudimentary jokes; neither he nor K'Tendi thought highly of the ostensible rulers of the Congo. Kit said, "What's it all about? Why do the boys have to be driven—doesn't the *baas* pay enough?"

"The pay is high," M'Tombu returned, squatting down on the turf. Kit followed, with the natural grace of a man who had long forgotten the crutch of chairs. "But there are whispers."

"There are always whispers. These people probably hope for gold. Most of the whites know I pay for my shells with raw ore—perhaps they have some silly story about a hidden temple under my hut—white men will believe anything."

"No, *bwana*. One can sense the gold-fever; it shows in the eyes, and in the smell of the sweat. Besides, who would disturb K'Tendi's gold? This is another lust. It is whispered that they seek the Valley of Dragons."

Kit's lips whitened. "If it were not for the bearers," he said grimly, "one might almost wish that they find it. This is very bad, M'Tombu. How came they to hear of the Valley? Do the deserters know?"

"We are to blame, K'Tendi."

"How so?"

"When we found and slew *mokele-mbembe*, the great dragon, last year. The whites you rescued brought the word out; they collected stories of tribesmen and chiefs; there was much excitement. This new safari seeks more *mokele-mbembes*, and their brothers."

Kit nodded. All in all, he was not surprised. Since he had yanked Stahl and the English girl almost out of the mouth of *mokele-mbembe*, he had been fearing some such result—

For *mokele-mbembe* had been a dinosaur, alive and thunderous. The survival of such monsters passed with only a shrug among the blacks, who knew no geology and had long had legends of the snake-headed *lau*, the Elephant-Eater, *mokele-mbembe*, and a dozen other nightmares of the swamps and forests—danger has a million heads in Africa. To the European world, however, which knew dinosaurs only as faint traces in ancient rocks, such a discovery would come like an explosion.

Kit had hoped that the lack of evidence—for they had had to leave the scene in a hurry—would have cast doubt on any story Stahl might tell, but he realized now that the hope had been only a phantom. Stahl had been an important bureaucrat, though a uniquely courageous one; his word would bear weight in Belgium. And Paula—

THE OLD BITTER TASTE was in Kit's mouth again, the alum-and-lye of his hatred for the whole white world. For a while he had thought that the English girl would stick with him. But she couldn't take it; her background overrode her; she yearned for the sound of nasal voices discussing things of no moment, longed to be back in an English drawing room where one might pat lions and snakes on the head at a safe distance of five thousand miles. She had demanded a *poshi* of M'Tombu, and had left Kit's lodge for the long haul to Berghe-Ste.-

Marie and civilization. With her she had taken Kit's last twinge of sympathy for the white man's world.

And Paula had been some kind of nabob on the English Congo Inquiry Commission; if she told the lords and ladies that there were dinosaurs ranging the Congo swamps, they would say, "My dear girl!", but they'd believe her. Now there was a safari looking for the Valley of Dragons—looking for it, in the old, familiar, European way: with whips.

M'Tombu was watching Kit steadily. "I have sent an advance party to ambush these seekers," he said. "A war-arrow will help desertions, and we can attack the rest at any time. After that—" The big Bantu did not bother to finish the sentence, but his gesture showed what he planned for the whites.

Kit shook his head. "This safari is probably official," he said. "If we break it up, it will give the whites every excuse for a punitive attack—soldiers, whippings, burnings of villages, all the old terror."

"But if they find the Valley, K'Temdi, they will be here by the hundreds."

"I know," Kit said, rising. "They will turn the country into a reservation overnight—or worse, they will stampede the great beasts out of the Valley and turn the whole province into a death-trap. We had best see N'Mnota at once."

The black stared at Kit for a moment. Then he said, "N'Mnota hates you, K'Tendi—and *juju* is a weak reed against whips and guns—"

"M'Tombu, whips and guns impress you overmuch; and I have no intention of using N'Mnota's kind of *juju*. Quickly, now—we have little time."

M'Tombu went down the trail without further question, Kit at his heels. Behind them, Manalendi, the long one, rustled the leaves; but when Kit turned to look for him, the python was not in sight. The realization gave him a chill. Manalendi had at long last deserted them, and there was little doubt where he was headed.

Manalendi was seeking out the Valley of Dragons, where the ancients of his tribe churned the swamps, fought titanically, or plucked the white fruits from the

lianas and thought of things which had happened before there was such a creature as man . . .

IN THE HUT of N'Mnota there was a peculiar, ineradicable stench, compounded of smoke, blood, scorched flesh, and a variety of aromatic herbs—the smell of the fetish. Also, it was dark, but not dark enough to conceal the fat ugliness of N'Mnota.

Kit had few enemies, but witch-doctors seldom loved him. That *juju* existed was a matter Kit did not doubt, but in his experience few of the local devil-dancers knew any more about it than the rest of the natives; they were simply parasites, preying upon the fears of their fellows. Kit had had deadly curses placed upon him by more of these leeches than he could remember, and had survived without any more effort than a shrug required. There was an old man to the southwest, now, who might make a bad enemy . . .

The tubby sorcerer bent a black look upon M'Tombu. "Thine omens are evil, great chief," he said sonorously. "This day I have read thy fate in the entrails of a pure-white rooster; thou bringest thy people to bad ends with overmuch hearkening to strangers."

"There are no messages writ in such messes," M'Tombu said, using the infinitely insulting *dju*, a grammatical construction ordinarily reserved for animals and children. "Thy chicken bespeaks thine own jealousy; K'Tendi is no stranger to any but thyself. Leave off thy prattling and be silent; there is man's work afoot."

N'Mnota grumbled, but subsided; M'Tombu was his chief. "If you speak of the government safari, N'Mnota was warned by the spirits long ere this."

Kit stepped forward; now that the tribal business was settled, he could take part without breaching courtesy. "Then perhaps N'Mnota can advise K'Tendi, who must learn what little he knows from the drums. Did the spirits happen to report that the safari sought the Valley of Dragons?"

Judging by the way N'Mnota's eyes bulged, the spirits hadn't thought that aspect of the matter important enough to

mention; but the wizard made a quick recovery. "Let them seek," he said. "If they should find it, there will be nothing left for the Wassabi to clean up."

"N'Mnota dissembles," Kit said. "His people fear the Valley, and with reason; it is not good that the whites should violate it. More: this country is virtually unknown to the whites—it belongs to us. If the whites find the Valley, the Gundu lands will be overrun with them before two years have passed—expeditions will come by the handfuls to snare the great beasts, settlements will go up, there will be shooting and trampling of corn and spoilage of women and property. If this safari is destroyed by the great reptiles, others will be sent, bigger and stronger ones, until the Valley is conquered."

"K'Tendi has forbidden that the Wassabi attack this safari," N'Mnota said. "Soon it will be known that he fears only for his own safety, and his fine words mean only that his brothers might take his gold. The Wassabi need not gold; they will protect their own *kraals*, and will know K'Tendi's cravements for what it is. I have spoken; enough."

"As have I," Kit said, rising. He stared down at the plump charlatan. "*I will not have these whites here.* Inevitably they will consult N'Mnota, since they will think he knows better than we others where the Valley might be. N'Mnota will keep his own counsel, or K'Tendi will see him sent naked into the Valley. Is it not so, M'Tombu?"

"It is so," the warrior said. There was no love lost between the wizard and M'Tombu, for among the Wassabi as among all Congo peoples the witch-doctor and the chief were constant rivals for power. N'Mnota spat disgustedly into the dust, but offered no further comment; the two went out into the sunlight, leaving him glumly regarding his bare toes.

"You will keep a close eye on the tribe, M'Tombu?" Kit asked in French.

"Yes, *bwana*, but I cannot promise silence of N'Mnota. He has long sought to return us to our old cannibal customs and our law that whites must be killed on sight; this affair will give him fuel and

tinder among our people."

"I understand that. I must leave it in your hands; I have other spears to harden in the south. Remember that it is important to head off any attack upon the safari—silence and stealth are our only hopes."

The big Bantu nodded. "Life, *bwana*." "A thousand years."

Kit strode toward the thorn gate. A thousand years—it was a long time, the equivalent of eternity for men; but now they had to deal with creatures who had been in Africa a minimum of thirty *million* years. The blacks had no word for "million," for they had never seen that many things alike. Well, the whites had the word, but they did not know the jungle.

The jungle had been around for a long time, too, and there were no words for some of the things it hid . . .

AT THE BEGINNING of the second day's travel, Kit took to the trees. The drums throbbed incessantly, keeping the jungle informed of the movements of the safari, and their sound was becoming angry and warlike. K'Tendi hath forbidden that these whites be molested, yet they seek the Valley of Dragons—the whites approach—K'Tendi hath forbidden—they are daily closer to the Valley—

Kit kept moving, south and west, roughly in the direction of Lake Leopold III. By nightfall the drums were very dim, and no new hides picked up their messages. Here what was urgent to the Gundu tribes was matter of no moment. The land which was the land of King L'Gondelu granted no allegiance to K'Tendi or to the whites.

Kit waited until the jungle was blanketed in blackness, and crept toward the *boma* within which L'Gondelu slept. He waited until the cooking fires died, and the murmuring of voices dwindled and became blended with the whispering of the jungle.

Then he lifted his head and screamed.

It was a long, thin, rasping wail—a sound that should not have come from the throat of a man, or, better still, should never have been sounded at all. It was the scream of a panther.

Again Kit waited. Through most of

the village, he knew, Bantu women would be huddling their infants closer, and black warriors crouching tensely inside the woven mats which were the doors of their huts. That scream must have emptied the alleys and the big compound in a hurry.

And in one hut, a very old man would be waiting as Kit was waiting . . .

Kit found the hut without difficulty and scabbled at the reed mat, whining like a curious cat. A quavering voice said, "Welcome."

It was pitch black inside, and there was no odor but the smell of earth, and a faint, musty tang that suggested age. The quavering voice said, "It is K'Tendi. This matter of the Valley is very serious, then."

"Deadly," Kit said. "Otherwise I would not trouble you, old one."

"I know that. K'Tendi knows of the limits of my power. Within those limits, I may help; not beyond. What would he have me do?"

Kit sat down and said tensely. "I am unable to order any attack on these whites; yet they cannot be allowed to reach the Valley. My desire that the safari be unmolested will quickly make my people suspect me; they may not do the important thing I must ask of them, when the time comes to ask it. There is only one way."

"Speak."

"L'Gondelu hates you, but he fears more than he hates; it is widely known that you are a true sorcerer, and no leech. It must be said here in the village that K'Tendi has deserted his people for the whites, and that the tribe of M'Tombu is weak and frightened."

The old voice said, "L'Gondelu will make war on M'Tombu if this is said."

"Even so. This is what I wish. Within two days the people of L'Gondelu must go north, painted and armed, to war upon M'Tombu. The drums must cry war with great voices. L'Gondelu will ask omens of you; say him nay; he will be sure to go if you prophesy defeat." Kit paused, but the old man said nothing. Kit said, "This will be true prophecy, that you may make in all good faith."

"The word that K'Tendi has betrayed M'Tombu will reach M'Tombu."

"No matter, M'Tombu will not believe

it. N'Mnota will, which will be for the best. But there is more. There must be magic; this K'Tendi cannot make."

"I make small magics. Speak."

Kit took a deep breath. "There must be a large magic. There must be lightnings in the Valley of Serpents. There must be lightnings—and fire."

For a long time it was silent in the dark hut. For the first time since he had come to live in the jungle, Kit felt a nervous urge to make some useless motion—pull at his earlobe, shift his feet, anything to relieve the tension. If he had asked too much—

"That is great magic," the old man said. "Would K'Tendi drive the monsters from their home? This must not be; the jungle would be very terrible if these serpents were abroad in it. The whites would drive them out; but we must not."

"We must," Kit said, his voice deepening with conviction. "We must do more; we must drive the monsters directly over the camp of the whites. And then—we must drive them back into the Valley again. Look you, my friend: we can bring no force to bear on the whites ourselves, or we shall feel the whips on our backs before the year is out, and the Gundu country will ring with gunfire. Our sole hope is to convince the safari that the great reptiles have been driven out of their valley and are scattered all over the face of Africa. There is no way to do that but to do it. And—of course the monsters must be driven back to the valley again."

"And K'Tendi means to muster the people of L'Gondelu and of M'Tombu at the rim of the fire, to herd the beasts to the valley again—with the threat of war between the two tribes?"

"Yes," Kit said. "The flying things will return of their own accord when the fire is over, but the thunderers who walk must be herded. It will take us all to get them back, and there is no way but war to bring us together. Can the lightnings be asked this favor?"

Once more there was a long silence. Then the old man said, "The jungle is dry; but the season of rains is moons away. I will ask the favor, K'Tendi—

but it is a large magic for an old man. If I am refused, there will be slaughter between the tribes, and the whites will reach the Valley all the same."

"And K'Tendi," Kit said wryly, "will go in the pot. My people have not forgotten the crisp crackle of long-pig, for all that they have not tasted it since I came to them. It would be fitting that they broke my law with me!"

"I will ask that there be fire in the Valley of Dragons," the old voice said. "And a south wind to fan it. But this is a very large magic for an old man, K'Tendi."

Kit stood up. "I would not ask it," he said soberly, "of any other."

TWO days, and dusk again, and the trees purring with an invisible river of wind. Kit paused in the crotch of a shea tree and listened. The safari had last been reported travelling the Ikatta, and he knew that it would have to leave that swampy river before getting very deep into Gundu country.

A distant sound fought upwind. Singing! For a moment Kit would not believe it. He wriggled higher in the tree and lay still along a thick, corded branch. So the bearers still had spirit enough to sing? It didn't jibe with the stories of whippings and desertions—

The deep bass voices drew nearer, and after a while Kit could make out the language, and then the words:

"I die in the desert, a thing
accused,

That saw thee, yet never pos-
sessed thee . . ."

No such song had ever been sung before in the Congo, for there were no deserts in the Belgian protectorate; only a very few patches of grassy veldt in the northern highlands. Kit racked his memory. The dialect was very strange.

After a moment he had the answer. Upper Kenya—that was desert land, and the language fitted. The deserters, then, had been the local boys; these Kenya bearers could be expected to stick with the whites. The Valley of Dragons would be only a name to them.

That was bad. There was both money

and brains behind this raid on the jungle's oldest secret.

The rhythmic crashing of machetes had barely reached Kit's ears when it was cut off. There was shouting, and a vicious *crack!* which almost made him wince. The headmen had whips, all right, and no reluctance to use them. A gleam of orange showed that fires were being lit, and camp made for the night.

Kit slithered forward, grasped the tough lianas, and went hand over hand to the next tree. From here he could see the encampment. Almost directly below him, a tent was being pegged out, and before it three white men stood, arguing in subdued voices. One of them held the whip, doubled under his arm. Off to one side, an incredibly thin, tall Negro was patiently having his back taped by another white—evidently the victim of the whip, getting a doctor's attention. The black confirmed Kit's guess: the man was obviously a Turkana, a member of that small, conflictless tribe which ranged the boundaries of the Kenya colony.

One of the white men raised his voice angrily. "You're a fool," he said shrilly, in French. "They'll take it from one of their own kind, but from a white man they won't. Haven't we lost enough bearers?"

"I know what I'm doing," the man with the whip growled. "France is full of niggers. If you allow them an inch, they take an ell."

The doctor finished and gave the tall Turkana a slap on the shoulder; he went off surlily, and the fourth white man joined the group. "At least," he said, "try to take it a little easy, des Grioux. A welt is one thing, that doesn't cripple; but if you lose your temper and flay the man, he'll be useless for weeks; maybe for good."

"All right," the one called des Grioux said in a sour voice. "But I'm tiring of all this malingering. Listen to those damned drums! By the time we find the Valley at this rate, the whole country'll be up in arms."

"Those aren't war drums," the fourth man said. "Just the usual information bureau. If you hear the war-call, you'll have whipped it into being."

Kit decided that it was time he took a hand in this conversation. Swinging his light boots over the edge of the branch, he slid away and dropped.

The men were still arguing when he struck, and the matted grasses took up most of the sound of his landing. The little doctor started visibly when he turned in Kit's direction.

"What—who's that?"

The others spun. Kit kept his thumbs in his belt. Even in the dusk it was plain to see that he carried no rifle or spear. He said, "Good evening."

"My goodness," the doctor said, gasping. "A white man—what a turn you gave me! Did you spring up out of the ground, man?"

"No matter," Kit said. "I've had word of your safari. I've some advice for you, if you're interested."

"Hardly," des Grieux growled. The one called Dunstan put a hand on his arm.

"Just a minute; I think I know this man." He looked Kit over carefully. "Unless I'm sadly mistaken, we have here the legendary K'Tendi—Son of Wisdom, King of the Wassabi, Master of Serpents, and half a million other titles. Or are you just a stray hunter?"

"I'm Kit Kennedy," Kit said, "Called K'Tendi by the Wassabi."

"And what of it?" des Grieux demanded. "I'm not interested in operatic heroes. State your business, m'sieu, and get back to your savages—we've no time to nurse strangers."

"I don't need nursing, thank you. I'm here on your behalf. This is dangerous country you're entering. I'd advise you to turn back."

"Is that a threat?"

"Not at all. You are in no danger yet. But the blacks fear *juju* more than they do guns. The Valley of Dragons is held in great dread by all the Gundu tribes; if you persist in searching for it, you'll have a full-fledged revolt on your hands."

Des Grieux sniffed. "A real excuse to come in and civilize this morass, I'd say. You're a white man; you don't believe this kind of story. What's your own interest in the Valley?"

"Personal."

"Naturally. What is it?"

Dunstan said, "As the story goes, this man's an American who's taken to jungle living. Maybe he doesn't want us trespassing on his territory. That right, Mr. Kennedy?"

"Partially."

"His territory?" Des Grieux laughed harshly, strode forward, and shoved his face to within six inches of Kit's. "Listen, m'sieu. This is the King's territory. We have no regard for savages, no matter what their color. I'm a hard-headed man—hard enough to believe the unbelievable when the evidence is good. There are dinosaurs here. I want drawings and specimens. I mean to get them. If the niggers fear magic more than guns, that is a very sad error on their part; do you understand me?"

Kit calmly took des Grieux' nose between steel-hard fingers and brought the astonished man to his knees with a merciless wrench. Des Grieux tried to grab at his legs, and the whip fell to the ground. Kit put a foot on it and flung the man away from him.

"Your manners," he said, "need improving. I don't like people who puff in my face." He scooped up the whip. Des Grieux scrambled to his feet, raging, but if he had any intention of charging Kit, the sight of the lash changed his mind.

Kit's eyes flicked over the guarded faces of the white men. In the brief silence, a pounding of drums came through. Dunstan stiffened.

"That's it," he said softly. "We're in it now. That's a war drum, or I've never heard one."

The wild throbbing came from the north, where the lands of M'Tombu lay. Kit cocked his head.

K'Tendi hath betrayed the folk of M'Tombu! K'Tendi hath given the Gundu lands to L'Gondelu! K'Tendi hath promised the Valley to the Whites! K'Tendi hath betrayed—

And then:

Spears to the south, or death! Spears to the south!

"Take warning, gentlemen," Kit said softly. "The blacks war among themselves. Only the Valley of Dragons is tabu. If

you turn back now, you will be safe—otherwise, you'll die. The Valley is not a cozy zoo. It is a place where old and horrible things still live, things that your world cannot meet, things that we know better than you. If you fight your way through the tribes to the Valley—you'll wish you hadn't!"

As the last word left Kit's lips, there was a flutter of movement over his head, and three tough, massive strands of cold power lashed about his waist, tightened, lifted—

Manalendi!

The foliage closed about him. Below, the four faces looked after him, white as milk.

THE FIRES dwindled behind them and blinked out. Kit clung rigidly to the python's body for a moment, then hit it twice with his fist. The coils loosed him delicately, and Kit crawled free and swung away. Below, there was a sudden hysterical shouting, and then a volley of shots through the tree they had just quit, whipping the leaves like heavy rain.

Kit kept moving. Only when he was sure that the camp would not be able to hit him from where it lay did he stop and catch his breath. The python glided to a stop near his head.

"You're a melodramatic old sinner," Kit murmured. "What was the big idea, anyhow?"

The snake moved uneasily; the sound of Kit's voice seemed to disturb it.

"What's the matter? Fighting somewhere?"

"Tsss," Manalendi said. He began to slide away. Kit waited curiously until the snake came back and drove a horny snout between his shoulder blades, nearly knocking him sprawling from the branch. Kit clutched at the vines and caught in a mouthful of air.

"All right, I'll come along. Don't be so damned persuasive."

"Tssssss!" the snake said, nudging him urgently, and began to travel again. Kit clambered after him as fast as he could. The war drums boomed implacably; the very air seemed to shudder. It was very dark. After a while Kit worked his way

up to the top of a giant baobab to get a look at the stars. Manalendi travelled in a broad, impatient spiral of steel around him, shaking the branches gently.

"We're going the wrong way," Kit muttered. "And it's clouding up. Look, handsome, damned if I'll stop to steal you a chicken at this stage of the game. You'll get me lost, and I've got business—oof!"

The snake's huge head had thudded into his ribs again. Kit decided to call a moratorium on his plans. Pythons normally slept between meals—usually two weeks at a time. But Manalendi had something extraordinary on his cold little mind tonight, that was certain.

A distant flicker caught Kit's eye. For a moment he thought he had imagined it. Then it came again. A chill went up Kit's backbone. It was several months too early for the rainy season, but that flash could be only one thing. An old man in L'Gondelu's *kraal* had asked certain Powers a favor—and had gotten it.

Kit clambered down and began to work south again. After a few moments the snake followed; Kit was afraid it would be disposed to interfere, but this time it made no protest.

He skirted the camp, listening wryly to the sounds of frightened preparation that the drums were stirring up in it, and backtracked the safari. It seemed several hours later that he came upon the spoor of a large war party, but the stars were now completely overcast and it might have taken less time. Already Kit was beginning to wonder if the night would ever end.

The party, when he reached it, was still on the move. They were going south; therefore, probably M'Tombu's people. Not that it made much difference—Kit knew that neither side would be exactly glad to see him now. He passed on over them without making any sign.

A dim haze of yellow and pink was glowing on the far, dark horizon. Whispers moved the air above the tree-tops, the flight of thousands of small, dark bodies. Some of them were birds; Kit was glad he could not see the others.

The Valley was on fire.

Kit pressed forward. The encampment

of L'Gondelu was not hard to find; the warriors had lit fires. Kit descended and walked straight into it. Even a fallen king, he thought wryly, has a little prestige left—one can never tell when he might regain his throne. Besides, Manalendi was following him—a spectacle to give the most bloodthirsty enemy a sober second thought.

L'Gondelu came to meet him, tall and horrible in paint and feathers. His greeting was very simple. He said, "Go!" three syllables in Swahilli, and three times as unfriendly.

"I have grave news," Kit said, without giving any sign that he had heard. "M'Tombu's party is near."

L'Gondelu gestured imperiously with his spear. A black nearly as tall as himself stepped to his side. "Make ready," L'Gondelu said. "The Wassabi approach. Then to Kit again, "Go. You are not welcome here."

"That is not the only word I bring," Kit said evenly. "It is now far too late to make war upon the Wassabi. Do you not hear the jungle?"

L'Gondelu lifted his head. The jungle was rustling. While he listened, a small, vivid green snake shot through the dust at his feet and vanished again, leaving a zig-zag trail.

"The small ones first," Kit said softly. "Then the big constrictors, like Manalendi here. The birds have already gone over; and then——"

The chief's eyes bulged with realization. "Fire!" he said hoarsely. "K'Tendi hath fired the jungle!"

"The fire is far from K'Tendi," Kit said. "It began beyond the villages of the Wassabi. It is——"

A medley of triumphant howls drowned him out. The brush shook, and erupted black men. L'Gondelu's warriors snatched up their spears.

"The Wassabi!" L'Gondelu cried. He brushed past Kit. Arrows began to thrum from the trees around the clearing. On the north side men were already down. Shields thudded against each other.

At the same instant the trees were swarming with screaming monkeys, pushing at each other, biting, jumping wildly

from branch to branch, dropping like the ripe baobab-gourds that bore their name. The din was terrible, but above it a greater sound came rolling in, a rising clamor of terror and death. The warriors hesitated, turned from each other to look up.

A herd of antelope stampeded through the undergrowth, on hooves as light as the footfalls of spirits. The glow on the sky was plainly visible now. The roaring and howling became still louder, and Kit thought he could hear the faint crackling of the flames themselves behind it.

The black men forgot their war. "The trees!" L'Gondelu screamed. The ranks melted like clods in a flood, making for the thick trunks——

But it was already too late. There was terror up there among the leaves. A black and sinuous thing looked down at them from the nearest crotch, its eyes glowing green fury. L'Gondelu stabbed at it, and it answered with a sound like the death-agonies of a devil. It was mad with fright and hatred, and sprang upon the instant, the sabers of its claws spread wide.

Man and cat hit the ground simultaneously, but the cat did not stop to fight. It fled, a bolt of black lightning. In the tossing branches more pairs of green slits flashed down. The men slid back down the trunks again in a hurry.

"M'Tombu!" Kit shouted.

"Here." The Wassabi chieftain, almost unrecognizable in his war paint, gestured from the other side of the clearing, but made no move to come closer. If he had, his own men would have put a spear in his back.

"The Valley has been burned out!" Kit said, at the top of his voice. Even in the din he was sure every black could hear him. "The great beasts are coming this way! They must be driven back!"

For an instant the shock froze them all. The sky was bright enough to cast faint shadows. The ground shook with the passage of heavy bodies somewhere nearby; hippos, probably.

Then, slowly, M'Tombu approached. With him came two or three others, and L'Gondelu. "Is this your doing, K'Tendi?"

M'Tombu said somberly.

"No matter. This disposes of the whites; the monsters will go right over their camp; they will be lucky if they live, and will report that the great beasts have been scattered beyond hope of capture. But—they *must not stay scattered.*"

Both chieftains nodded. It went without question. Penned in the Valley, the great reptiles lived out their lives without impinging upon the rest of the jungle folk; but roaming abroad——

"I have three hundred men," L'Gondelu said.

M'Tombu grinned mirthlessly. "So many? It is well this war was stopped. I have half that many, K'Tendi. Is it enough?"

"It will have to be. Fan out. The forest folk will not molest you unless you try to halt them; let them by." Kit moistened a finger. The fire seemed to be moving a little to the east of them, under the urging of a steady, inexplicably cold wind. "Herd the monsters around to the west—it will be impossible to make them go back into the blaze."

There was a new thunder, agitating the trees like the pebbles in a witch-doctor's rattle. The night rang with the trumpeting of elephants.

It began to rain. It was impossible, but it was so.

On the yellow-lit loam, *things* came lumbering. Branches snapped with their approach. The first one came through, a thirty-foot horror with a wide-fanged head, blundering like a kangaroo upon its hind legs. For an instant Kit froze, his muscles congealed with panic. Then the thing moved forward, and Kit forced himself to shout at it. It stopped, and glittering, mindless eyes looked down at the puny figure with the brand.

Brand: fire. The thing was stupid, however terrible. After a while its walnut-sized brain turned it aside and sent it loping away toward the west.

There were more. The world became an endless nightmare. There were four-legged monsters twice the size of hippos, with ridges of flat spear-blades along their

spines. Screaming, eighty-foot nightmares with necks and tails as long as Manalendi, legs like tree-trunks, bodies that would dwarf a bull elephant.

There were wide scarlet maws, lashing tails that bore batteries of spikes, great turtle-like carapaces, grasping webbed paws with pointed horny thumbs, pads that mashed five inches into the loam at every step. Above, bat-shapes wheeled in the columns of rain, things eighteen feet from wing-tip to wing-tip, and called to each other hoarsely, eagerly.

And there were things for which no words existed, things older than words, older than the walking apes who had invented words——

The men were Johnny-come-latelies. But they had spears and arrows, and fire. Also, they had brains.

Something stirred under the overhanging lip of the cliff. A huge, heavy head wove up and looked at them. Bowstrings twanged and a black flight of arrows whined around the thing. It hissed and lumbered away into the Valley.

"That's the last," Kit said, his smoke-roughened throat rasping. "Too bad we had to kill so many, but the jackels will clean them up. Anybody got a brand left?"

There were several. One was passed from hand to hand until it reached Kit. He took it and went forward into the pass, looking up at the great overhang, feeling a sick regret for what must be done.

The three little white sticks slipped neatly into the crevice. Kit wound the fuses together, lit the longest one, and ran. At the count of eight he threw himself on his face.

The blast sent fragments of rock and burned wood whoo-whooping wildly through the mist. The overhang tottered. Then, majestically, it came down, and an avalanche of rubble came after it. The rain beat the dust down.

A leathery flapping went over their heads. Nobody watched it. It went over the brim of the sealed pass and was gone. It would never come out again.

Nothing would ever again come out of the Valley of Dragons.

TOMTOM TRAGEDY

By WILTON HAZZARD

The great war drum of the Makua tribe had been silent for many moons. When suddenly its moaning rhythm beat across the kraal, Corby knew that juju death was flying like an arrow to his heart!

THE RIVER gleamed like polished jade. Tangled lianas streamed out from walls of jungle into the broad, slow current. Ripples of green slime turned up by the high prows of the canoes folded back on themselves and were still. Occasionally a gossamer of butterflies, caught in the rays of the setting sun, hovered over the heads of the canoe-boys like a multi-colored veil floating in a breeze.

A tall Makua of classic physique stood in the bow of the foremost of the three canoes, shielding his eyes against the glare of the sun. Just as it sank into the green depths of the river, he pointed ahead and shouted:

"Mahango, Bwana!"

"Mahango—Mahango!"

The crews of the following canoes repeated his shout. Then a lively chant was started, breaking the brooding silence. The canoe boys rose to one knee and drove their paddles into the green slime. The bowman began to beat time with two halves of a coconut shell. The canoe lurched from side to side and there was a wild joyous play of muscles as the crews raced for an outjutting bend in the river. Spray from the flying paddles slapped into Gordon Corby's face as he crawled from under the rattan shelter amidships.

Mahango was situated a few miles East of the triangle formed by the Gazaland-Transvaal-Rhodesian border at the confluence of the Limpopo and Muanetsi rivers. It was, therefore, a strategically placed factory, and the most Westerly post under the *Companhia de Mocambique*.

As the Company's senior agent, it was Corby's job to inspect the isolated factories and to see to it that the petty black despots who held sway along the banks

of the great jungle waterway, kept the treaties they had made with the chartered company.

Trouble shooting along the Limpopo was apt to be more than a mere figure of speech in Corby's day. Portuguese control of the remote districts was more nominal than effective. The Makuas were still restless after the revolt under Gungunhana, or, as many thought, Corby among them, under the real leadership of the Zanzibar Arab Sef Mejid, Gungunhana's visier whose grasping ambition had reached out for the whole of Gazaland and whose cowardly desertion in the hour of crisis had brought war and death to the Makuas.

Corby himself had taken a spear-thrust from the doughty Makua war chief when at long last he had been brought to bay and had died as he had lived, killing men with the utmost enthusiasm. His great war drum had been silent now for ten years, but not the tongues that extolled him. He died to the long grief of his tribe. A truly great man, the Makuas said, so brave and of such infallible power that a man's name drummed out by him flew to the heart of its owner as swift as an arrow and lo, the man was dead!

Mahango stood upon an eminence in a clearing about a mile from the South bank of the river. As the canoes swept around the bend, the thatched roofs of the wattle and daube huts showed above the green, like the peaked straw hats of Chinese peasants. The cargo sheds stood at the far end of the stockaded compound, the factor's white-painted bungalow in the centre. The flag of Portugal drooped from the head of the tall staff that stood in front of it.

As the canoes slanted shoreward, Cor-



by's attention became fixed on the flag. All was not well at Mahango or it would have been hauled down at sunset. It was a ritual religiously performed wherever the white man's fetish flies far from his homeland.

The canoe boys saw and felt the signs of ill-omen. Without a word of command, they rested their paddles and began to talk among themselves in soft whispers. Where were the storeboys who were wont to come down to meet them and the girls with their provocative, swaying hips and mocking laughter? It was an evil thing for men to come to the end of a long trek and to be greeted by even less than the bark of a dog. Aie, only the be-

witched or the dead could be so silent!

CORBY uttered a sharp command. The paddlers started again, but with evident reluctance. The under-brush had been cleared from the bank. A wide path led up the slope from the cleared space and faded into the misty green. Corby was the first ashore. While his crew beached the heavy dug-out, he walked up the path for a short distance, rifle in hand, then stopped and looked up the trail.

As the last canoe drove its nose into the soft ooze of the bank, Corby's headman, wearing a red fez, khaki shorts and a tunic that showed a row of greasy battle ribbons, leaped out and ran up the path.

Mahri Hanna, or Maryanne, as Corby called him, was a Somal in the prime of his manhood, and he was as punctilious as an *hidalgo* upon what touched his own and his master's honor. He had served with Corby against Gungunhana; and according him his merit, Corby had raised his status to that of a Companion-in-arms.

"We've got trouble!" said Corby, as the Somal came to stand beside him. "Those canoe boys are scared for one thing, and if you don't watch 'em, they'll shove off and leave us stranded."

"Who knows what has happened here, sar? It would be folly to go up to the factory alone."

Corby grinned: "The same thought occurred to me just now," said he. "And the surest way to keep the boys is to take them with us. Get them moving, Maryanne!"

Shouting and flicking his cane, Maryanne marshalled the thirty odd boys and started them up the trail. Corby placed himself at the head of the column. Maryanne remained at the rear to assist the too reluctant, with his cane.

Night came as they made their way up the slope of the hill. A brilliant moon silvered the path and the mist that came with the chill of night, hung in shreds among the trees. The drone of insects flowed into the silent spaces and the weird cry of the *kunha* bird began to sound down the scale. The trail broadened as it debouched from a rustling grove of banana trees and approached the gates of the deserted, silent compound.

Suddenly a hoarse voice, coming from the bungalow that faced the open gates, broke out into song:

*"Oh, bring my terung die ou
Transvaal—"*

The rest was drowned out by the startled yells of the canoe boys as they stampeded back down the trail. Corby took a deep breath of relief. Piet Dervoort's people had deserted him, but evidently the young Boer was still very much alive. A good man was Dervoort, Corby thought. Of a hard-riding, straight-shooting breed. There was always trouble somewhere along the river, but it was

uncommon when Dervoort couldn't keep his boys. He strode up the moonlight path. A spurt of flame flared on the veranda of the bungalow. A bullet fanned Corby's cheek. He flung himself down on the path and rolled out of the line of fire, swearing fluently.

Maryanne came racing up the trail. Corby waved him down:

"It's Dervoort," said he as the other crawled up to him. "He must be blind drunk or he wouldn't have missed me. Ho, Piet!" he bellowed. *Nee skeit!* It's Corby!"

HE WAS answered by a wild whoop, then Dervoort came running and stumbling down the path, tattered pants flapping about his legs. Corby rose to meet him.

"Alamagtag!" the young fellow stood swaying on his feet and peered at Corby with blood-shot eyes. "I took you for a damned spook! Wat dink jy—" He broke off laughing hysterically. Then fear leaped into his eyes and he clamped his hand over his bearded mouth while his body shook as he stifled his mad laughter. Suddenly he threw his arms about Corby and sobbed like a woman.

"How long have you been alone, Piet?"

"A month, perhaps—I cannot tell. It was the drum—always at sunset it started. It sounds hollow like a voice from a tomb. Alamagtag, my boys went mad with fear, I tell you!"

"Did you hear it tonight, Piet?"

"No, no!" cried the boy wildly. "I am not sick! It is not an ordinary drum—I know drums. Was I not born among the Zulus? You did not hear it because it has done its work. It called my boys away; called each by name, I tell you!"

"Sure it did!" said Corby soothingly. His Makua canoe boys were coming back up the trail, urged to it by Maryanne's cane. Several of them were staring at Dervoort with big, curious eyes. Corby took Dervoort's arm and walked him toward the bungalow, lest his wild appearance and excited gestures communicate his fear to the gaping Makuas.

The familiar odor of palm oil and dried fish, coming from the shed, greeted

Corby as he approached the bungalow. A row of empty gin bottles stood in a neat line along the rail of the veranda. Dervoort's rifle lay on the floor; there was an open box of cartridges near it and the brass of empty cases gleamed on the floor. It was the old story—a very old one for Corby, almost conventional in its details. A White agent deserted, isolated and feeling the jungle closing in on him like a palpable mass—fear fed by imagination until every sound and object was magnified and distorted. Usually the victim, afraid to sleep at night, kept a vigil upon his veranda, blazing away at shadows. It could end in one of two ways. The poor devil went crazy and shot himself, or he got drunk and stayed that way until Corby came and sent him down river for a rest, while he remained behind to root out the trouble and get trade started again.

While Maryanne herded the Makuas into their quarters and barred the gates of the compound, Corby, with the tolerance that comes of understanding, drank with Dervoort. The truth was that there was a softness under Corby's hard exterior. He took a paternal interest in the well-being of the young agents that came under his charge, if they measured up to what he thought was desirable in a good one. And it was pleasant to drink with a man whose corpse, at this very moment might be buried under the red earth of the compound. He nodded sympathetically as Dervoort babbled incoherently about the drum and witchcraft. And when the Boer slid from his chair he picked him up and tucked him into his bamboo cot.

On the following morning Dervoort was up before Corby. He was on the veranda when Corby came out for coffee, clean and fresh-looking and apparently none the worse for the night's debauch.

"Senhor," said he diffidently in Portuguese. "I think we should drag the canoes up to the compound. Also we should divide the night into two watches. You to take one; myself, the other."

"Eh?" Corby was startled. "Why the devil should we do that?"

"Because if we do not, there will be

no Makuas and no canoes in the morning, Senhor."

"Well, I'll be damned—the drum, eh, Piet? Well, don't worry about it. The kind of experience you've just been through can leave a man with very vivid impressions."

Dervoort colored: "I do not imagine things," said he. "And I will bet a month's pay that you hear the drum tonight!"

"I'll take your money!" Corby laughed. "And just to put your mind at rest, I'll have Maryanne lock the boys in their quarters tonight."

"Good enough!" Dervoort grinned at him boyishly and went off to start the day's work.

Later Corby sauntered through the sheds. He found everything in good order. The heat in the cargo shed was heavy with the sour, nutty smell of palm oil, native and dried fish. He noted with satisfaction the number of tins filled with the orange-colored oil and the neat casks, the work of Dervoort's coopers, piled high in tiers ready for shipment. Despite desertion, Dervoort would show a better record for the year than any other man along the river. He left the shed with a thoughtful look in his eyes. Dervoort had lost none of his grip on things and he wasn't the type to be troubled by too vivid an imagination.

Just before sunset Dervoort and Corby came out on the veranda. Neither of the men spoke. Dervoort stood with his gaze fixed on a gap in the trees through which a strip of the river could be seen gleaming like burnished tin. The opposite bank was a green fringe against the sky brilliantly blue, shading into a band of purple where distance blurred the outline of a range of mountains. With half-closed eyes, Corby studied the Boer's good-looking profile; noted the tenseness of his pose, the supple grace of his young body. A Makua was standing by the pole waiting for the signal to lower the flag. Maryanne came to report all secure for the night. Corby jerked his thumb at the bottle that stood on a table at his elbow and Maryanne poured himself a brimmer.

Just as he lifted the glass to his lips the drum spoke. Its tone did sound hollow

and yet each note was distinct. Thrice the call was repeated. The booming notes hovered over the tree-tops and died in the limitless silence of the jungle at the precise moment of sunset. Then everything was as still as death. Not a leaf or a twig stirred.

The crash of shattered glass broke the spell. Liquor slopped over Corby's shoes. He turned to stare into the Somal's bulging eyes, his own face twisted into a grimace of astonishment. Maryanne's lips moved but no words came.

"Gungunhana's drum!" said Corby.

MARYANNE burst into his native speech: "It called thy name, master! Even as it did long ago when we marched against him and he challenged you to battle. Oh, we know that the Makuas say in their hearts: 'Gungunhana will return!' It must be so, else how could this thing be?"

"Gungunhana is dead!" said Corby sharply. He held out his big hand. "Is this not the hand that slew him. You talk like a wizard!"

But Maryanne knew his privilege and was disposed to speak his mind. No good could come of his master's fine contempt for the wisdom of the forest people, and it troubled his loyal heart. How was it that one so wise could not understand that the soul of an enemy slain, might take up its abode in the body of another man, or in that of a jungle beast, the better to wreck its vengeance?

"Bwana," he began. "Drums cannot speak with the same voice no more than people can——"

"That's true, Maryanne."

"It's also true that no Makua would dare to beat the drum of a chief so powerful as Gungunhana——"

"Ha!" Dervoort, who had been watching Corby's face, interposed with the triumphant note of the vindicated. "Wat dink jy daarvan?"

What did he think of it? Corby looked out across the river whence the sound had come. What should a man think when a drum, silent for ten years, boomed out a challenge from the grave? According to his emotional bias, he supposed. Just as

it was natural for Maryanne and Dervoort, who had some Zulu blood in his veins, to think of witchcraft, it was natural for him to think in terms of flesh and blood, from the effect to the cause.

"A man who is not a Makua is beating that drum," said he. "Fact is, Piet, the drum has stopped trading at your post and it's our job to stop the drum. I want——" He broke off and jumped to his feet with an oath. The Makua who had been standing by the flag-pole had disappeared. The subdued babble of voices came from the native quarters, gradually increasing in volume until it became a confused roar.

"Come on!" Corby shouted and vaulted the veranda rail. "They're going to make a break for it!"

He raced across the compound with Maryanne and Dervoort at his heels. They had covered half the distance to the gates when the Makuas burst from their quarters and streamed out in a black flood. The three were caught in the mad, screaming panic and swept on toward the gates. Corby's head bobbed above the mass like a white float in a stream, while he roared and struck out to right and left. Then the tide reached the gates, crashed them and swept on down to the river.

Corby picked himself up from the path, gasping for breath and spitting out dirt. He felt as if a steam roller had passed over him. Dervoort ran up to him, his automatic in his hand.

"Put it away!" snapped Corby. "A dead porter's no damn good to anybody. Where's Maryanne?"

The Somal came staggering up the path, wiping blood from a gash in his cheek.

"Maku dogs!" he spat, disgustingly.

"They have taken the canoes, Sar!"

"Well!" Corby squinted at Dervoort. "I'll listen to you next time, Piet. Anyway, we couldn't have got any work out of those fellows; they'd have sat around all day babbling about Gungunhana's ghost. There's a village a few miles down river. We'll try to get another gang there."

Dervoort gave him a puzzled look: "But the drum——"

"To hell with the drum!" Corby exploded. "The drummer, not the drum, is

our trouble, Piet. I'm going to start looking for him right now. Man or ghost, nobody can scare the wits out of my boys—stop trade in my territory!"

As he turned to walk up the path, Dervoort started after him with his mouth open to protest, but Maryanne caught his arm.

"It cannot be otherwise, Sar," said the Somal gravely. "The drum has called him. You know it must be obeyed."

"The devil, but that is not what he thinks!"

"Does it matter what he thinks, Sar? The drum calls; we go. We will come to the same place by different roads."

"Alamagtag, yes! But I think death is the end of this road, Maryanne."

"It is here at Mahango, too, Sar. If we try to leave, it will catch us on the river and we will die like cowards."

"You will follow him into the jungle, Maryanne?"

"Oh, yes, Sar! He is never so far from me that I could not reach out my hand and touch him."

Dervoort rubbed his chin, thoughtfully, then suddenly he laughed: "Good enough! When the predikant caught me making love to his daughter back home, he said I was ripe for hell's fire. And a preacher cannot lie!"

THEY STARTED for the village two hours before sunrise and marched for a while under the dripping of the dew-laden trees. They followed one of the game trails that threaded the forest. The river was hidden by a dense screen of bush, but its noise was audible; a soft gurgling over-tone to the throaty grunts of beasts and the cackling of birds disturbed by the passage of men. A troop of monkeys flitted across their path like grey shadows; the old dogs that formed the rear guard scolded and showed their teeth. As the sun climbed, burning shafts of light pierced the gloom; miasma, reeking with the droppings of water beasts, rose from the black mud wallows and the trail ahead faded into soaking mist. But soon the mist cleared. The heat became oppressive and the three rested in a pool of sunshine, easing their rifles and heavy

packs from their shoulders while the steam rose from their damp clothing.

"What's your explanation for the drum, Piet?" Corby asked suddenly.

"Alamagtag, does it need one? I tell you I would feel better if we were trekking the other way!"

"Afraid of spooks, Piet?"

"It is not the same thing. I have never seen a spook, but I have seen much that I cannot explain. Witchcraft may be trickery and superstition, as you say. But I have seen men die of it. And if trickery kills a man, what good does it do him to know it?"

"That's true enough. Witchcraft is a weapon in this country, and a dangerous one. But you'll admit that the wizard kills by poison, not by magic."

"I do not admit it. Say now, if you are killed today, or tomorrow, would the Makuas be wrong if they said: 'The drum called him and he could not stay?'"

Corby knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose: "We're out after the drummer because it's our job to keep trade moving in these parts, Piet," said he with a scowl. "Besides, there's damn little else we can do until we get canoes and boys to paddle them!"

"Truly!" muttered Dervoort as Maryanne helped him to shoulder his pack. "There is nothing we can do. The wizards have turned their trick!"

By noon the red flare of dying banana fronds were showing among the green, indicating the proximity of a village. It was a small village of several sorry-looking huts clustered about a palaver house. There was no broadening of the trail that approached it and no man came out to greet them, which was an insult if it was not indicative of open hostility.

"The devil!" swore Dervoort and unslung his rifle. "We might be lepers."

"We are worse!" said Maryanne, looking gloomily at the deserted hut. "They know a ju-ju curse is upon us. Put up your rifle, Sar, no man will hinder us."

"Keep your rifle handy and keep moving!" Corby barked at him.

Aware that eyes were watching them from behind the screen of bush, Corby led the way through the center of the vil-

lage, expecting to hear the whizz of deadly, poisoned arrows with every pace. But they reached the river unmolested. There were several canoes drawn up on the muddy bank; worm-eaten, battered relics for the most part. Maryanne chose one that looked as if it might stay afloat.

Luckily the river was only about two hundred yards across at this point, the current slow and the water as tranquil as that of a pool. To the South its channel was visible for about a mile. To the North, the channel was straight for several miles until it was lost in a void of shimmering green where it made its Westward turn below Mahango.

BEFORE they were half way across, dark figures began to show on the trail behind, and the village drum commenced to throb. Soon it was answered by others, up and down the river, and deep in the jungle. Corby swore softly under his breath. Evidently his movements were being broadcast and—he didn't doubt it—some Makua wizard, with more daring and originality than his black-hearted brethren, was building up a reputation for himself at the expense of what Gordon Corby valued most—his prestige. No white man in Gazaland was treated with more diffidence by the Makuas than he was. That was due to an accident of war; to the fact that the butt of his rifle had felled Gungunhana. But he had come to think of it as his due, nevertheless. It was prestige that made his work possible and his work was his life.

Though nothing of it showed on his hard, lined face, Corby was thoroughly roused and he was worried. He knew that Dervoort had stated the native viewpoint correctly. If anything happened to him, the Makuas would say that Gungunhana's ghost had called him to account. The odd thing was that he was compelled to answer the call; he couldn't ignore it. If the damned drum wasn't stopped, it would break him! It was just that—the calculated cleverness of the thing that worried him. Somewhere he had an unknown enemy, one whose intelligence was above witchcraft.

They found a path on the opposite bank and followed it until they could see the flag-pole at Mahango on the hill above the trees. Corby called a halt:

"It's about sunset," said he. "We'll get our direction from the drum."

Dervoort nodded and Maryanne started a fire for the evening meal.

Again at the exact moment of sunset, the call reverberated over the jungle. In spite of himself, Corby felt the hair on his spine bristle. It was the silence that followed it, that would get under a man's skin in time. But the jungle was always silent for a brief moment at sunset. He wondered if it was coincidence or a conscious striving for psychological effect.

"About ten miles North-east," observed Dervoort.

"That's where I figured it would be," Corby agreed. "It's not generally known, but there is a valley back there called Umakosini. The Burial Place of Chiefs."

"Alamagtag!" breathed Dervoort and stared at him.

Corby chuckled and answered the other's unspoken question:

"You're right, Piet; they say Gungunhana is buried there. But I'm not asking you to go along. You'll stay here with Maryanne. If I'm not back by this time tomorrow, start down-river. D'you understand, Maryanne?"

"Oh, yes, Sar!"

"And you, Dervoort?"

"Yes, Sar!" said the Boer, and spat.

After he had eaten and rested, Corby started up the trail. The soft leaf mould of the forest cushioned his feet. When he had covered a couple of hundred yards, he looked back. Dervoort and Maryanne were on the trail behind him. A warm light came into his eyes. He waited for them, and then, without exchanging a word, the three trudged on.

Now the path followed a shallow stream that gurgled over a sandy bottom. The night was full of whirring and cacklings. The underbrush thinned and patches of starlit sky began to appear in the leafy canopy overhead and, presently, an early moon climbed above the trees and dappled the path with silver and shadow. The subdued beat of a drum sounded in the

distance. A wooded bluff loomed ahead. The stream led them to a deep ravine. They entered it in single file, moving swiftly and silently with the damp, live smell of fertile loam rising from under their feet.

After they covered another hundred yards, a hiss from Maryanne at the rear, brought them to an abrupt, tense halt. They stood motionless.

"What is it?" whispered Corby.

The Somal motioned him to silence and pointed. Corby looked back along the trail. Pools of moonlight made it visible for many yards until it vanished into shadowy perspective. At first he was aware of no movement; then he saw black shadows flit across his line of vision and the flash of light on metal.

"It is a trap, this kloof," said Dervoort calmly. "There will be more of them ahead of us."

Corby wiped the sweat from his face as he said slowly: "Well, the fellow that's beating that drum has got more on his mind than killing us just yet, I think."

"You think he wants you alive?"

"I've got it figured that way," Corby murmured.

Dervoort did not answer for a moment, but stood looking up the trail ahead, his handsome face set in hard lines.

"Shoot it out with them," said Dervoort. "A Makua and a Zulu is the same thing. I have seen men die slowly. Look!" he broke off, pointing.

A STALWART MAKUA had come out of the shadow a few yards in advance of them. He was an induna, a proud, stern-visaged commander of a regiment. A metal ring, symbolic of his rank, gleamed around his bull neck, and another ring crowned his white, woolly head. He was unarmed and he extended cupped hands in formal greeting.

"I know you, Bwana Sadari," said he.

Corby looked into the grim face and smiled:

"Do I look upon Sala, who was senior captain among the Makuas?"

"Even so. But I come in peace, Sadari."

"I see that you are unarmed, Sala. But

I saw spears behind me and, doubtless, there are spears behind you."

"Think no evil of that, Sadari. My master sent me thither to wait for you. And now that you have come, I must take you to him."

"Who is this master, warrior?"

"Ha! You will know him when you see him, Bwana Sadari! If you come with many, he bade me to drive them. If you come with few, he bade me to bring you to his house in peace. He has words for you."

"I, too, have words for him, Sala. Let it be as your master says. Show us the way, warrior!"

The induna turned and stalked up the trail. As the three followed there was a faint rustling of leaves on either side of them and Corby guessed that they were flanked by unseen warriors moving through the bush parallel to their line of march.

An hour's march brought them to a right-angled turn in the ravine. A gorge opened before them, closed in by high walls of black rock. The ground was sandy underfoot and fairly clear of bush. The gorge was manifestly the ancient bed of a river, perhaps the Limpopo itself. The stream they had followed meandered between huge boulders, rounded and smooth. The sound of drums increased in volume.

"This must be it," said Corby. "We are the first white men to enter the Burial Place of Chiefs, Piet!"

The young Boer smiled wryly: "If we are not first white men to be buried among them, I will go home and marry the predikant's daughter. Even that, I swear it!"

Maryanne crowded Corby. He looked about him while he clutched in his hand the charm he wore about his neck. Unintelligible words came from his moving lips—muttered incantations to appease the Great Shades.

Suddenly Sala halted and raised his hand. A terrible cry rang through the gorge. Corby turned in time to see the Makua warriors burst from the cover of the bush behind them. He fired from the hip into the black mass. Dervoort's rifle exploded at the same instant. Then the

Makuas were upon them and they were in the center of howling, black chaos. For a time they stood their ground, fighting back to back with clubbed rifles. But grasping hands clawed them apart. Corby saw Maryanne and Dervoort go down, and he roared like a wounded beast. His heavy boot cracked the skull of a Makua that clung to his leg. His rifle had been torn from his grasp and blacks clung to his arms like limpets. A jolt from his knee freed his right arm and his big fist smashed into a snarling face. With his gun hand free, his automatic began to spit death, and space opened around him. A knob-kerry whizzed and thudded between his shoulders. He staggered and went down at last under a mass of stinking, sweating bodies.

Swiftly the Makuas bound him, hand and foot. A slender pole was passed through loops at his feet and shoulders. Among yells of triumph he was lifted like a slaughtered beast and borne away.

Face down and with his head bobbing a foot above the ground, the dust that rose from under the splay feet of his bearers choked him. By the time they had covered a mile he was conscious only of the agony in his muscles which were drawn with every swing and jolt as if he were being racked.

The dust had blinded him, but the frenzied clamor of drums, savage yells, the bedlam that came suddenly to swirl around him, told him that they had arrived at a village. The swaying stopped. His head struck the ground and the stench of mould and dung filled his nostrils. He waited until there was silence near him, then rolled over on his back. Great tears streamed down his lined face as he opened his eyes and some of the grit was washed from them.

A stifled Boer oath and a groan sounded close to him. Dervoort, Maryanne? He called the Somal by name. Dervoort answered him in a choked voice:

"They left him back there—dead!"

Corby began a mad struggle with the bonds about his arms and legs. The hut was filled with his gasps and groans until, bathed in sweat, he lay exhausted and sank into a kind of coma.

THE SOUND of men talking outside the hut awakened him. Pencils of sunlight pierced the noisesome blackness. The rattan door of the hut was open. Light and air streamed and was blotted out again as two Makuas crawled in. One bent over Corby, the other over Dervoort, steel flashing in their hands. The bonds about Corby's legs were slashed. Cramped and unable to stand, they were dragged out into the sunlight, where they were allowed to kick until the life came back into their limbs. A dozen Makuas stood in a circle around them, leaning on their spears, jabbering and laughing. Corby saw a few of his own boys among them and got some consolation from their glum looks. They, at least, were not enjoying their Bwana's humiliation. Then the two whites were heaved up onto their feet and marched along a path between two rows of huts that looked fresh and new.

At the far end of the path there was a bungalow, raised on a foundation of piled stones. Its extended eaves, supported by four poles, shaded a wide stoop. A heap of dried mud, bundles of raffia and saplings recently slashed, attested the newness of the structure.

As they approached it, two figures came out on the veranda. One wore a white turban with a fringed knot over his left ear and his obesity was made prominent by his loose, white robe and the green cummerbund around his belly. The other was a woman, tall and full-breasted. At the distance of twenty paces, she looked like a white woman, but as they came to stand at the foot of the veranda steps, Corby saw Arab blood in the olive sheen of her skin bared by her white sleeveless abaiya, and in her black, flashing eyes. A golden-haired marmoset, at the end of a length of silver chain attached to her wrist, sat on her naked shoulder with his prehensile tail coiled around her neck. The grotesque little creature grimaced at them and bared its teeth.

"Alamagtag!" whispered Dervoort. "She is something to look at."

But Corby's eyes were fixed on the fat Arab's face. It was a flabby black-and-white mottled face with sagging jowls like the dewlaps of a hound. A close-cropped,

grey beard only half concealed full lips and a mouth of discolored teeth.

"I see that you have not forgotten me, Bwana Sadari," said the Arab in a high, sibilant voice. "I have prayed that we two should meet again. Behold, my prayer is answered—it is the will of Allah!"

"No, I have not forgotten you, Saf Mejid—it were easier to forget the devil!" Corby retorted. "And truly, the will of Allah is beyond all understanding or surely he would have answered the prayers of better men and sent you to hell long since, to await me there!"

Mejid's belly shook with silent mirth: "Doubtless all will be answered," said he. "We shall meet there again in the end. But now it is a matter of precedence. It is fitting that Bwana Sadari should go before me. I have so arranged it—in sha Allah!" Then his yellow-flecked eyes glowed with venom. He jerked his head toward the girl: "This is Nanan. Her mother was French——"

Corby turned curious eyes upon the girl. She stood looking at Dervoort with a faint smile on her full lips as if pleased by the frank admiration she saw in the young Boer's eyes. Corby had heard of Mejid's French wife. Some said he had stolen her, others—— Mejid's voice recalled him:

"——She was my great happiness until you came to Gungunhana's kraal with soldiers and drove us forth into the wilderness. She died of hunger and thirst!"

The last words were spoken with peculiar emphasis and Corby felt the chill of them in the pit of his stomach:

"She took her death at your own hands, Mejid," said he calmly. "You preached war and when it came you ran like a coward and left brave men to pay for your folly with their lives."

Mejid's hand flew to the hilt of the kumia thrust into his sash: "No more words!" he shouted. "I did not call you here to palaver! No, you have come to judgment and to death, as I knew you would when I called you on the drum, because you are as vain of glory as other men. Yes, you will die, but not quickly!" He pointed to a large hut that stood at the edge of the clearing: "There is your

prison. It is comfortable and its walls are strong. You will live there unbound for as long as life seems good to you." He broke off, his eyes gloating, then went on:

"Every day my servants will bring you fresh food and water, Sadari. But one day your food or your water will be poisoned——which day, who knows? Perhaps tomorrow; perhaps when the moon has waned. When hunger groans in your belly; when thirst burns as fire in your throat——Ah, then think of the poison, Sadari, and think of me! Men say you are fearless," he sneered. "But I think that you will cling to life. Allah grant that it may be long! I have——"

HE BROKE OFF with a startled yell that mingled with a scream from the girl. Like something shot from a catapult, Dervoort had bounded up the three steps. His lowered head struck Mejid full in the stomach. They crashed to the floor together. Dervoort kicked savagely at the Arab's head. Two Makuas flung themselves upon him and pinned him down. Surprised by the unexpectedness of the attack, Corby was thrown down before he had moved.

Mejid was helped to his feet: "Take them away!" he gasped.

Sef Mejid lounged on his veranda at sunset on the following day. He savored the cool breeze and sucked his long-stemmed narghile contentedly. Occasionally his gaze turned toward the hut at the edge of the clearing before the heavy, barred door by which two armed men stood guard, and as often as he did so, he laughed softly.

Oh, yes, it was a pleasant thing and, by Allah, it was a shrewd thing—to avenge himself and to establish his authority over the Makuas, at one stroke! With what patience and cunning he had planned it! No white man could trace the deed to him. When the two were dead——of poison or starvation, it mattered not, there would be no marks of violence——he would have their bodies carried back to Mahango. Nothing would be disturbed. Months would pass before the Portuguese infidels came to look for them. By that time the ants and vermin would have fin-

ished the work. Who could say how they had died?

Wallai el Adhim, it was a flawless thing of beauty! Already the Makuas believed that the soul of Gungunhana had entered his body and spoke through his mouth, as if a *shensi* could have a soul—but Allah keep them in the darkness of the unbelieving! Soon *he* would be the Bwana Sadari, Lord of the River. Even the great Company would pay for peace, the hongo he would impose on their caravans.

"It is an evil thing you do, my father," a soft voice broke in on his thoughts. Startled, he turned to scowl at his daughter. She moved gracefully across the veranda and sat at his feet. The marmoset jumped from her shoulder and tugged at his chain, striving to reach the fruit that lay on a table at Mejid's elbow.

"Is it an evil thing to avenge your mother, girl?" he asked.

"Were the words of this man, Bwana Sadari, true?" She answered him with a question.

"He lied! I was ill with fever. My servants bore me away against my will. Is the word of a stranger and an infidel more to you than a father's?"

A troubled look came into the girl's eyes. She shook her head as she said: "But the other—he is young. He could not have been your enemy. What wrong has he done?"

"Allah give me patience! It is not what he has done, girl, but what he might do. He has a tongue to tell a tale with!"

The girl's black eyes flashed: "That is the evil you do! And my heart tells me that it is not for the love of my mother that you do it. He is young and brave—"

"Ah, the young one! So, there a hot wind blows!" Mejid patted her shoulder. "Put him out of your mind, girl. Soon better men, and richer, will look upon you with desire."

"Is your heart fixed upon this thing, my father?"

"Wallai, it is! Go, leave me, girl!"

For a moment she watched her pet's frantic efforts to get at the fruit, her expression enigmatical. Then she picked up the whimpering little monkey and went into the house.

"HOW LONG is it now?" Dervoort looked up at Corby and wiped the sweat from his face. It was night and a band of moonlight struck down through the smoke-vent in the high roof, lighting the interior of the hut dimly.

"Three thousand by my count," said Corby.

"Then it is not tonight!" Dervoort took up the gourd of water that stood on the floor between them and drank greedily. "But it may be in the food, eh? Alamagtag, what a way to live! A mouthful of water, then count the seconds—have you no nerves?" he almost shouted at Corby. His hands trembled.

Corby's big hands clenched and drove the nails into his palm. For the first time he knew fear, not the natural, healthy fear that clings to life, but the kind that seeks death. He insisted on tasting the food and water first, not because he hoped that Dervoort might live, but because he was afraid to see him die.

Dervoort jumped to his feet suddenly: "I can stand no more of it!" he cried. "There is no hope for us. It will not be tomorrow or the next day. That fiend out of hell will keep us alive until the thing drives us mad!" He caught Corby's arm in a hard grip. "Let us rush the guards when they come in next, my friend. A spear-thrust is quick!"

Corby shook his head: "They wouldn't kill us, Piet. Give it another day. Maybe we'll think of something."

The young man looked into his face and suddenly smiled: "I am not a fool," said he. "I know how it is with you. But I am here because I did not obey your orders to go down river. It is not your fault, I would do it again." He pointed to the earthen pot filled with a savory mess of rice, mutton and greens. "We will eat together tonight, my friend. And when—what the devil!"

He broke off as Nanan's marmoset scampered between their legs, its silver chain jingling behind. The pet went straight to the earthen pot and clung to its rim; fascinated, the two watched the little beast stuff rice into its mouth, like a grotesque caricature of a greedy old man. Then Corby uttered an exclamation and

grabbed the chain. There was a string around the marmoset's neck and attached to it, almost hidden by the long hair, was a small cylinder of paper. With the bad temper of the pampered, the marmoset bit his finger as he detached the paper.

"Don't let him get away!" Corby sucked his bleeding finger as he went to the shaft of light and opening the paper, puzzled over the Arabic characters: "Well, I'll be damned!" he said at last. "Listen to this, Piet!" He read:

"I looked upon thy youth and beauty and pity kindled a flame in my heart. I give you my pet. I have kept him in hunger. When he dies, know that the servants of my father, whom Shaitan has made mad, will come for you I know well that thy courage is equal to what lies before thee. May the mercy of Allah be thy shield. His wisdom by council. Farewell!"

"Piet, here's a woman who knows her mind and speaks it!"

"That is a rare thing, I tell you!" said Dervoort wonderingly. "But to whom does she speak it—and what the devil is the meaning of it?"

"Well, she wouldn't be talking to me, Piet. I'd say it's plain enough. She liked the look of you and she's sent her monkey to taste your food. The girl's got brains! She figures if we know just when we're supposed to die, we've got a fighting chance. By thunder, that's it!" Corby lapsed into silence and the furrows on his face deepened with thought.

"Alamagtag, look!" Dervoort's voice broke the silence.

The marmoset was rolling on the floor. The two men exchanged glances as the animal began to whimper piteously.

"It was tonight!" breathed Dervoort.

Corby stripped off his jacket, threw it over the tiny creature and smothered it. He looked up at Dervoort: "There's a chance, if you want to take it, Piet."

The light of hope was in Dervoort's eyes and he laughed: "Less than a chance is good enough for us, my friend. Already we should be as dead as the monkey!"

6—Jungle—Winter

A few moments' groans and cries of mortal agony came from the hut. The two Makua guards, squatting before a fire that burned close to the hut, sprang to their feet and stared at each other, their rolling eyes showing white in the darkness. They waited until all was quiet within. Then one picked up a burning brand from the fire, lifted the bars from the heavy, wooden door and entered the hut. The flickering light of his torch showed two figures stretched out on the floor. The Makua shuddered as he looked into the face of one whose teeth were bared in a horrible grimace of death. He called to his companion:

"The big one is too heavy," said the other guard, as he entered and looked about him nervously. "I will go—aie—e!"

He started to yell as one of the figures rose and sprang at him. Corby's big hand caught him by the throat and the life was quickly throttled out of him. Corby got to his feet. The embers of the torch glowed on the floor. The hut was filled with heavy breathing.

"Piet!" he called softly.

"Verdomp skelm!" Dervoort rose out of the darkness, rubbing his throat. "For a moment I was not sure whether it was to be me or him."

Armed with their dead guards' spears, they went out into soft moonlight. An orange light showed in one of the windows of the bungalow. Jackals were howling close to the clearing. Goats and sheep bleated nervously in the near-by huts and the lowing of cattle and the shouts of herdsmen came from the thorn-bush boma. Evidently prowlers had attacked the stock and the men of the village had been called out to drive them off.

"This is luck!" said Corby.

"The devil, you say!" Dervoort answered with his reckless laugh. "It is the shield of this Allah, my friend!"

SWIFTLY they made their way across the open space to the bungalow. Dervoort circled around the rear. Corby cautiously mounted the steps to the veranda. The murmur of voices came from the rear of the house. A screen of mosquito net was all that barred entrance. Corby ripped

it with the point of his spear and went in. Light streamed from a curtained doorway, dimly lighting the passage that ran the length of the bungalow. Suddenly a cry, followed by a thud, echoed through the house.

"Musto!" Mejid's voice called from behind the curtain.

Corby waited tensely with his back against the wall.

"Musto, what is it?" Boards creaked under heavy footfalls. The curtains parted and Sef Mejid came out into the passage. Corby stepped in front of him. His spear flashed and drove at the pit of the Arab's stomach, but stopped with the point denting the mass of flesh.

"Merciful Allah!" gasped Mejid, his eyes bulging.

"Another word and you're a dead man!" hissed Corby and backed him against the wall.

Dervoort came out into the passage followed by the girl, Nanan: "One," said Dervoort, "the others are at the boma."

The girl's eyes were fixed on Corby's face.

"I will not kill him, Lady," said Corby, reading the question in her eyes. "If he obeys."

Mejid's fat body quivered. His dewlaps showed green and white and sweat oozed from his pores: "I will do as you say," he piped.

"Are you the drummer?" demanded Corby.

Mejid nodded: "Who else? A shensi would not dare to beat Gungunhana's drum."

"Where is it?"

"In the gorge, the Burial Place of Chiefs, Sadari."

"Good! We'll go there. If we meet with anyone on the road, you will tell them to go away." Corby increased the pressure on the point of his spear.

"Merciful Allah, yes!"

"Good! March!"

"One moment!" The girl's voice detained them. She beckoned to Dervoort and he followed her through the curtained doorway.

It seemed to Corby that they were gone for a long time. He called softly. They

came out carrying rifles and cartridge belts. Dervoort looked guilty.

"Did you have to pick a lock?" asked Corby sarcastically.

Dervoort grinned: "No, it was freely given, my friend. This one is clever. She discovered that it would be tonight and she put bait, meat, down by the *boma*. They will be busy for the rest of the night! I tell you——"

"Come on!" growled Corby. "Or you won't live long enough to make a fool of yourself!"

They left by the rear door. There was a cultivated patch of ground between the house and the bush. Corby spurred Mejid to a run. They gained the cover of the forest, then circled around the clearing and came out on the trail half a mile beyond the village.

As the moon rose above the kopjie they came to the gorge. Dervoort, who had been lagging behind with the girl, fell into step beside Corby:

"This thing does not seem as good to me now as when we planned it," said he with a scowl.

Corby stopped dead in his tracks and caught the young Boer by the shoulder: "You'll do what you're told, Piet!" said he with an oath. "If you follow me this time, I'll shoot! Take that girl and trek for the river, now!"

Dervoort's mouth set stubbornly: "I can see how a message on the drum will lay Gungunhana's ghost. Yes, it will stop the war talk along the river. But I do not see how *you* are going to get away from Sala and the Makuas back there."

"Hell!" exploded Corby. "I've told you. According to Mejid, he hasn't got more than twenty of his own men. That means the rest are your own boys and mine. I'll swing 'em over to me all right. All I've got to worry about is Sala. And if I can't handle him, then I can't handle my job on this river. Now, get to hell out of here!"

"Yes, Sar!" Dervoort beckoned to the girl and they started off down the trail toward the river. Corby watched them until the white of the girl's robe was lost in the gloom.

He gave Mejid a prod with the barrel of his rifle.

"Move fast, you bag of wind and corruption!" he ordered.

THEY crossed the gorge to its opposite wall. Mejid led the way up a steep, narrow trail. They came to a cave, the mouth of which was screened by flowering vines that fell over the cliff like a curtain of scarlet and green. Close to the entrance stood Gungunhana's drum. It was a hollowed log, trimmed to an oval shape, its ends plugged with softer wood. The slot measured about the span of a hand at the wide end, or male voice, tapering to a mere slit at the narrow end, the female voice. Worn, splintered drumsticks lay beside it.

The cave was not deep. Corby's nostrils quivered: evidently it was the lair of jungle cats not long departed, the air was heavy with their fetid stench. Sef Mejid sat on the drum, breathing heavily and wiping the sweat from his face with the wide sleeve of his robe.

"Gungunhana is not buried here," Corby stated rather than questioned.

"Who knows where he is buried?" Mejid wheezed. "I brought the drum here."

"And it was you who started the story that this was Gungunhana's grave?"

"Even so. When the war came I fled to the mountains with my women and a few servants." He shook his head dolefully. "It was a hard life. It seemed good to return but it was many years before I saw the way."

Corby looked at him curiously: "What were you trying to do? Build up a new cult, make a fetish of the drum and yourself the high priest?"

For a moment the spirit that long ago had made him all but master of Gazaland, burned behind Mejid's eyes. He drew himself up:

"But for you and treachery in my own house—" the light faded in his eyes and he slumped back on the drum. "It is the will of Allah!"

Sudden anger twisted Corby's face into an ugly grimace. Maryanne was dead, and but for the promptings of a woman's heart and wits, he and Dervoort would have died in agony, the first sacrificial victims to a new superstition. He wanted to give

Dervoort and the girl time to reach the river before the village was roused by the drum. He waited for half an hour, then:

"All right, Mejid, get started. You will say that Bwana Sadari has palavered with the spirit of Gungunhana. We are very good friends, understand. Say that Gungunhana bids Sadari's servants who deserted him, to return to his service. There is peace between Gungunhana and Sadari. There is peace on the river. Now, go to work!"

Sef Mejid rose and stood posed for a moment like a virtuoso about to strike the opening chord of a symphony. Then the great drum boomed. Crashes of sound filled the cave and rolled out across the jungle as from a great sounding trumpet. Drumming was an art passed on from father to son, and Sef Mejid was its master. Fascinated, Corby watched the sticks flying in his sensitive hands. The Arab's eyes were glazed and sweat streamed from his fat, quivering face as he forced rhythm and space to speak his mind. There were pauses and rippling notes like the sound of the river cascading over the rocks. Suddenly Mejid stood tense while the end of his message floated over the tree-tops in dying echoes.

Then out of the silence came an answering call—tak-tak-boom-tak-a-tak-boom—

Mejid flung the sticks from him: "It is done!" said he.

Corby went to the mouth of the cave and looked out across the gorge. Drums sounded faintly in the distance, relaying the message down river; and, presently, the village drum began to beat out an alarm. Corby turned: "Come on Mejid, come on," said he.

"Where?" the Arab's jowls quivered.

"Back to the village."

"No!" whimpered Mejid. "Merciful Allah, Sala will know that I have tricked him. He was Gungunhana's captain. He will kill me!"

Corby smiled grimly. At least Mejid's fear made it clear that he had drummed out the right message.

"In sha Allah!" said he, and there was bitter mockery in his tone, "Stay, or try to make it to the river, as you will."

When Corby reached the village, the Makuas were holding a big palaver. They sat in a circle in the cleared space before Mejid's bungalow. The induna, Sala, stood in the center haranguing them. He wore the plumes of a chief and shook his spear. He stopped abruptly and stood with his mouth open as he caught sight of Corby walking up the moonlit path.

There was a rustle of movement and excited jabbering, as Corby elbowed his way into the circle.

"Let me hear your lies, Sala," said he coldly.

THE INDUNA'S EYES flashed: "Beware, White man!" said he, insolently. "Else I silence thy tongue! Aie, I would do so, but perchance I see now things that were hidden from me before." He swept out his arm in a grand gesture. "These are my people. I am their chief. Let Bwana Sadari say that it is so, and I will let him go in peace. I have spoken!"

Sweat trickled down Corby's spine. He wished he could see what was going on behind his back. Sala was offering him a way out, but it was not in his nature to accept it. Compromise and prestige didn't mix. In a matter of seconds he'd be a dead man or Bwana Sadari, Master of the River.

"Sala," said he sternly. "Once before you offered me peace but you attacked me and killed my servant. My answer is this!" His hand shot out and plucked the plume from the astonished induna's head and flung them to the ground. A shocked cry burst from the Makuas. Sala snarled and faded back for a few paces like a boxer. His spear flashed upwards.

Corby stood his ground, his rifle still resting in the crook of his arm. A look of consternation came to Sala's face. It seemed to Corby that his eyes were fixed on a point beyond him, but he dared not turn his head. Slowly the spear was lowered. Corby took a pace forward and struck the spear from Sala's hand. Then, offering up a silent prayer of thanksgiving, he turned to look around the circle of black faces until his eyes came to rest on his own boys who sat in a group apart.

One by one they stood up as his eyes singled them out. He called them by name.

"Let the Bwana Dervoort men stand," said he.

When they were all lined up he looked them over and shook his head: "What is to be done with such children as you?" he asked. "Shall I send you back to your kraals and take Dondi boys in your place?"

A wail of protest came from the Makuas. The Dondi were their hated rivals.

"But I must punish you. To desert a White Bwana is an evil thing. You will work for five days for nothing. I have spoken! March!"

As the last of the column filed past him, Corby was startled to see a figure in a white shirt come sliding down the roof of the nearest hut. He swore volubly as Dervoort walked up to him, grinning.

"That was a good thing to watch," said the Boer. "But don't try it again, my friend!"

"How long have you been up there—where's the woman?"

"After you left the cave I was never more than twenty paces from you."

"Why the devil didn't you show yourself?"

Dervoort laughed and patted the butt of his rifle: "It was enough that Sala saw this," said he. "Did you think your ugly face frightened him, my friend?"

"Blast you, Piet! You've got no respect for a man's ego!"

Back at Mahango Corby sat on the veranda of the bungalow. Dervoort and the girl sat close together talking in whispers.

Just before sunset, it came throbbing from across the river. As silence crept back to the surrounding jungle, his new head-man came running across the compound and up onto the veranda.

"Bwana," whispered the black, his voice hoarse with excitement: "Sef Mejid is dead! Sala has killed him!"

Corby nodded and touched the head-man's shoulder: "There must be no loud talk of this thing. Go now!"

As the light failed and the flag came down, Corby bent his head.

LOST SAFARI

By ALEXANDER WALLACE

Veteran guide Ross Bain wanted to keep his record clean. So he led that party of strange scientists through twisted, unknown jungle trails—even though he knew the prize they sought was his own dead body!

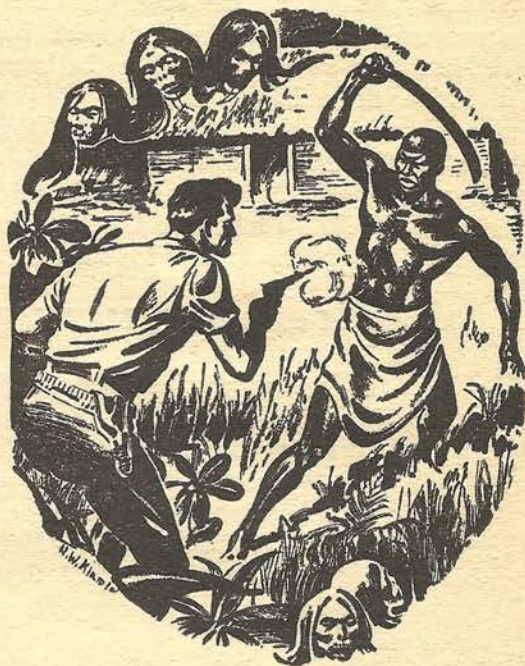
THE SLEIGHS' SAFARI WAS camped on the river about a mile below Massa Kessi, or Macequece as the Portuguese called the little African town. The rest house, a thatched bungalow perched on iron-wood stilts, stood in the centre of the clearing overlooking the river, now silvered by the light of an early moon. The flat space behind the bungalow was occupied by several small tents and a big square, khaki-colored mess-tent before which Sleigh's Swahili porters sat crooning to the accompaniment of a bamboo flute, more pitiful than the wailing of an abandoned infant.

Emerging from the shadows of the jungle trail, Ross Bain paused to take in the scene. Sleigh looked like money, he concluded. And a white-hunter who owed his headman a couple of months' wages had no right to be fastidious in the choice of his clients. It was just the fact that Chemly had recommended him to Sleigh that made him hesitate. He couldn't understand why Chemly had done it. There was something queer about it. A knife slipped between his ribs in a dark alley was the more likely thing for him to expect from Chemly. But here was Sleigh—a naturalist, wanting to work the Revue River as far south as Bometela's kraal and then north to the Rhodesian border. Not just another big-game hunter out for trophies and glory; he was an event, or his sister was. Nothing like her could happen again.

Ross smiled quizzically as he strode toward the bungalow. The devil take Chemly! A man had to make the best of his opportunities.

A cane chair creaked as he mounted the veranda steps and a white-clad figure rose from the shadow.

"Ah, glad to see you, Bain!" Sleigh shook hands with him affably. "Just in time for drinks." He was a tall man with



and uncommonly large head, a ruff of graying hair and pale, blue eyes. One side of his face was paralyzed so that when he smiled the corner of his mouth slid up toward his left ear. Ross found it hard to reconcile his boney ugliness with the shapely, provocative loveliness of his sister. It was one of those jokes of nature, he supposed.

"Well," said Sleigh, dryly, "I hope this visit means that my sister has convinced you, Bain."

Ross flushed in the darkness. Said he: "I'd like to make it clear that I turned you down at first because of Chemly. Frankly, I'd sooner have a recommendation from the devil. We had a little trouble not long ago—"

"I know," Sleigh interposed. "Bit of a bounder isn't he?"

Ross smiled wryly—typical British understatement that! Chemly was a remittance man and as vicious as a cobra. He'd been the terror of Macequece before the

Commandant, with Ross acting as bouncer, had urged him to move on.

"I know the family," Sleigh went on. "Damned awkward for them—there's a title y'know. We met him at Beria on our way in. I knew he'd been up here for a few years and asked for a few pointers. He said you were a Yankee—well, you know how he talks. He said you didn't have enough brains to be dishonest, but you knew this country as well as he knew the inside of a bawdy house. Coming from Chemly I thought that was high praise and looked you up."

Ross laughed. "That's dear old Chemly, all right! Well, I'll admit to knowing the country. If you're ready to start, I'd like——"

"What sort of country is it, Mr. Bain?"

BOTH MEN rose as Jennifer Sleigh came out onto the veranda. She was blonde, tall and very shapely in her jodhpurs and white silk sweater. There was about her an exuberance, an emanation of physical nature in hardy flower. Ross leaned back against the veranda rail, silent for a moment, savoring the strong flavor of her presence.

"It's good country," he said, presently. "Not much fever, too high for it. Take a chunk of territory—say, about twice the size of your own Sussex—clothe it with jungle, honeycombed by streams that run through the green bush like veins in a great leaf; people it with a dozen tribes of Makuas, proud Zulu stock, and you have Portuguese Manicaland."

"Makuas," said Sleigh, with a frown. "I know you chaps prefer your own men, but I want to take my Swahilis along. They're all expert skimmers. That's important, a careless skinner can ruin a good specimen."

"This isn't a big-game hunt, so that's all right," Ross agreed. "I'll want to take my own headman, M'bani, that's all. And don't worry about the Makuas. They've got a bad name, but it's just a matter of camp discipline, understanding their lingo and tabus. That's what you're paying me for."

"Good! When can we start?"

"You have your license, of course?"

"Took it out at Beria. May I see

yours?" Sleigh held out his hand.

"Sure," murmured Ross with a slight frown. He fished the booklet out of the breast pocket of his shirt. It served the dual purpose of passport and discharge-book. On the fly leaf there was a photograph and a physical description of the holder. The remaining pages gave a record of previous engagements with a signed reference from each client.

Sleigh thumbed through the pages quickly, but examined the fly-leaf carefully. "He's not married, Jennifer," he commented with his crooked smile and handed the book to the girl.

"Hm-m-m!" she mused over it. "Thirty-five, six feet, curly haired, an' everything—Lord, you'd better start running, Mr. Bain!"

"Any reason why we shouldn't start in the morning, Bain?" Sleigh put in before Ross could answer.

"Four o'clock is a good time," he said, as the girl handed his book back to him with a dazzling smile. "I'll have a chat with your headman and check your loads now."

"That won't be necessary," said Sleigh. "Amuku knows his business."

"I don't doubt it. But I'm responsible for what happens from now on. I'd like to check."

"Oh, all right," Sleigh agreed. "But there are two cases of scientific equipment, plainly marked. Be careful with them." He smiled tolerantly.

"Won't touch 'em!" Ross grinned back at him. "I'm not a customs officer. I just want to see that we've got what's needed for the trip."

The smile faded slowly from Sleigh's face as Ross went down the steps. He turned and blinked at the girl.

"Odd thing for him to say," he muttered.

She shrugged, lit a cigarette. "Don't tell me that you're getting nervous, brother dear," she said, with a tinge of malice in her voice. Sleigh scowled at her and stamped into the bungalow.

Ross walked across the clearing to where Swahilis, quiet now, sat around a fire. Sleigh's headman rose and detached himself from the group as Ross shouted



his name. He wore a brocaded vest which left his muscular arms and deep, broad chest bare. A scarlet cummerbund belted his white duck pants and the lobe of his left ear was missing. It looked as if it had been sliced off by a sabre cut, for there was a pink scar running down from it across his cheek to the corner of his mouth. He walked with a swagger, his hand resting on the hilt of a knife in an ornate scabbard thrust into his cummerbund. Ross didn't like his bold eyes and guessed that he'd seen service in one of the native regiments, probably as a sergeant.

Muttering under his breath and with a scowl on his hard face, Amuku followed Ross with a lantern, checking over the loads. They came to a couple of cases, one on top of the other, marked with a red cross.

"Open them," said Ross over his shoulder.

"Much trouble!" growled Amuku.

Ross turned on his heel to face the headman, his eyes measuring him. "You want to be paid off?" he asked, evenly.

"You no fit for drive me!" retorted the headman. "Me b'long Bwana Sleigh big time."

ROSS' EYES FLASHED and he rapped out a dozen, stinging words in Swahili. Amuku stiffened and stood like an ebony statue, but he was working up his nerve. His brash eyes rolled and his lips moved though no audible sound came from them. In a sudden fit of temper he turned and yanked at the upper-most case. It came down on Ross' toe and he

let out a yelp of pain. Amuku spat and grinned. Then Ross hit him.

The blow knocked the headman off his feet. But he was up again in an instant, and Ross felt the muscles in his belly tighten as he saw his curved knife flash from its scabbard. He met Amuku's leopard-like charge with his shoulder, riding it and twisting his body.

The blade clinked on the buckle of his belt, sliced through leather and flashed before his eyes.

Then he had Amuku's arm over his shoulder. With a grunt of exertion he twisted around and flipped the big black over. Amuku flopped across the case with a sickening thud and the sound of splintering wood. With the wind knocked out of him, he rolled off the case with his knees drawn up to his chin. Ross kicked the knife from his hand.

The fight was out of Amuku when he got to his feet. He backed away as Ross advanced upon him.

"No trouble, Bwana!" he gasped. "No trouble!"

"Go get your pay," said Ross, curtly.

Amuku started to say something but thought better of it and ran for the bungalow, muttering under his breath.

Ross roused a couple of the porters and, after the cases were checked and re-packed to his satisfaction, he started for the bungalow. As he was crossing the clearing Sleigh's figure appeared out of the shadows.

"I say, Bain, can't you overlook this trouble with Amuku?" he asked. "He's one of my best skimmers y'know."

Ross shook his head and said dryly: "He is handy with a knife, but I'd like to keep my skin, Mr. Sleigh."

Sleigh rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then: "I don't want to lose him. I can guarantee that you won't have any more trouble with him. Look here, suppose I keep him as my personal boy and leave the rest to your boy, M'bani? I'll pay him headman's wages and a bonus at the end of the trip. How does that suit you?"

Ross considered this. He didn't like it, a man with a grudge was bad medicine on safari; some of it, in fact, was apt to get into a man's grub. But M'bani could use the money, he certainly had it coming to him. And M'bani could cook his grub.

"Well if it's that important, all right," he conceded. "Just keep Amuku out of my hair."

They were up and away in the pallor of the false dawn, following a trail that wiggled up the side of a hill. Rain had fallen during the night, but the roof of the jungle had not leaked and the path was dry, a sure sign that the rainy season was over.

Ross, at the head of the little caravan with M'bani swinging along beside him lantern in hand, sang as they marched. It was always the same with him when the grey drift of light among the crowded trees closed around him and the odor of forest mould rose under his feet—always the same thrill, an unaccountable yearning for excitement, the strong vice of the lover of the wilderness.

They struck the Revue River at its confluence with a perennial stream that meandered down from the watershed along the Rhodisian border. They made camp beside a deep pool an hour before sunset.

Ross was in his tent, stripped to the waist and bending over a canvas tub while M'bani doused his head with water, when Jennifer Sleigh walked in on him. He told her to get out. But she laughed and sat on the edge of his cot, watching the coil of muscles under his brown skin as he towed himself vigorously.

"Not bad," she commented.

Ross flushed and shrugged into his shirt. Only then he noticed that she was wearing

a short, khaki skirt that revealed dimpled knees.

"Not bad, yourself!" he grinned, to cover his embarrassment.

She stretched out her legs, eyeing them critically, "No," she agreed. "Men pay to see worse."

Then Ross' eyes came to rest on the small-bore shot-gun resting on the cot beside her.

"You promised to take me shooting," she reminded him, her eyes following his.

"Well, all right," said he. "There's a marsh about a mile from here. We might get a duck or two before supper."

HE got his rifle and led the way up stream. The girl followed close at his heels, making enough noise to scare off all the game within a mile. They reached the marsh. Tall reeds covered its surface except for a few patches of open water that mirrored the blue of the sky. White and red star-shaped flowers, flaming against the green of the jungle, and the strong-smelling hibiscus scented the glade. Looking at the girl as she crouched behind the reeds, tense and eager, Ross noticed that her skin, which had been burned a fiery red, was now peeling and showing a soft, golden tan underneath. Again he found himself wondering about her. There was a *risque* toughness in her make-up that he could not fathom. He could see her in the front row of a chorus, flaunting her perfect legs. He could not picture her among the social clique that Chemly came from.

He reddened guiltily as the girl turned her head and caught him staring at her. She regarded him carefully for a moment, her expression changing from surprise to one of amused speculation.

"You know," she said with gentle derision, "I don't think you quite approve of me, Ross."

"Haven't seen a thing that could be improved on," Ross grinned.

"That's a polite lie," she said and turned her head away quickly. "I don't see anything to shoot at so— oh, look!"

She was pointing down the narrow game trail they had followed. There no more than fifteen yards from them a buck had

come to slack his thirst, head arched between slender legs.

"Isn't he beautiful!" breathed the girl.

Ross touched her arm, silencing her. Through the screen of reeds his trained eye had seen the slinking form of a leopard, fawn hide and black rosette spots almost invisible in the underbush. In a moment, he knew, the swift, drama of jungle life and death would be enacted before their eyes.

The girl saw the leopard as it crossed the trail, stealthily approaching to within springing distance of the buck. It was a beautiful specimen—a hundred and forty pounds of concentrated ferocity and blood-lust—the ground color of its fur pale fawn to rufus buff graduating to pure white on the underparts.

The girl's mind was slow to grasp the import of what she saw. Then she uttered a little gasp of horror; and, before Ross could make a move to stop her, she threw up her shotgun and let go with both barrels. Ross felt the hair rise from his scalp. His mouth was still open to shout, but he had uttered no sound. He saw the leopard jump sideways, snapping at its hindquarters; then crouch snarling, tawny, wicked eyes glaring at the girl who stood utterly motionless, fascinated by fear.

It had all happened in a split second, and Ross fired from the hip before that second was out, hoping to check the beast's charge. He heard the impact of his bullet. Then, with a yell he shouldered the girl and sent her sprawling as the leopard sprang. He fired again blindly as the white underbelly came hurtling toward him. He had the presence of mind to draw up his knees as he went down.

He was on his back suddenly, with snarling fury on top of him. He caught the beast by its ruff and held it off with arms and legs that had the strength of desperation in them. But he knew that he could not hold on long, could not save himself from the slashing, razor claws. Blood from a wound in the beast's throat trickled down his rigid forearms, and he knew his last shot had hit and hung on for his life, as the leopard's struggles became feebler. Finally it rolled over and lay on its side, muscles twitching.



ROSS got slowly to his feet and then began to curse as his nerves reacted to the shock of it. He looked around for the girl. She was on hands and knees amid the reeds. She blinked up at him.

"You—you blasted—" Ross began, savagely; then, remembering she was a woman, took a deep breath and clamped his mouth shut.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed. Ross' shirt was torn from his shoulder and he was bleeding freely.

"Of course I am!" he snapped. "I'm lucky to be alive and so are you! I've taken some fools into the jungle in my time, but never one that did a thing like that!"

"It was so close I didn't think I could miss," she explained.

Ross spread his hands in a despairing gesture. "Miss Sleigh," he said patiently, "you didn't miss. but a child should know better than to take a pot shot at a leopard with a shotgun!"

"You saved my life!" she said, as if the thought had just struck her.

"There's not an accident against me, yet," growled Ross. "My little book is clean."

"I see," she said, slowly. "A clean record. That must mean a great deal to you, Ross."

"It's all I've got," said he. Then as his ear caught the odd inflection in her voice, he gave her a sharp look. But her face was blank. She said: "Better let me fix that shoulder."

"M'bani will do a better job," said Ross, and strode off down the trail, a little surprised at his own surliness.

It was dark when they got back to the camp. Sleigh was seated in the mess tent, smoking. He eyed the girl and Ross curiously as they came in.

"Good Lord!" he jumped up as he caught sight of Ross' shoulder. "What happened?"

"Had a little trouble with a leopard," Ross told him "I'll need the first aid kit."

"It looks bad!"

Ross shook his head. "I got off lucky. I've seen thorns do worse."

"Ah," said Sleigh, in a relieved tone, "I'm glad to hear that! I want to pull out in the morning, push on to Bometela's kraal."

Ross was surprised and his face showed it. Sleigh glanced at his face obliquely and continued: "I want to set up a base camp. I like to work systematically, with the absolute minimum of discomfort. Once we set up a permanent camp you and the boys can range for the 'beef' and fight the mosquitoes. I'll stay at home and look after the skinning and the cataloguing."

"Robert," the girl put in, sharply. "You're not very considerate. Mr. Bain should rest for a few days."

"That's up to Bain," replied Sleigh sourly.

"I think it's up to you," she insisted.

Sleigh looked at her, his eyes narrowing in thoughtful appraisal. "You seem to have forgotten the importance of time, Jennifer," he said carefully. "Among other things," he added, significantly.

The girl's lips tightened. Watching her, Ross thought he saw the shape of fear behind her silence. Said he: "I'll take no harm, Miss Sleigh." She gave him an enigmatical smile and turned away.

Outside in the night he paused to think. There was something queer in all this. They were in a naturalist's paradise, in fact, they'd been trekking through one for three days now. But for all the attention Sleigh paid to it they might just as well be in the Sahara Desert. There didn't seem to be much of the scientist's enthusiasm about him. On the trail he plodded along, morose and silent, oblivious to his sur-

roundings, except to curse the mosquitoes and complain of delays. But he had an explanation for it. He liked his comfort; he wanted a base camp. Let him have it. Ross shrugged and trudged off to his tent.

They turned westward working their way up stream toward the Rhodesian border. They were well into Bometela's country when they made camp, two days later.

An hour after sunrise on the following morning they struck a trail wide and firm enough to allow the passage of a large cart. Presently they came upon a couple of stripped palms, one on each side of the road, with offerings to the local fetish hanging from them. And there was a log, half buried athwart the trail, a charm to keep the leopards away from the village. . .

THE VILLAGE itself was crouched upon a cleared plateau overlooking the river—a collection of frail huts with thatched roofs.

Old Bometela and his people came out to meet them. And in a moment they were surrounded by warriors, stern-visaged and of splendid build, women and children, the latter as tenacious as gadflies and twice as irritating. There was a rest house, Bometela told them, but the roof had fallen in. He graciously offered them his palaver house as a shelter—an offer that Ross hastily countered with a gift and a request for permission to make camp a mile up stream from the village where they would be assured of un-polluted water.

"Do you want me to hire a few hunters?" Ross asked Sleigh.

"Of course," Sleigh answered. "But let's get settled first."

As soon as the tents were up Ross sent for M'bani.

"Keep the Swahilis away from the village," he ordered. "I want no trouble with the Makuas."

"Yes Bwana," the big Makua answered, then stood fidgeting with a dubious look on his grim, black face.

"Something wrong?" asked Ross.

"It may be that the Swahili dogs will not do as I tell them, Bwana. They say Amuku is their headman."

"You are their headman," Ross told him. "Are you afraid of Swahilis?"

M'bani spat contemptuously. "But there are twelve of them, we are only two, Bwana," he added.

Ross gave him a quick look. "So, that's the way it is. You smell trouble, eh?"

"They make much talk at night, Bwana."

"What do they say?"

"It is the speech of apes, Bwana. How should I know?"

"It that all, M'bani?"

"Yes, Bwana."

Ross dismissed him, but watched him cross over to where the Swahilis were pitching the cook tent with a frown between his eyes. He was inclined to think that M'bani was expressing his deep-seated distrust of all who were not Makua in origin. Certainly, Sleigh's crew knew their job and they seemed to be willing enough.

Later he picked up his rifle and went over to the mess tent. He found Sleigh and Jennifer sprawled out in camp chairs behind billowing mosquito-netting. Jennifer opened one eye as he entered and said: "Have a drink, Ross."

Sleigh only grunted, and Ross said: "There's a spot up stream I'd like you to take a look at, Mr. Sleigh. A good place to set up a *boma*. If you like it, I'll get the boys started on it."

"Huh—oh yes, of course!" Sleigh heaved himself up stiffly, yawned and jammed on his helmet. "Come on, Jennifer. There's no rest in the man!"

Ross led them down a narrow trail that passed under a continuous archway of boughs so thick that the sunlight only filtered through it and dappled the leafy loam or sparkled on the noisy river. All along was the spoor of the game that used the trail; the diamond-shaped hoof prints of antelope, hippo slides in the clay banks of the river and trees deeply scored, fourteen feet above the ground, where elephants had paused to sharpen their tusks.

Further on the river narrowed to a gorge. The lap and wash of the rapid had worn the stone bed into great, dark folds which in places enclosed patches of golden sand and pebbles. On the opposite bank the ground sloped down and trees arched over a green pool fed by miniature falls with a lacy, rainbow mist rising from its edges. Cream balls and water lilies shone

with pearl-like lustre amid the green and strongly scented the air.

Ross halted motioning his companions to silence. After a few minutes life came back to the pool. A monitor, invisible before, slid from a fallen tree and there was a flash of turquoise light as a kingfisher swooped down on a swarm of insects. Ross pointed as the surface of the pool was ruffled. A great snake swam across it with a bird, just caught, held in its jaws.

"It's a box seat," he whispered. "You'll see all there is to see here, and the light is good for photography."

But Sleigh was not listening. He was not even watching. He sat on a log with his back turned to the pool, wiping sweat from his forehead. His face was flushed.

"Feeling rough?" Ross asked.

"Yes," Sleigh answered wearily. "A touch of fever, I think."

"Better get back to camp then." Ross started back down the trail. They had not gone far when the girl stopped, pointing upwards. "Look, monkeys!" she exclaimed.

THE WHOLE TROOP crossed in front of them, leaping the narrow gap across the path high overhead like fleeting grey shadows, and making a good deal of noise while they were about it. One of them, a young fellow, misjudged his distance and fell. He lay on the ground badly hurt and whimpering like a child. A shot from Ross' rifle put him out of his misery.

"It's not often you see one fall," he commented.

Sleigh stood looking down at the little creature with a puzzled expression. "Too young to hold on with its tail, I suppose."

Ross' eyes opened wide with astonishment. He stood utterly still, staring at Sleigh. His mind slow to accept implication of the other's words.

"What's wrong," demanded Sleigh, looking around nervously.

"Don't you know?" asked Ross quietly.

"Damn it, no! said Sleigh, irritably. "Should I?"

"I think so," Ross said, with a faint smile.

Sleigh's glance shuttled to the girl. She shrugged and his eyes came back to Ross

again. His face showed signs of internal distress. Then he muttered something about a headache, turned on his heel quickly, and strode off down the trail. Jennifer followed him.

Ross stood watching them with a broad grin on his face. He wasn't a naturalist, but he knew that African monkeys did not swing by their tails. Only the New World monkeys, the *Cebidae*, had prehensile tails. Sleigh might have passed it off as a joke, but he had not. He knew he'd made a *faux pas*, but he didn't even know where he'd gone wrong.

"Naturalists, my foot!" murmured Ross. Then the grin faded from his face. But if he wasn't a naturalist, what was he? Why this masquerade in the jungle? It was not his nature to nurse a grievance or suspicion, and he didn't like being led by the nose into anything. He headed back to camp determined to have it out with Sleigh.

But Sleigh had another idea. When Ross got back to camp he was stretched out on his cot groaning, and the odd part of it was the real symptoms of fever. Ross suspected that it was the mild kind—recurrent shakes and temperatures. But Sleigh was making the most of it. He rambled incoherently when spoken to, sweated and groaned. To be on the safe side Ross got him under blanket, then measured out doses of quinine and left him with the girl.

Jennifer did not show up for the evening meal and Ross ate alone in the mess tent. Later he sat smoking, thinking back, wondering. Snatches of conversation, meager details passed through his mind and came out woven into a pattern. Carefully he considered it. There was Sleigh's connection with Chemly—not necessarily what he said it was. The fact that he'd come in with his own gang. Jennifer Sleigh—there was something wrong about the brother and sister relationship, he felt it. Sleigh's indifference; the monkey incident, and more. Yes, it all pointed to those two cases of scientific equipment that Sleigh *didn't want disturbed*. The answer was in those cases!

He rose knocking the ashes from his pipe. The cases stood in a corner of the tent under several others. He dragged

them out. It took him some time to pry off the locks. Eagerly he unpacked them and then stood amid the litter of their contents, swearing softly with a look of bewilderment on his face. There were books, neatly labeled bottles, chloroform, specimens in alcohol—an entomologists field equipment.

"Now you can put them all back again!"

Ross turned slowly to face Jennifer Sleigh. Her blonde head was thrust through the opening of the tent and she was looking at him with derision in her eyes. Ross stared at her blankly, while his face grew red with anger and guilt.

"What did you expect to find" she asked, mildly curious.

"Anything but this!" Ross answered shortly.

"Oh—why?"

"Why? Well, damn it, because African monkeys don't swing by their tails!"

"I see." Suppressed laughter quirked the corners of her mouth. "Robert's only an amateur," she hastened to explain—too glibly, Ross thought. "And he's really interested in bugs. He should have told you."

Ross' smile was slow. He said, "He did. He mentioned skimmers, and I've never heard of a man skinning a bug."

"Oh, well." She shrugged.

"Why are you afraid of him?" he asked, trying to catch her off balance. It didn't work.

"He's got a violent temper. He can make things damned unpleasant," she answered blandly.

Ross gave her a long, steady look, then: "All right, Miss Sleigh. I guess I stuck my chin out."

She smiled. "Don't lose any sleep over it, Ross. No harm's been done. I'll help you pack that stuff."

By the time they had finished the camp had settled down for the night. Sleigh's tent was the only one showing a light. Drums were throbbing over at the Makua village and the bull-frogs were singing their blatant serenades down among the reeds. Ross put out the lights and held the flap of the tent up for the girl to go out. She ducked under his arm and came up very close to him.

"Ross—" she started to tell him some-

thing, but broke off, the signs of inward strife plainly showing on her face. But Ross was conscious only of her perfume, the out-thrust of her breasts, warm through his shirt. Her shoulder touched his arm, holding up the flap. The moment was irresistible. His arm slid down about her waist. She yielded, her body arching to his. He kissed her and her lips clung to his for a breathless moment. Then she pushed him off with an oath that made his ears burn.

"Don't get any ideas about me, Ross!" she said, breathing quickly. "Just forget that!"

"Why should I?" demanded Ross.

"You'll find out!" she looked up into his face, briefly, appealingly. Then she ran for her tent.

ROSS looked up at the stars, "You're damned right I will!" he muttered. "That brother of yours is after something, and it isn't bugs, my girl!"

After a moment of deliberation he started to cross the clearing for his own tent. As he was passing the cook tent he hauled up to listen. Someone was scuffling around inside. One of the boys stealing grub Ross guessed.

"Come out of there!" he shouted.

There was absolute quiet for a moment; then a stifled scream and a figure burst out of the tent and came flying towards him with a rush of air and the jingle of metal.

"Bwana! Bwana!" A Makua girl, stark naked but for the beads and bangles around her wrists and ankles, flung herself at his feet. Amuku came out after her. He pulled up short as he caught sight of Ross, then advanced slowly, his chin thrust out, brash eyes glinting in the moonlight.

The girl clung to Ross' legs whimpering. Gently he lifted her to her feet.

"She mine! You make no trouble," growled Amuku.

"Did you take money from this man?" Ross asked the girl in the Makua dialect. The sound of her own tongue heartened the girl. From behind the shield of Ross' broad shoulders she hissed and spat at Amuku like a kitten at a tomcat.

"No" she said, scornfully. "He caught

me by the pool where we bathe at night."

"Go back to the village," Ross told her. "And say to Bometela that I will come to palavar about this thing tomorrow."

As the girl turned and raced away Amuku made after her. Ross stepped into his path and landed a blow that lifted the black off his feet and set him down on his knees.

"I said no man was to go to the village," said Ross, coldly. "I am going to drive you, Amuku."

The big Swahili went for his knife, but Ross was too quick for him this time. He darted in and kicked it from the black's hand as it flashed from the scabbard. Then he stepped in slugging. But Amuku faded backwards, riding his punches. Suddenly he rushed and his arms caught Ross in a crushing embrace. Ross gasped as the pressure tightened about his ribs, and knew that he was in serious trouble. He felt a rush of fear as his feet left the ground. Amuku threw him hard, and he hit the ground with a thud that rattled every bone in his body. He lashed out desperately as Amuku dived for him. The headman turned a somersault and flopped on his back. Ross was on his feet in an instant. But before he could jump back Amuku had him by the ankles and his feet were jerked from under him.

They rolled over and over, grunting with exertion. Amuku clawing at Ross' face, trying to gouge his eyes. Ross was the more powerful man and he had a cooler head, but Amuku had oiled himself recently and it was some time before Ross could fasten a good grip onto him. At last he got Amuku's arm up behind his back, and Amuku began to howl for help.

Ross heard Jennifer's scream mingle with shouts and the pad of bare, running feet. In a moment the other Swahilis were milling about, jabbering like a cage full of monkeys. Hands clawed at him. His shirt was ripped from his back. He released Amuku and sprang to his feet, lashing out right and left with fists and feet. The Swahilis fell back under the barrage of blows that left two of them stretched out cold. Ross got a fleeting picture of Sleigh, clad in gaudy, stripped pajamas, standing in the opening of his tent. Jennifer was

beside him, her eyes big with fear. Now the Swahilis were closing in on him, silently, warily. Then a gun exploded and a bullet whined overhead. On top of it came M'bani's wild war cry. He came charging, wild-eyed and swinging Ross' gun-belt around his head. The Swahilis in his path scattered.

"Good boy!" Ross gasped in relief. He took the heavy automatic from M'bani's hand. Under the menace of it Amuku and his Swahilis froze. Ross looked them over with cold eyes. Said he: "Amuku did not obey M'bani. He stole Makua girl."

A low murmur of dismay went up from the Swahilis. Curses and angry looks were thrown at Amuku. The big headman seemed to shrink.

"What will the Makuas do about this thing?" Ross asked. Then as the Swahilis began to jabber in panic, and some to slink away, he laughed.

"No good to run away!" his clear voice rang out. "Makua drums will talk tonight. You are dead men, if I do not speak for you!" Then they were crowding around him, pleading, begging. He silenced them and said:

"Amuku will give his wages as a peace offering to Chief Bometela, and I will palavar with him. Now, let each man put his knife at M'bani's feet. I have spoken!"

It was done without a murmur of protest. Ross holstered his automatic and strode over to the Sleighs, his eyes truculent. Jennifer ducked into the tent as he approached.

"We're heading back to Macequece, Mr. Sleigh," he announced. "Just as soon as you're fit to travel." In the thin silence that followed he watched anger come alight in Sleigh's black eyes, saw it twist his face into an ugly grimace.

"Damn it!" Sleigh exploded. "You're a bit high-handed, Bain. I'll tell you when——"

"I'm telling you!" Ross cut him short. "I've had more trouble with you in six days than I've had in as many years! I don't know what your game is. I don't care. My job is to get you back to Macequece, safe. From the look of things, that's not going to be too damned easy. So shut up and pack up!"

WITH THAT off his chest Ross felt better and stamped off to his tent. But he didn't sleep. The Swahilis were holding a palaver in the cook tent. He could hear the hum of their voices above the stridence of the jungle night. He didn't know what to expect. He pinned up the flap of his tent so that he had a good view of the clearing, put out the lamp and sat in the darkness with his rifle across his knees. He dozed off with the rumble of drums in his ears.

He opened his eyes with a start. The moon was still high, and the first thing he saw was Sleigh, in his gaudy pajamas, his loose slippers making a flapping sound as he picked his way carefully across the clearing. Ross' first thought was that he was sleep-walking. He half rose then sank back as he saw Sleigh was headed for the cook tent. After pausing to look around Sleigh dived into the tent and the murmur of voices ceased. Minutes passed, then he came out with Amuku. The big Swahili had a pack on his back and carried a rifle. The pair stood talking for a while in hushed voices, then Amuku left the camp. But he did not take the trail back to the Macequece, *he was headed up stream toward the Rhodesian border.*

Utterly motionless and completely bewildered Ross watched Sleigh return to his own tent. Presently the other Swahilis came out and drifted like shadows across the clearing to their quarters. Sleep settled on the camp.

Ross shook his head, while a profound sense of depression and foreboding took possession of him. It was all very strange, there was an ugly bewilderment about it. What was behind it? What *could* Sleigh be after, here in the jungle a hundred miles from anywhere? He could think of nothing. He turned in swearing softly under his breath, consigning Sleigh and all his works to hell.

Jennifer showed up for breakfast the next morning. While M'bani served them they talked casually, but as soon as he had cleaned up and left the tent Ross said: "Your brother's fever seemed to be much better last night, Miss Sleigh."

She fumbled in her shirt pocket for a cigarette. Ross struck a match for her.

"He's not my brother," she said, as she leaned toward the match.

Ross stared at her. It was the confession not the fact that startled him. He held the match until it burned his fingers, then dropped it with an oath and caught her wrist.

"Good Lord—your husband?"

"No!" she laughed.

"Maybe he'd like to be?"

"No!" She snatched her hand away and jumped to her feet. "I'm just sick of lies!" she cried. "You get out of here, Ross, fast! Don't let him talk you out of it."

"Why?"

"Never mind. Just pack and head for home!"

Ross leaned back in his chair, grinning up at her. Said he: "You know I don't think there's as much brass in you as you'd like me to think. Maybe I should stick around."

"You're crazy if you do!"

"You're in some kind of trouble. Tell me more. I'd like to help."

"Don't you try and big brother me!" she flared. "Just get out of here."

Ross smiled slowly. "Was there anything brotherly in that kiss last night?" he asked.

She gave him a startled look, opened her mouth to speak but shut it again as Sleigh's shadow fell across the tent.

"What are you two shouting about?" he demanded as he came in, his eyes darting suspiciously from one to the other.

"You'll get a chill walking around in those pajamas," Ross said.

Sleigh looked at him blankly, then turned to Jennifer. "I'd like to eat," he said plaintively.

"I'll get M'bani." Jennifer gave Ross a meaning look and went out.

Sleigh sank into a chair with a groan: "Don't let what happened last night upset you, Bain. I need you. I was wrong in bringing Amuku along. He's a trouble maker. I sent him packing last night in the hope that you'd reconsider."

Ross was conscious of a feeling of exasperation. Sleigh was too fast for him. He always beat him to the punch with an explanation that, on the surface, at least,

had the color of truth. He asked: "Why did he go west?"

"Oh, the Makuas, he didn't want to pass near the village." He smiled crookedly, and went on: "I paid him his wages in full. I knew you'd object, so I did it when you weren't around. Thought it was the best way to avoid trouble."

Ross smiled wryly. There it was again! All the loose ends tied—too damned neatly. It occurred to him that he might make better progress if he kept his mouth shut. He said: "I'm on my way over to the Makua village about that girl. They'll ask for plenty. It may take a day or two to get it settled." He watched Sleigh's worried expression change into one of quiet satisfaction. He thought: *He likes the delay, he's playing for time. Something is going to happen, soon.* And Sleigh's next words seemed to confirm his thought.

"Anything you say, Bain," he approved. "The cash is here when you want it."

AS USUAL the palaver was a long-drawn out affair. All the members of the girl's family made a speech. Then it developed that half her bride-price had already been paid by a fine young warrior and his claim was vociferously pressed by three generations of his kin. Ross was glad to settle for twice the girl's full bride-price before he ran into further complications. He left, promising to return with the equivalent in cash on the following morning.

It was midnight before he got back to camp. Utterly worn out with talk and feeling the kick of the palm wine he'd drunk, he stripped to the waist, flopped on his cot and was soon asleep.

The sun was high when he awoke. He had a bad taste in his mouth and wanted coffee. He shouted for M'bani. There was no answer. He shouted again. Still no answer, and cursing he started to dress. His shirt felt light in his hand. He felt the pockets. His passport and license were missing. A quick, startled glance around the tent revealed that his rifle and automatic were also missing. His jaw set and his eyes hardened.

Then Ross steamed off to the mess tent.

When he entered, sheer astonishment jolted the rage out of him. Sleigh was seated at the table and beside him stood another white man—a tall fellow with dark curling hair, wearing a belted, tattered corduroy jacket.

Ross' eyes measured him then fastened onto his face. There was something familiar about the fellow. He'd seen him before, somewhere, years ago.

The stranger was looking him up and down now, rubbing the beard stubble on his chin with his hand, making a rasping sound against the jungle silence.

"There's a striking resemblance," he remarked in a soft, cultured voice.

Ross' mouth opened, and he stared foolishly, his mind slow to accept what he heard. But there it was, considering him *with cold, grey eyes—his own image!* No, not his image, exactly. The face was a little different. It was longer, the eyes more closely set. But in build and coloring the two men were alike as two peas in a pod.

"Oh, Chemly had it figured out all right," said Sleigh. "With his license you could get by an army, Eddy."

"My license—say what is this?" Ross demanded.

Sleigh chuckled and his mouth slid up to his ear.

"Like you to meet an old colleague of mine, Bain—the rare specimen we came to look for. You've heard of him, I'm sure. Eddy Talman."

Talman, the I. D. B. man! Ross whistled softly, he was beginning to understand. Eddy Talman was the smartest illicit diamond buyer in Africa. Three months ago he'd made a big haul, then shot a Jo'burg policeman and escaped northward.

"I gather that you have heard of me," said Talman. "And you have the good fortune to look very like me, Mr. Bain."

"What does that mean?" Ross asked. He'd guessed the answer, but he wanted to be sure."

"Perhaps this will save time," Talman took a passport book from his pocket and handed it to him. Ross looked at the fly leaf. The physical description tallied

with his own. All that was needed was to change the photographs.

"It's a change of identity I contemplate, Bain," Talman said coolly. "A temporary one, of course."

"Of course," said Ross, dryly. "But somebody might get to wondering what happened to me back at Macequece."

"Why should they? You haven't been to the coast in ten years. Well, you went on safari with Sleigh. You work your way down to Joboto on the coast. Sleigh decides to work new territory. He invites you to go along. He books a steamer passage for you. You go, or rather I do. D'you think the Portuguese johnnies will catch on to that?"

Ross saw only too clearly that they would not. What he couldn't see was a permanent spot for Ross Bain in the shape of future events.

"It's where I go that interests me, Talman," he said.

"You lose yourself in the jungle for three months, and you take five hundred pounds sterling to make it worth your while. Of course, Amuku and his boys will go along with you, just to see that you keep to your end of the bargain. After that, if you're smart, you'll get yourself a new license and keep your mouth shut."

"You make it sound just lovely," said Bain, with a thin-lipped smile. "Maybe you'll tell me how I got into this rotten mess."

"Why not? It was Chemly's idea. We've worked together for years—that's why he like Macequece, close to the border, y'see. Well, on this occasion I had a spot of trouble at Jo'burg. I have to get myself and the diamonds out of the country. Without Chemly and you—well, I'm grateful to the extent of five hundred pounds."

"And Miss Sleigh, Jennifer?"

Talman laughed. "You'll admit that she has what it takes to make a man forget his better judgment, Bain. Man bait. Just man bait!"

Ross flushed. It was the unvarnished truth, but he didn't like hearing it. *She cared enough to warn me.* The thought startled him, and he asked quickly: "Where's my boy, M'bani?"

"Just forget about him. I'm giving

you your chance to get clear," said Talman.

"A hell of a chance," said Ross grimly. "But maybe it's better than you think."

"Meaning?"

"Just what I said."

TALMAN'S COLD EYES bored into him. "Sleigh tells me you're inclined to throw your weight around. But don't get funny with *me*, Bain. Sleigh doesn't like to play rough, but I do. Remember I can use you dead or alive. Better dead, perhaps. Go back to your tent and stay there. We start for the coast at sunset."

Better dead than alive. Ross left the tent with words ringing in his ears and a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. His mutilated body, found in the jungle with Talman's passport, would suit Talman much better, he had no illusions about that! Even if Talman meant to play it straight Amuku and the Swahilis would cut his throat on the first opportunity. It was likely Talman had it figured that way.

Suddenly he knew fear—sheer, sweating panic. His first thought was to start running, and his eyes swept the clearing, looking for something to dodge behind. They came to rest on Amuku, who stood watching him, rifle in hand. With an oath Ross got a grip on himself. From now on someone would always be watching him. He'd have to depend on his wits.

He went to his tent and took a stiff tot of brandy. He felt better. For days he'd been blundering around in the dark. Now, he knew what he was up against. Besides it was a way to the coast. He'd think of something between here and Jotobo. He poured out another tot of brandy. As he put the glass down, a drum began to rumble over at the Makua village. He glanced at his watch with a frown, remembering that he'd promised to pay Bometela this morning. It was a few minutes after noon. He remembered that he hadn't told Sleigh about his agreement with the Makua chief. He took a pace toward the opening of his tent, then pulled up short as the idea struck him.

He sat down turning it over in his mind.

Why should he tell Sleigh? If Bometela wasn't paid he'd come to collect, backed up by his young warriors, spoiling for a fight. It was cold blooded. If a false move was made it would end in a massacre. Ross poured himself another brandy and swallowed it. Well, he was as good as a dead man, and so was M'bani. A man had the right to gamble for his life. Let Bometela come! With a grim smile Ross sat down to wait.

As the sun declined from meridian the Maku war drums began to throb. The volume of sound increased slowly and Ross knew that Bometela was on the march. Presently one of the Swahilis came running into the camp, shouting for Sleigh. Soon the whole dozen of them were grouped about Amuku, jabbering and gesticulating. They were yapping about the Makua girl. They were scared. And so were Sleigh and Talman, by the look of them. They had come out of the mess tent. Talman stood looking in the direction of the native village. Sleigh was waving his arms at Amuku, ordering him to serve out guns and ammunition.

"Ho, Bain! Come over here!" Sleigh shouted.

Ross buckled on his empty gun-belt and sauntered over to them. The Makuas were close now. The chant of the warriors was audible above the rumble of the drums.

"You settled with them about that girl, didn't you?" Sleigh wanted to know.

"I don't recall saying so," Ross murmured. "We weren't able to reach an agreement."

"What do they want?" demanded Talman.

Ross jerked his thumb in Amuku's direction, "Him," he said, laconically, and grinned as the other Swahilis edged away from their headman.

Talman swore, "I'll give them a bellyful of lead, that's what!"

"If you're thinking of that you'd better give me a gun," suggested Ross.

Talman looked at him, suspicion in his cold eyes. "It could be that you're trying to work something, Bain."

"You know their lingo," Sleigh put in. "You don't need a gun to talk to them."

"Sure, I'll talk to them," Ross agreed.

"I don't like it!" Talman interposed sharply. "Anybody else speak their lingo in camp, Sleigh?"

Beads of sweat dropped from Sleigh's forehead as he shook his head. And the Swahilis were showing increasing signs of nervousness as the Makua war-chant grew in volume.

"I guess it's got beyond talking," said Ross with unruffled calm. "We'll all be as full of Makua spears as my aunt's pin-cushion before long."

At the moment the Makua debouched out of the forest into the clearing—tall, light-footed warriors all of them, with the sun gleaming on their oiled bodies and winking on their spear heads. They formed a compact mass at the edge of the clearing while their drums throbbed a frenzied rhythm. A truly terrifying sight. Talman and Sleigh were staring with their mouths open.

"For Pete's sake, do something, Bain!" Talman's voice quavered.

"They're working themselves up!" gasped Sleigh, and started to back away. The Swahilis stood utterly still, watching the white men, sensing their fear.

"Don't move! Don't shoot!" Ross' voice rang out clear, commanding obedience.

SUDDENLY the drums stopped. Then with a blood-chilling howl the Makuas charged. It was too much for the Swahilis, they dropped their guns and bolted for the bush, Amuku well in the lead.

Panic was what Ross had gambled on. As the Makuas swept across the clearing in a cloud of dust, he swung on Sleigh who was standing closest to him. The blow stunned Sleigh and he sank to his knees. Before Talman realized what was happening, Ross had scooped up Sleigh's gun and stood facing him.

"Drop it, Talman!" Ross warned.

"Blast you——" Talman cocked and his gun spat fire. He missed, and a split second later he fell on his face with a neat hole between the eyes.

Ross whirled to face the charging Makuas, arms upraised and shouting at the top of his voice. Bometela's bull voice

roared out a command above the tumult. Like a black wave the warriors dashed to within ten feet of Ross. Then halted and receded, forming a semi-circle about their chief. An attendant dashed forward with an umbrella and the regal stool. Old Bometela sat on it, a picture of bewildered and outraged majesty.

When quiet came and the dust had settled, Ross flung his gun at the chief's feet. "The evil-doer is dead, chief!" he announced, dramatically.

"Ha!" said Bometela, with evident satisfaction. "I did not think that you would cheat me, my friend. It is a good thing for you that you did not run with those Swahili dogs. See!" He rose and tossed his spear in the direction in which the Swahilis had fled. With a wild yell twenty young Makua warriors dashed off, like blood hounds slipped from the leash.

"Call them back, Chief!" urged Ross.

"Why?" asked Bometela.

Ross had to tell him the whole story twice before he was satisfied. Then he beckoned to his headman and talked it over with them, while Ross sweated, hoping that fear would give wings to the Swahilis' heels. At last a decision was reached and a drum throbbed, recalling the Makua warriors. But Bometela was no fool.

He saw Ross' need and his own advantage, and he grasped it firmly.

If, he argued, the one who was dead had stolen government property, would not the government pay for its return? Did not the Bwana himself say that the coming of Bometela's warriors had saved him? It was clear that Bometela had saved the government property also. And, therefore, was it not just that the reward be paid to Bometela?"

"Half the reward is just, Chief," Ross countered firmly. "I cannot tell how much the Government will pay. Let Bometela march with me to Macequece. Let him give me porters and I will speak for him."

"Let it be so!" Bometela agreed, never doubting that he had the best of the bargain.

Ross picked out a dozen dusky Makuas. Four he sent to dig a hole for Talman, the others to break camp. Then he walked

over to Sleigh, who stood rubbing his chin like a man waking from a bad dream.

"Where's Jennifer?" Ross asked him.

Sleigh looked at him with vague eyes. "In the cook tent with M'bani," he managed to say at last.

"We'll go there," said Ross.

Jennifer and M'bani were stretched out on the floor, bound hand and foot. Ross released M'bani.

"You take his place, Sleigh," he said.

"Look, Bain," Sleigh spoke eagerly. "There's a poke of diamonds in my tent—a fortune, man! Easy for you to get away with them. What about it?"

"Do we split three ways?" asked Ross with his eyes fixed on the girl.

"Remember that record, Ross!" she urged. "It's clean, keep it that way."

A grin settled on Ross' face. He stooped and slashed her bonds. "I want to talk to you, young lady."

He led her to the mess tent. She took the cigarette he offered to her, lighted it, and sat down watching his face through a veil of smoke.

"You told Talman you were through, is that right?" he asked. Then, as she nodded her head: "What made you change your mind?"

"Maybe I liked the way you stood up for that Makua girl," she answered.

There was a pause while Ross studied her with thoughtful eyes. Then: "How badly do the police want you, Jennifer?"

"What difference does that make to you?"

"I want to know how long I've got to wait."

She caught her breath. Her hand went to her throat.

"You're crazy, Ross! I'm no good —"

"What have the police got against you?" Ross insisted.

"Just what you know. But you'd better listen, Ross!" She retreated behind the table as he advanced toward her.

"I met Talman in London. I fell for him—he was like you, only rotten inside. Perhaps I thought diamond smuggling was romantic. But I knew it was on the wrong side of the law. I went in with my eyes open and——"

Ross caught her then and held her in his arms. "All that is unimportant. I've got a good record as a white hunter. But I'm glad they don't put *everything* in that little book. I'm not asking questions, and I'm not answering any. We start from here."

Suddenly she lifted her face to his, and her eyes were luminous and soft. "Yes," she said breathlessly, "from here."

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FICTION AND FACT

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VOODOO FANGS

By DAN CUSHMAN

It was more than the fire-juju of the N'cimbo fetish priests that made Yankee Jim Dunn throw away his life-long dream of escaping Luassa kraal.

YANKEE JIM DUNN lay on his back in the hammock, listening to the fly-drone of late afternoon. Through slitted eyelids he could see the bamboo undersides of the veranda roof with here and there an irregular bit of colorless sky.

For a long time it was like that, then a breeze from somewhere rustled the thatch blades along the roof and he could feel the gentle sway of the hammock. He remained still, enjoying the rocking movement to its end, then, using a minimum of effort as a man learns after enough years in the tropics, he swung out one of

his long arms and found the *schnapps* bottle.

It was empty.

He cursed and hurled it at a verandah pillar. The bottle missed and sailed beyond the range of his eyes to the street of the native village below.

"Suka-Hati!" he called.

In time there was a responding shuffle of feet, the crack of ladder rungs, and a plump brown woman came in view over the verandah edge.

"Yes *Luang?*" she asked placidly.

"The bottle. Haven't you learned by this time that white men dislike empty



bottles?" He laughed throatily.

She climbed on over the rail, looked around for the bottle, glimpsed it on the footpath street below.

"Ah-so. Then *kenapa*—why white men make so many empty quick?"

Yankee Jim stayed in the hammock, watching his brown woman move away. After she'd disappeared a smile broke the lines of his face. Good answer for a *perempuan*. Too damned good. She was smart, this Suka-Hati of his. He'd have to take it out of her one of these evenings. No Polynesian woman respects her man unless he kicks in her slats once a month.

She was back in three or four minutes carrying a square, brown bottle of *schnapps*.

Yankee Jim spoke, "How long since that day I got you at Mombasa?"

The bottle was wet from the evaporation cooler. She set it down and dried her hands on her *kain belachu* sarong. For

a quarter-minute she looked far off at the flaming mirage of late afternoon.

Eighteen years. Allah in thy mercy! Eighteen years of the tropics, of huts like this, and heat, and *schnapps* . . . He lay looking up at the woman, remembering her the way she'd been that first day on the wharf over at Hombasa. She'd been fifteen years old—maybe less. Polynesian girls mature early. Young and slim waisted with breasts like a budding Venus not too damned well hidden by her sarong. He'd smiled at her, and she'd smiled back. It had been easy as snapping his fingers. That, and paying over the six pounds sterling demanded by the Chinese who had brought her there on five-year bond to work in his trinket *klong*. Eighteen years, and now she'd grown fat so her sarong fit her like bolt-cloth wrapped around a bale of sisal.

He laughed and sat up, putting bare feet down on the mattings. She watched "The *schnapps* is good, Luang?"



"In the jungle, all *schnapps* is good."

He poured one in a little bronze cup, cut it with boiled water, downed it. Many white men on the Congo grow fat on liquor, quinine and heat, but Yankee Jim was gaunt. The country had dehydrated him. His muscles had turned to sinew, his skin darkened to the hue of okume wood. He moved slowly, but strength and catlike grace still lay in his long body.

"Call Noka."

Suka-Hati struck a gong of Hindu brass that hung from a roof beam. In a moment a Bakete boy came carrying a scrap of dampened cloth. Yankee Jim stretched out his feet and the Bakete boy squatted to bathe them.

"*Bwana*, you have see other *bondele-man*?"

"Where are they camped?"

"Beyond cassava patch." He looked up with eyes gone big and round. "Many guns, *Bwana*. You hear? Guns, like so." He held up ten fingers.

The boy finished by smearing merthiolate around his *bwana's* toenails, then slipped on his rope and canvas shoes. The shoes were wrinkled and laceless.

"*Bwana* will see them?"

"I'll let them come to see me."

SITTING in the hammock he could see the village footpath below. It was the end of the rains, and clouds were still heaped in massive blue-gray billows beyond the Khaya trees that surrounded the clearing. It would be another thirty days before harmattan baked a crust over the camel track from Ghazal and allowed the Arab traders to come with their salt and crude opium balls to barter for poor men's daughters, and longer still before the Hittites came from the east coast to exchange their Calcutta cottons and cheap Spanish machetes for that same opium which would move from the blind harbors of Zanzibar into the trade streams of commerce.

It was seldom white men came at all to this deep hole of the jungle, almost never through the mire of rains. He wondered what this safari could be. For the past three days the message drums had relayed its progress, following it down

from the swamps of N'gamo.

The sun went down in violet-red mist. Village cookfires raised a stench of burning thatch. From a domed mud and palm-mat hut a monkey-skin drum was calling fetish priests to their evening *vo*.

The boy came back carrying a halved papaya. He said, "*Bwana*, if *bondele-man* whip native boy and native boy run away . . ." He stopped, hunting for words to go on.

"What happened tonight? What is it you haven't told me?"

The boy just stood there, eyes big and round.

"I asked what happened!"

"Nothing, *Bwana*!" he backed away, giving the Moslem salute he'd learned from Arab traders. "Nothing. Nothing happen."

He was lying. Yankee Jim watched him slide over the edge of the verandah and drop to the ground. Something beyond the ordinary had taken place during siesta, but it would be futile trying to force information from a native. Time would bring it out. Time—the unlimited commodity of the tropics.

He sat in a native reed chair, twisted a cigarette of black, Inyorka tobacco, lighted it from the hanging candle, inhaled strong smoke to the farthest centimetre of his lungs. His feet were stretched far out. He wore no sox, and his canvas shoes were open; his pants of white Calcutta cotton hung in folds that made his long legs seem bony.

The village awoke to evening activity, native boys driving goats to the stockade where they'd be safe from the big cats, the steady thud-thud of women pounding cassava. In time the drums would start for the nightly dance. Things never changed.

He sat forward and watched as two white men came in sight where the village footpath emerged from khaya and ironwood trees. A big man and a small man, the big one striding in the lead. Back of them were three natives carrying bolt-action rifles.

Naked boys and girls of the village came running and stood with their bellies sticking far out in the Luassa manner to

view the unexpected sight of white men.

The larger of the whites paused to ask a question, and a native boy pointed with his lower lip at Yankee Jim's hut. The big man strode on, his companion and the rifle-carrying private *askaris* strung out behind.

He stopped, seeing Yankee Jim looking down on him.

"*Bonsoir, Monsieur le Americain!*"

He spoke in French, but the guttural twist of the words showed the language was not native to him.

The man stood with his rather short legs set wide, his trunk was thick and powerful, his head short-roached and round. There was something military in his way of speaking, but no man with much military training would have made his entrance with his shirt open at the belly and his pants too low. He had something in his left hand which Yankee Jim now saw an oiled rhino-hide whip. A Luger automatic was strapped around his waist. The other white man was insignificant and spidery with a mouth of decaying teeth.

Jim took his time in answering. "You don't need your rifles in this village."

"I take rifles where it pleases me!" the big man answered in English. His accent was Prussian, or maybe Polish. Sometimes it's hard to tell.

Yankee Jim took a last deep drag from the cigarette and ground it beneath the sole of his shoe.

"What are you doing, visiting me, or marching on me?"

The man thought it over. It seemed to take time for things to register on his brain. He decided to smile.

"I was visiting. Yah. Only the friendly visit."

"Then come on up."

THE LADDER creaked under his weight. The skinny man followed. Below, the hired *askaris* crouched on their heel bones and waited.

There was only the one chair, Yankee Jim's, and he did not bother to rise or send the boy for others. He let them stand and leaned back the same as before, studying the blunt face that looked down on

him with wide, grave eyes.

"I'm Yankee Jim," he said at last.

"Yah. For five hundred kilometers back and forth through this sink-hole jungle we have heard of Yankee Jim. 'At Luassa village you will see white American Yankee Jim,' this they say. 'Yankee Jim who walk even among cannibal and poison-arrow pigmy without fear.' So at last you are here."

"All right, who are you?" Yankee Jim barked.

The tone made blood rise beneath the man's oily tan. He doubled his massive, pink hands, licked his lips. Then he fought down anger and took a deep breath. "Yah. My name. Vorley. Hugo Vorley. Und my friend. Westland."

"Limey Jack they call me." the spidery man said in nasal Cockney, grinning to show his rotting teeth. "Shake, as you bloomin' Yankees say." He thrust out his hand, then let it fall when Yankee Jim ignored it. "I say, you're a difficult bounder, ain't you?" He looked around, pretending to see the *schnapps* bottle for the first time. "Wat 'ave we 'ere? Fire for the furnace?"

"Sure. Have a drink."

"Well now. That's more friendly. So it is. I'll just 'ave one. I must say, sport, you serve good spirits for this far in the bush. Now where would a man be findin' old-time square bottle *schnapps*?"

There was only the one bronze cup. Limey reached for it, and stopped at the expression in Yankee Jim's eyes. Jim struck the brass gong and the Bakete boy came with two more cups. He set them down, poured.

Limey grabbed his and downed the liquor. Vorley just stood solid and massive as before, looking down on the cup. The oiled rhino whip was still rolled up in his left hand.

Yankee Jim spoke, "Your drink, Vorley."

"No. Tonight I am not drinking."

He said it in a certain way. Yankee Jim had been indolent and relaxed, but the tone made him lean forward.

"There's your drink!"

Vorley repeated, raising his voice, "Tonight I am not drinking."

He'd been angry when he entered the clearing. Jim had recognized that by his stride. It had irked him when Jim objected to the armed *askaris*. Now to be left standing while the American sat angered him still more.

Yankee Jim leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrow above okume-brown cheeks. He spoke in a voice soft and dangerous as a leopard's tread.

"This is my village. Men who visit me here drink with me when I ask. Even men who come with their own rifles. Take your drink."

Silence was tight-drawn. From below came the excited chatter of natives gathered to look at the strange, gun-bearing tribesmen.

Limey broke in with his parrot voice, "Lord, man, give *me* the bloomin' *schnapps* and I'll not make an issue of it."

"Shut up!" Vorley muttered.

"I only said——"

"Shut up!" Vorley stood with one hand still gripping the whip, the other on the leg of his dirty pants just below the automatic. He laughed with a single, heavy jerk of his shoulders. "Ach! So why fight about *schnapps*?" He lifted the bronze cup, drank. Some of the liquor remained on his lips, making them look gross and slick. He wiped them off with the back of his hand. A powerful hand, fingers thick as bananas, hairless, pink. "Yah. So now we have drunk *schnapps* together. Friends we should be. White men in this land of black swine—they should stick together, not quarrel about little things."

Yankee Jim's face had assumed its old lines, desiccated by sun and heat, leathery, expressionless. Only his eyes remained alive and quick.

"Why did you come here?"

"We look for run-away boy."

"And you think he's *here*?"

"Somewhere in village. Our *askaris*—they follow. He was one of those killer N'cimbos."

"You beat him, I suppose, and he ran away."

"I give him few lashes, as he deserve. Mitout the whip, how do native know

white men are superior?"

Yankee Jim didn't answer.

"He is here, *Herr* Yankee. This I know. You see, I have men. I will search village if you not give him up to me. Down below I have three *askaris* only, but back at mine camp——"

"You have seven more."

"Your information is goot, *Herr* Yankee!"

"Sure. You came from upriver. Last night you camped at the edge of Mom-bashi swamp. Yesterday you slept in the bottoms of your canoes on the swamp of Ifabwa. There you whipped another boy for stealing an extra handful of mealie-meal. Our drums keep us well posted, *Herr* Vorley. As for your boy, perhaps he is here." He turned and fastened his eyes on the Bakete houseboy who had moved to the extreme corner of the verandah. "Noka! He's here, isn't he?"

Noka shook his head, eyes wide and frightened.

"You're hiding him. Bring him up."

"Yes, *Bwana*. He hid in *piccinin kia*. Me bring."

Vorley chuckled, relaxed a little. He swung the coiled rhino whip against his leg.

"Goot! I thought you would help me. White men we must stick together, yah."

"What did he do that you lashed him?"

"He lied. The swine. He lied and would have caused us all to die. Me—Westland—all of us."

It took Noka a couple or three minutes. The runaway boy stopped with head and shoulders visible above the verandah rail, staring in terror at Vorley.

"No, *Bwana*! *Bwana m'kumbwa*! Be good boy. Me no lie."

CORLEY let the rhino whip unroll. It had a lead-weighted butt that seemed to feel good to his hand. He was breathing more rapidly, his eyes had quickened, his lips were parted showing his small, widely spaced teeth.

The boy slid over the rail. Fright made his legs weak. He half fell, rose, cringed across the verandah, eyes on Vorley.

"Come here!" Vorley roared. "You hear me, swine?" Your *bwana* say come

here!" His voice was like thunder.

The boy stopped. He was like a rabbit, frightened to immobility by a cobra.

He was about seventeen, skinny legged, charcoal black. A N'cimbo though not a particularly fine specimen. He'd taken a fearful beating. His back was a mass of raw flesh. Someone had bathed the wounds, but caked and blackened blood still hung heavy where the lash had cut. His wrists showed where thongs had been. He'd probably been lifted with toes off the ground. A heel print was left on the floor mat. Blood from one of the wounds that was still oozing.

"Turn around," Yankee Jim said.

The boy obeyed.

"That's enough." He was still leaning back, relaxed. He twisted up a cigarette and lighted it from the goat tallow dip. "Vorley, I have to hand it to you. It takes a strong arm to open wounds like that."

"Yah." Vorley was flattered. He flexed his shoulder muscles and gave the rhino whip a deft roll. The tongue of it snapped, making the native boy cringe against the wall. "Und after the whip, the salt. So I save his life. Otherwise the bleeding. You see?—I have the mercy, too." His little eyes came to rest on the *schnapps* bottle. He chuckled, reached for it, poured a slug in the bronze cup, lifted it in his thick, pink fingers. "To this I drink! To white man. Yah. White man, may he always rule jungle."

"Put the drink down," Yankee Jim said.

"What?"

"Put the drink down!"

There was a raw edge on his voice. It jerked Vorley up for a moment. He stood with legs wide, drink still balanced in his thick fingers. With a movement unexpectedly quick Yankee Jim rocked forward, his long arm swung slapping the cup from his fingers. The *schnapps* flew, struck Vorley's beefy face, ran down his cheeks, dripped from his chin.

It took him a second to realize what had happened. He roared and started forward. Yankee Jim leaned back, hands resting indolently on his legs.

There was a gleam of *assagai* metal from the doorway leading inside. A native

guard sprang into view, spear leveled. He seemed about to drive the heavy iron head through Vorley's middle, stopped at the last possible instant. Vorley screamed, sucked in his breath, weaved back. His knees were bent. He almost fell.

"No. No." The words came in a tearing raw whisper from his thick throat. He backpeddled, trying to keep his balance. His heel caught the matting. He went down, catching himself on elbows. The *assagai* man moved forward, keeping the spear point close to his chest. Vorley reached back, got hold of the verandah pillar, rose to his feet.

The guard wasn't going to kill him. He took a great lungful of air.

"Ach! So you have *askari* too."

He wiped the *schnapps* off his face. The whip lay at his feet. He picked it up. Sight of the three *askaris* below helped him.

"Now, *Herr* Yankee, I will go mit my boy."

"The boy stays here."

"You would keep him? This boy signed to me by——"

"Men don't come in this village and argue with me. Not even when they bring three rifles along. Not even with ten rifles. You can make it a hell of a lot easier on yourself by remembering that."

Vorley's face was dark. Massive shoulders seemed ready to split his shirt. His pants, hanging low with his belly over them made his legs seem gorilla short. He spoke with words coming in a hiss across his vocal cords.

"He is my boy. You hear that, Yankee? *My boy!* The boy I got out of chains in *chemin de fer* gang mit mine own moneys. For twelve months he is mine own boy—so say *Commisaire*. And my boy I will take!"

"You're a long way from the *Commisaire* now, or haven't you noticed?"

Vorley breathed deeply, fighting his rage.

"So. You are *boss-bondede* here mit many *assagai* men. I do not argue. I ask you think what is right, what is wrong. As one white man to another. You know what this N'gamo did that I lash him? Listen. He is of N'cimbo tribe. I buy his

freedom, besides pay him good coin of Belgium that he guide us to his country. So what did he do? Lead us into ambush. For this many men not so kind like me would cut off his legs, would tear out his tongue. Yah. But me I use only whip."

"Why were you going to N'cimbo?"

"Why? I have not told you? A kidnapped girl. White girl. The Conway girl. You have heard of Conways, *Herr Yankee*?"

"You're trying to tell me the N'cimbo kidnapped a white girl?" he asked incredulously.

"It is true as I stand here. And mine is expedition to rescue her." He let the words take effect, sensing they would change the complexion of things. He commenced feeling through the pockets of his pants. "You know all white men in this jungle, yah?"

He drew out an envelope damp from sweat and bent the shape of his leg from long carrying. He laid it on the stand. A name had been written in ink, but wear and dampness had almost obliterated it.

"You know him perhaps?"

Yankee Jim read the name. "Mr. James McGraw, esq."

"I'll give it to him."

"I could perhaps see this man——"

"McGraw? He doesn't like strangers. Especially strangers who carry whips and call with their hired *askaris* along."

"Ach, so. I go now, yah?"

"Sure. Go and be damned."

II

YANKEE JIM opened the envelope. A single, folded scrap of paper was inside. Excellent hand-made paper of a type hammered out by the tireless mallets of Hindu craftsmen over in Mozambique. A raised monogram in one corner. "C" in a circle. There was barely enough light to read.

Jim:

I pray this note reaches you. Will you help all you can? For my sake, if that still means anything.

Always,

Selma.

His hand closed quick and hard, wadding the paper. His face looked leaner, bigger boned by the late evening light. He leaned forward to pour from the *schnapps* bottle. He lifted the bronze cup. His fingers were jumpy. The natives were staring at him.

"Go away," he muttered.

A night breeze blew along the village clearing, carrying an odor of burning thatch, the perfume of false jasmine, the pungent-rotting night smells of the jungle. It was the first time he'd noticed in a long time. The smells had become a part of his life.

He recalled his first years in the tropics when he'd gone into the bush as resident geologist with Katanga Consolidated. His life had seemed clear before him then. Five years in the jungle, and after he'd served his time he'd graduate to one of those gleaming, two-story company houses in Elizabethville. For himself and the girl who signed herself "Selma" on this letter. The chief stockholder's daughter.

He'd had his choice. A mansion in Elizabethville or a hut on stilts in the jungle.

That was one thing he hadn't figured. The jungle. Heat, monotony, whiskey. Then one day he'd seen the slim Polynesian girl standing on the wharf at Mombasa. Suka-Hati.

He laughed, a brittle, savage sound. He stood and hurled the bronze cup. It struck the pillar and bounded back.

"Noka!"

The Bakete boy came from the door.

"That boy from Vorley's camp. Get him."

Yankee Jim climbed down the ladder, waited for Noka to come up with the frightened N'cimbo boy. The N'cimbo fell to his knees, grabbed Yankee's trouser leg,

"*Bwana!* He kill. He kill if me go back——"

"I'll be with you."

"I be your boy forever. I be——"

"Come on."

The jungle was purplish with shadow, noisy with the sound of homing parrots flying in flocks of hundreds through the remote branches. For a hundred meters it

was a solid growth of green with the footpath tunnelling through, then it opened on some hummocky clearings where women came to dig yams and cassava.

A couple of cookfires marked the safari's location. There was a sentry, rifle on his arm. Yankee Jim spoke in the Katanga jargon and walked by him. Vorley rose bow legged and massive with light from the cookfire making his skin look like oily copper.

"So. You bring boy!"

"Yes. He's your boy, but no more whip." He raised his voice. "Get that? No more whip!"

"You forget. This is my safari. *Mine!*" He looked at the cowering boy, and his lips twisted in a heavy, satisfied smile. "Why you decide to come, *Herr* Yankee? Why bring back boy?"

Yankee Jim did not seem to hear the question. He asked one himself,

"Who did you say was kidnapped?"

"Conway girl! From mansion at Shalomar. You know Conways of Shalomar?"

"Never heard of them."

"Ach. Your jungle is so deep? You have not heard of cobalt kings. The mines. Katanga."

"Why would the N'cimbos steal a white girl?"

"As hostage. To keep the mining survey crews from their hill country. How would I know what damned black swine do?"

It was possible, of course. That was copper and cobalt country up there, and the N'cimbos were savage and clever.

Yankee said, "You went up there. They drive you back. Now what do you plan?"

"Perhaps mit more *askaris*. You see us—only ten men. And of course Limey and myself to make twelve. These others—black porters. Coward swine! But mit thirty men—forty. Then perhaps they will fear us and give girl back."

"Go in there with five hundred, and those N'cimbos would bush you ali. But if there really is a girl, I suppose I can get her for you."

"Ho!" Vorley rubbed his big hands together. "So, perhaps. Good." He stopped grinning. "You perhaps offer this to get

half reward. Maybe you think you should get paid much of Conway's moneys——"

"I don't want a damned cent."

"We are friends then. Yah. Everything, our quarrel, the *schnapps* in face, forgotten. We will leave, upriver, tomorrow morning."

"We'll leave tonight."

Yankee Jim retraced his steps to the village. A lamp burning hippo grease gave a ruddy glow to his hut. Suka-Hati sat crosslegged on a *batik* mat blowing something that passed for melody from a little, six-pipe *cheng*. She laid the instrument down and waited for him to speak.

"I'm going away. Find my leather boots, my knapsack, my Arab robe."

"Yes, *Luang*."

Rains and harmattan had come twice since Yankee Jim had made long *safari* but now, at this abrupt leaving, the woman did not ask when he would be back, whether he would ever be back. In some ways a man's better off with a brown woman.

He went inside the bedroom, reached beneath the cot, took an automatic pistol from a wrapping of grease-rags. Mauser. A big, forward-heavy gun. One of the old type that would fire itself empty with a single long pull of the trigger if its owner was man enough to hold it down.

He strapped it around his waist, called Noka, sent him for a crew of boat boys.

IT WAS MIDNIGHT when they left, the two long dugout canoes following the sluggish Konolo through bright moonlight with the jungle shores massive and black on both sides.

Boat boys chanted, paddled with monotonous, choppy strokes, and Yankee Jim lay back, lulled by the steady rock of movement. Vorley sat in the stern of the same boat, asleep, snoring with mouth open, the rhino whip still in his hand.

Morning, with the sun turning white hot. Canoes hunted shade against overhanging jungle. The river broadened until current became imperceptible. It was a swamp. Quiet, lily-grown passages in the never-ending twilight of bowering trees with a hundred-odd monkeys chat-

tering, swinging one-armed, peering down with old-man's faces.

The swamp was apparently endless, yet a drum boomed from somewhere, sending a two-toned sound that was picked up in the far distance by another drum.

Yankee Jim lay back, smoking an in-yorka cigarette. He could see Vorley crawling forward around the paddlers.

"The drum. What does it say?"

"How in hell would I know? Ask your black boys."

"They say you understand drum like native. In Kindu village I hear you——"

"Next time you're in Kindu, tell them they're nuts. No white man ever learned the tongue of the talking drums."

They spent siesta in the canoes. By night the swamp was gigantic and grotesque. Dawn broke over rising hills with the Rowenzori Ridge vaguely visible through mists.

It was overland thirty kilometers through spotty forest and sudan where grasses grew higher than a man's head. A low divide, and a footpath descending to the Makura river. The Makura was a hill stream, cool and swift.

Once again there was a message drum. A sudden sound booming on them so hard they could feel its concussion against their chests.

Vorley cursed his porters and hired *askaris* who had plunged to the protection of bramble beside the trail. If he had fear himself, his pride prevented him showing it.

He looked at Yankee Jim, "But you know all native. Even N'cimbo. They will not ambush mit Yankee Jim along?"

"I wouldn't guarantee a damned thing."

"No," he muttered doggedly. "They will not."

The drum stopped. Distantly its rhythm was picked up by another drum. And after a while, the primeval silence.

They went on, nobody speaking. The trail wound through deep bush, crossed a tributary stream. The *capito* boy dropped to one knee with a "Ke-ke!" shout of alarm. He pointed at a footprint slowly filling with muddy water. Someone had been there only minutes before.

"Keep going!" Vorley muttered.

The *capito* boy's eyes were round and frightened. He stood up, head shaking, backing away.

"Keep going!" Vorley roared.

"No."

He had the rhino whip coiled in his hand. It unwound. The *capito* saw it coming at the last instant. He tried to hurl himself to the earth beyond its reach. The lash snaked out and wrapped around his neck. For an instant it held like a lasso. Vorley spread his legs and heaved back, snapping the boy forward. The lash came loose leaving ripped flesh that quickly glistened with blood. The boy lay face down in the mud.

"You see?" bellowed Vorley, turning to the others. "Once more you see what happen to boy who disobey."

The *capito* was momentarily stunned. He pushed himself from the muck. Vorley stepped back, hand balancing the whip. He swung the whip around and over his shoulder, started down. Yankee Jim had stepped close behind him. He seized the whip next to the stock and twisted it from Vorley's hand.

Vorley almost lost balance. He caught himself and spun around. A curse ripped from his throat.

Yankee Jim said, "You'll not whip anyone on this safari."

"So. You think to tell me. Vorley. You think you *boss-bondele* now."

He backed away, hand dropping to the butt of the Luger. The holster flap was snapped shut. It would have taken half a second to free it. Yankee Jim's gun was in an open holster. Vorley did not go for his gun. He let his right arm swing lax.

Limey Jack Westland was at one side, half hidden in shoulder-high fern. He shouted one of the *askaris'* names,

"Houssa!"

Houssa was the headman. Yankee Jim sensed him coming up behind. A tall, high-shouldered native, arms ringed with ten pounds of brass, face grotesque from Katanga tribal welts.

He spun and looked into the muzzle of a bolt-action rifle.

The pin was back, Houssa's smoky brown finger was bent around the trigger. Two or three seconds passed . . .

CORLEY'S VOICE. He laughed. "So. Now I am not on your verandah, *Herr* Yankee. Now you are on mine verandah as one might say, yah. Now, here, it is I, Vorley, who call music. But I am better host. I do not throw liquor in face. It is as I say, the rule I live by, white men must stick together." He breathed hard, letting breath out beneath flattened nostrils. "You see? Vorley repay evil mit good."

"Your being scared of the N'cimbo's wouldn't have anything to do with it!"

"Vorley is no coward. In jungle the white man is few, the black swine many. We must stick together or all die. Put down gun, Houssa."

They went on, Yankee Jim taking the lead, Vorley at the rear where he could watch and prevent the flight of his natives. The river was swifter now, filled with swirl and foam. Mist hung in the air. Mist rising from a cataract. The roar of it became louder.

The river fell in four steps from one sandstone ledge to another. For half a kilo the path clung to the rocky river marge, then it narrowed and zig-zagged to the top. It was wide enough for a single line of men.

Here, despite Vorley's whip, fear of the N'cimbo's prevented the natives going on.

"Leave them!" Yankee Jim said. "And you can stay too. If I need help, I'll come back after you."

"So. You would like to go on mitout us."

"Come or stay. I don't give a damn."

He started up the spray-wet trail with Vorley, the cockney, and three of the *askaris* following.

It was a long climb through the heat of late morning. He paused at the crest. Vorley was still a hundred steps behind. At the base of the cascade, eyes shaded against the sun, he could see N'Gamo, the boy Vorley had half killed with his whip back in Luassa.

Yankee Jim paused to breathe. His legs ached, pulse hammered. He'd had too many years of hammock, *schnapps*, and strong Inyorka tobacco.

He looked around at the country. Low mountains with knobs of granite breaking

sedimentary strata. A mineral country to his geologist's eyes. He'd never prospected it, but Vorley's words about cobalt and copper sounded plausible. More plausible by a hell of a lot than his story of a white girl being kidnapped and held hostage by these N'cimbo's who would scarcely range as far into white man's domain as Shalomar a hundred kilometers to the south and east.

In half a minute Vorley puffed up the trail and stood beside him with perspiration running wet streaks down his cheeks.

"And now?" he grunted.

Jim swung a long arm indicating the higher hills. "The village is over there. Kamkamba. If the N'cimbo's are holding a girl hostage, she'd more likely be there than anywhere."

"And you would go inside village? You would dare do that?"

"I've never been very careful with my neck. Maybe that's why I still have it. Things work out that way sometimes."

"And maybe too chief is friend of yours?"

Yankee Jim started on without bothering to answer.

III

THE TRAIL was still steep and narrow, cut from rock as it circled the hillside. It widened unexpectedly, and there was a small clearing. The air fluttered and an arrow dug dirt from the path ahead.

Vorley leaped back, cursing, hand coming up with the Luger.

"Put it away," Yankee Jim said.

"You think I should maybe——"

"Put it away or the next arrow will be through your guts."

"Yah"

Vorley rammed the gun back in its holster. There was still no one in sight. Just the sunlit open space covered by knee-high orchilla, the green surrounding wall of thorn. No leaf trembling.

Yankee Jim took his time. He was like a man who'd stumbled into a cobra's nest and realized the danger of any abrupt movement. He turned, stretched his arms to indicate they were far from his gun,

and lifted fingers in a tribal sign. Fifteen or twenty seconds passed. The heat and fly-drone of late morning seemed to press in on them, seeming to accentuate the stillness. Then there was movement, a tremble of orchilla leaves.

A man stood up only a dozen paces away. A skinny old native with a tribal-scarred neck and heavy earrings of copper. He was holding a short-bow and a notched arrow.

A second native got up to the right, a third to the left. Then they rose from every side. Eight of them in all.

The skinny native, their headman, came forward, tapping a bit of white cowrie shell in his necklace to signify friendship.

"*Bwana Yankee!*" he said.

Yankee Jim answered in the N'cimbo dialect, asking for Na-Pemo, king of the village.

Na-Pemo would be there. The drums had told him of *Bwana Yankee's* approach. The headman made this known by a combination of Congo jargon and sign language, choosing to show off his knowledge of this rather than use the dialect of his own people which Jim understood well enough. However, the other *bondeles* and their *askaris* must stay behind. They would be safe below the waterfall.

"What does he say?" Vorley's eyes were small and suspicious in the midst of his vast face. "What does black savage say about chief Na-Pemo?"

"The chief will welcome me—alone."

"And me? I should stay here like coward?"

"You'll have to wait below the waterfalls."

Vorley planted himself on his short, bowed legs, hands on hips, the whip, as always, coiled in his hand. He laughed. A sound from deep in his throat. The *askaris* watched him, rifles still in their hands. Limey Jack had cowered back as close to the thorn as he dared with the N'cimbo warriors watching.

"*Ach* so. I am to wait here while you bring girl out alone. And when, pray *Gott*, will it be I see you again? I should meet you maybe in Elizabethville?"

"All right, don't trust me. But what choice do you have?"

"*This choice!*"

He'd backed a step, getting himself in the clear. His wrist moved, uncoiling the whip. It swung quick as the dart of a mamba-snake.

The lash wound itself around the headman's neck.

The native started to scream. The lash choked it off. He dropped the bow and arrow, reached up to claw with his fingers. Vorley swung back with strength that jerked the small man from his feet. He let go the whip at the same instant, caught the native and drew him close with forearm locked beneath his chin, held him close, using his writhing body for protection.

His right hand came up, weighted with the Luger. It hammered in a machine-gun series of concussions.

The whole thing took place with instantaneous rapidity. The whip, the flying body of the native, the closely spaced explosions. Three of the N'cimbo guards were down from flying bullet lead. *Askaris* dived for cover, rifles blasting in a volley that blended with the Luger.

Yankee Jim turned on Vorley, jerking the Mauser from its holster. His brain seemed to explode. There were blank seconds, and he came to himself with earth and trampled orchilla weeds beneath him, vaguely realizing that Limey had slugged him from behind.

He got to hands and knees. One gun was still hammering. Air filled with the sharp odor of cordite. He saw Houssa, the head *askari*, striding across the clearing, rifle leveled breast high. Houssa stopped, hesitated, the rifle jumped in his hands. One of the wounded natives had evidently been crawling off in cover of weeds.

Vorley laughed. He was standing with the skinny headman still held close, the Luger leveled with its barrel across his naked side.

"So. That is all. All but one."

Vorley suddenly released the headman. The fellow staggered away. Vorley booted him with the flat of his foot, sending him sprawling face down. He rolled over and stared at the leveled Luger.

Yankee Jim reeled to his feet, "*Vorley!*"

THE GUN POUNDED, making a flat, dead sound on the late morning heat. The native had been trying to get up. The bullet struck and drove him back. It passed all the way through his bony frame and raised dust from the pathway beyond his left shoulder. It must have missed his heart for he threshed for a dozen seconds before the shudder of death passed through him.

"Ho!" Vorley chortled. "Like chicken mitout head."

Yankee Jim was on his feet. Pain from the blow he'd received seemed to be splitting his brain down the center. His hand felt for the Mauser. It was gone. He looked for it on the ground.

"Right 'ere, sport," Limey Jack said, slapping his belt where the Mauser was thrust. In his hand was a heavy Webley revolver. "Just stop where you are."

Vorley walked over to nudge a couple of the fallen natives with his toe. He grunted satisfaction, put away the Luger, turned to face Yankee Jim.

"So. You thought me the fool. You thought to leave me behind while you went to village and got girl, and took her in alone to collect reward moneys. Maybe you thought to keep girl, too. For yourself. When you see how young she is, how white and soft. But you see Vorley is not so big the fool."

Yankee Jim let a laugh jerk from his throat. He flipped one hand to indicate the dead natives sprawled in orchilla weed.

"How do you expect to stay alive in this country after word of your slaughter gets to Kamkamba?"

"But I will get to Kamkamba *first*. I will have the girl and be far away before they know. And you will help me do it, *Herr Yankee*."

"You'd have the guts to enter Kamkamba *now*?"

"They will not kill me while you are along. I know that when I see how they love you, these native swine."

"What would keep me from telling what you'd done?"

"Ho! They would kill me. But they would kill you, too, for bringing me. And perhaps the girl. Did I not say Vorley was smart man?"

Vorley picked up the rhino whip, drew it beneath one sweaty armpit to wipe away the dirt and leaf fragments that clung to its oiled surface. He tested its balance, let the lash roll out and pop like a small-calibre gunshot.

He jerked his head in command. "Take him!"

The askaris came up, one on each side of Yankee Jim. One of them grabbed an arm. Jim jerked himself free.

"Easy sport." The cockney stepped closer, thumb rocking the hammer of the Webley revolver. "I'd mind the *boss-bon-dele*, now I would. It'll be easier for you, I'm tellin' you that as one English-speakin' white man to another. Just lift your 'ands before I 'ave to bend this barrel over your cronk again."

Yankee Jim lifted his arms. It would be useless trying to fight them all. He'd best take it. Vorley wouldn't dare kill him. Not yet. There was a grim smile on his lips. He'd spent half his life in the tropics and had never felt a whiplash. Every man should be lashed at least once in order to make his jungle experience complete.

"You see something funny, *Herr Yankee*?"

"Go ahead. Get it over with."

"Yah. So I will. I will let you now see what happen to man who throw chnapps in face."

He swung the whip. It seemed to be an easy movement, using only a part of his strength. In that it was deceptive. The lash gathered speed to its moment of impact and struck with the pain of a white-hot wire, ripping the white cotton coat and shirt that covered Yankee Jim's shoulders.

Vorley took his time and swung again. Again. The exertion had increased his breathing. He gave a little, satisfied grunt with each swing of his body, and wheezed a few times afterward.

Yankee Jim took the blows, making no sound. His teeth were set, his arms were wide with one of the askaris holding each of them. Perspiration sprang to his forehead and ran down his lean leathery cheeks. His coat and shirt had been chewed to strips by the lash, streaked with blood.

"So." Vorley stopped and breathed heavily a while. "So much for one debt. So much for throwing *schnapps* in face. Now for trying to cheat me of reward moneys, I will give you perhaps six more."

Yankee Jim was dizzy from pain. Each time the lash seemed to take something out of him. It made his knees that much nearer to collapsing, the scream of pain that much closer to coming from his throat.

The whip came down again, again. Vorley moved back, using his forearm to wipe sweat from his face.

"You still like mine whip? You should see back, *Herr* Yankee. You should see how stripes run down from shoulder-blades and meet over spine. Sometimes, perhaps, when Vorley has more time he would make you cry 'Mercy, *Herr* Vorley. Enough.' Like so."

"I'd see you in hell first."

"So you say. So many men say. But it is different when flesh comes loose from bone." He coiled the whip and rolled his sleeve back down. "But I must congratulate you. You take twelve stripes and make no sound. Mit native near, that is goot. White man must prove himself superior."

Strength had returned quickly to Yankee Jim's lean-hard body.

"You're quite a fellow, Vorley."

He might have been at home, sitting in the shade of his own verandah from all one could tell by his voice.

"Yah. I am not fellow to throw *schnapps* in face."

Flies were there in swarms, called by the warm smell of blood. Yankee Jim stripped off his shirt and reversed it in order to cover the deep whip gashes. It was the best he could do for the moment. Later, with good fortune, he'd be able to get palm oil and a soft pad of bark cloth at the village.

"Now to village?" Vorley asked.

"Yes. It's ten kilometers. We'll have to travel through siesta to get there before they find out about this." He motioned at the fallen natives.

Fear narrowed Vorley's eyes, "You think——"

"There have been no drums."

He exhaled, reassured but still suspicious. It was true that Vorley was no fool. He was wary. The lashing had helped his pride, but he still hated Yankee Jim, and feared him. He would let Jim live only as long as his help was a necessity. That meant only until he could get the girl to the edge of N'cimbo country beyond the cascades.

THE RISING HEAT of afternoon made travel difficult. They moved slowly, keeping to the shade of thorn and spottily growing hardwoods. Jim had been over the trail before. He'd expected the sentries above the cascades. There would be no others short of the village clearing.

They walked through huge African teak shading a saucer shaped basin. The timber ended, and they paused at the edge of a clearing. A kilometer distant, and slightly below, lay a village built more after the style of a Zulu kraal than the single-street Bantu village prevalent in the Congo.

The huts were round structures of hardwood, bamboo and palm thatch. A stockade of pointed pickets surrounded the village. There were little irregular plots of millet and yams.

Heat waves of late afternoon gave things a shimmering quality that prevented them telling whether the open gate was guarded.

Vorley looked obstinate and suspicious as he stood, hunched forward, looking at the village with narrowed eyes.

Yankee Jim said, "There's no point in waiting." His lips peeled back in a grin. "Or have your guts turned yellow?"

"Vorley no coward."

"I've heard you say that before. What if they won't give up the girl?"

Vorley slapped the Luger.

Yankee Jim laughed. "There are a hundred *assagai*-men in that village. They'd let you shoot that thing dry and then run you through like pork on a spit. Just who is the girl you're after?"

"I told you. The Conway girl. Beyond that, I do not know. The Conways are great people in big house. They do not invite me to tiffin, *Herr* Yankee. Only to

save lives am I good enough."

Yankee Jim knew there was no use trying to get anything out of him. If there was a girl, he'd find out once in the village.

The footpath followed a rude dike used for holding irrigation water, then it cut through some feathery-topped papayas and crossed a hundred meters of grassless earth to the stockade gate.

The village slept in late-siesta sun. For a moment it seemed that no one even noticed their approach. But a drum started muttering. A message drum constructed of hollowed tree trunk being beaten with padded sticks and not intended to be heard much beyond the village clearing.

Yankee Jim stopped just inside the open stockade gate. A warrior with ocre and white clay freshly smeared on face and chest met him. A big fellow, unusually well formed for a N'cimbo who were inclined to be stringy-tough.

He lifted his *assagai* keeping it point down in a signal of peace.

"Bwana Yankee. You come, as talking drum say."

Yankee Jim slapped the holster at his waist to indicate it no longer contained a pistol. It was customary to leave one's weapons behind on visiting most of these hill-country villages.

The *assagai*-man turned to block Vorley's way.

"Only Bwana-Yankee."

"Me—*baminga*." Vorley pointed at his heart, at heaven, and gave the sign of peace.

The *assagai*-man stared at Vorley's Luger. Reluctantly Vorley unbuckled the holster belt and let it fall to the red-baked earth of the path.

"Baminga," muttered Yankee Jim.

The *assagai*-man stood at one side, letting Vorley go by. Limey Jack and the *askaris* were still outside.

"Unstrap your gun," Vorley said.

"I'm all right out 'ere," Limey chattered. "Me, I'll stay with the niggers and—"

"Unstrap your gun, coward swine!"

Limey Jack did so. His skinny fingers shook as he fumbled with the buckle. He

tried to grin, but succeeded only in looking like a mummy whose lips had shrunk away from his teeth.

They walked across the central square, the three white men with an ever-growing crowd of natives around them.

A *girot* was squatting on his heels, beating a message drum with two mallets, keeping track of their progress, relaying word of it to the chief's hut where old Na-Pemo would be waiting in state befitting a call from Yankee Jim. Beyond the *girot* was the inevitable mud-plastered fetish hut. A little forest of pointed stakes had grown up around the hut's doorway, each stake with a white skull set atop it in memory of an individual act of cannibalism. To many tribes of the deeper Congo it is not sufficient that an enemy be slain, but his flesh must be consumed as a final symbol of conquest.

"Hungry?" Yankee Jim asked over his shoulder.

Vorley spat. "You have poor sense of humor, Herr Yankee."

As Jim walked his back burned as though he'd been branded by a red iron. Sometimes perspiration would work down between his shoulders and the itch of it was like added fire. For the last five kilometers every movement had been torture, but there was no indication of that on his lean face.

Na-Pemo's hut was a big one with three centerpoles, its form remindful of a show tent back in America. The entrance was low, covered by a robe of antelope skin. Jim lifted it and went inside with Vorley and Limey Jack staying close behind.

IV

INSIDE, it was windowless and hot. After a few seconds things became visible. Na-Pemo was seated on a mound of palm mats and bark cloth, crosslegged, elbows supported by rests of polished horn. He was naked to the waist, his loins and legs were covered by a piece of red and blue *batik*. Each arm carried fifteen or twenty pounds of copper bracelet, and for that reason the arm rests were necessary. Crudely fashioned chains were strung around his neck, half covering his chest;

the lobes of his ears were pulled down like ribbons by the weight of copper earrings. He was fifty or fifty-five, as closely as anyone could guess the age of a hill-country native, and his skin had the charcoal duskiness of all his tribe.

"Yankee—*nibo*," he said, calling Jim "king" and thus placing them on an equal social level. He accepted the presence of Vorley and Limey Jack without question, as though they were Yankee Jim's servants.

Yankee Jim stepped atop the mound of palm mats. His hand came from his pocket holding a folded machete. He laid it on one of Na-Pemos knees. Na-Pemo acknowledged the gift with a smile that showed his teeth, the two front ones gone, hammered out as a charm against sorcery, the others turned red-black from betel nut chewing.

Na-Pemo slapped one hand on his batik robe and a naked slave woman shuffled from one of the hut's dim recesses carrying an earthen jug of millet beer on her shoulder. She squatted, poured a portion in each of two huge copper cups. The cups were so heavy a man needed both hands when drinking.

"You honor my village," Na-Pemo said.

"I have come looking for the *bondele*-girl."

No change on the chief's expression. No indication whether a white girl was really held prisoner. There was a possibility, of course, that she was being held in some other village. These N'cimbo controlled a wedge of unexplored country running to the misty summits of the Row-enzori Ridge.

The beer was sour with a raw tinge of fermentation still in it. A gallon of it would lack the alcoholic content of a single two-finger slug of *schnapps*.

After the beer, other slave women appeared, first with fruits—bananas, papayas, and little scarlet mangoes intensely sweet and no larger than plums. Next came a course of brittle-baked millet cakes, yams in honey, a sort of dry-shredded breadfruit.

The men ate. Vorley had been left standing for half an hour. His face kept looking darker and more massive as anger grew on him. He muttered something and

started forward.

"Sit down!" Yankee Jim growled at him.

Vorley hesitated. Jim went on, speaking English which the chief did not understand,

"Don't make any mistakes. Anybody coming inside a N'cimbo village is hanging over a cliff by his teeth."

"But if they find men back by waterfall——"

"You should have thought of that before you cut loose with the Luger. Now we'll have to play it out. If this fellow knows about the girl he'll tell it at his own damned leisure. If you try to force things, *you'll* be a lot more likely to end up with an *assagai* in your guts than me."

Vorley moved back and sank slowly to a heap of palm mats by the wall. His hand moved along the belt where his Luger had been. It bothered him to be without it. The whip was still coiled in his left hand, however, and there was satisfaction in that. He gripped it hard, watched Yankee Jim and the native as they ate through one dish after another.

The sun was low. It found little holes in the bamboo walls, sending through narrow strips of light. The village was awake, filled with the usual evening sounds, the same sounds Jim might be listening to if he were back on his verandah in Loussa. Sounds of cooking, of women, of stones pounding millet.

The slave woman came with a cockrel roasted N'cimbo style without its entrails removed.

Twilight now, and almost dark inside the hut. A crippled little black hobbled in carrying a grease lamp. Its light was lost in the vastness of the big hut.

Vorley had fought off impatience as long as he could.

"Yankee-swine! You think we have forever. You think——"

"Keep your tongue still."

The exchange seemed to remind Na-Pemo of the question Yankee Jim had long before put to him. He dried chicken fat from his fingers on a wisp of thatch and said,

"You want *bondele*-woman?"

She was alive then. None of the relief

Yankee Jim felt was reflected on his face. It was as thin and hard-lined as ever.

"Yes. I want *bondele*-woman."

"You—my *baminga*. You owner of my life." No-Pemo was referring to the fact that Yankee Jim had saved his younger brother's life in an ambush laid by the Nebos five years before, and for that reason he could refuse nothing.

Na-Pemo called an *assagai*-man, rattled off a command, and sent him away. They waited while darkness came more deeply, giving an added brightness to the lamp.

Na-Pemo made no explanation. He didn't tell how the girl had been taken or why. The talking drums had kept Na-Pemo aware of Yankee Jim's approach, he must have guessed the reason for his *safari* and had already decided to give her up.

THE *ASSAGAI*-MAN came back. Someone was with him. A girl. She looked small and frightened, head and shoulders draped with a batik-cloth robe. Her back was toward Yankee Jim. Vorley had started to rise from his place against the wall. He was staring up at her, crouched forward, one hand touching the floor. She saw him and started back, a scream forming in her throat.

She retreated, spun around to look at the chief. She would have gone to the native for protection from Vorley. For the first time Yankee Jim saw her face.

He sprang to his feet. "Selma!"

It was impossible. A girl couldn't look exactly the same after almost twenty years. Twenty years in the tropics is often the difference between youth and age. He remembered how Selma had looked the first time he'd seen her at that costume ball on the terrace of the Rand Club down in Lourenco Marques. She was no older, there was the same glossy hair with a tinge of red in it, the same hazel eyes, the small nose and short upper lip, the same lovely curves of her small, slim body.

"Selma," he repeated.

She didn't recognize him. He realized he was being a fool. This girl was not Selma. This was the Conway girl. He'd

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never known the name of the man Selma had married. He'd only known that it was all over between them after he'd taken up with the Polynesian girl over in Mombasa. This must be Selma's daughter. This was the girl she'd asked him to help in the brief note Vorley had delivered to the verandah in Luassa.

"You won't be harmed," Yankee Jim said, sinking back to his old place beside Na-Pemo.

"Don't let them take me!"

She was referring to Vorley and Limey Jack. Vorley had paused a couple of steps away. He was looking at her, eyes alive and greedy above his flat cheeks, his lips slightly parted showing his small, stained teeth.

Yankee Jim said, "Don't be afraid of him."

"Herr Yankee-swine! You think now you have Vorley helpless? That you will take woman and leave Vorley mit head on stake by voodoo house? You think this?"

Vorley was only a step away. The girl kept moving away from him. The *assagai*-man, thinking she might escape, seized her arms from behind.

The expression on Vorley's face alarmed Chief Na-Pemo. He got to his feet, copper bracelets clattering. He started to say something.

The whip had been coiled in Vorley's hand. He swung it. It wrapped itself around the chief's neck.

Vorley swung back with all the massive strength of his body. Na-Pemo was a thin man, no longer young. His bones were brittle. The sharp crack of a vertebrae could be heard through the hut.

He struck the floor face down, bounded, skidded limp to Vorley's feet. Vorley knew the jerk had snapped his neck like the drop from a gallows. He let the whip go loose, its lash unwind.

It had all happened with instantaneous quickness. While Yankee Jim was rising to his feet. The *assagai*-man let go the girl and reached for his copper-headed spear, swung around. Vorley had anticipated the move. He'd switched hands with the whip, swung it by the lash, its lead-weighted butt slamming the guard's skull and driving him like dead weight to

the ground.

Yankee Jim sprang from the heap of matting and bark cloth, and was on Vorley's shoulders.

Vorley had glimpsed him at the last moment. He was quick, superbly powerful. With a twisting movement and a snap of his shoulders he dumped Yankee Jim to the earth.

The whip came around, aimed for the head, but Jim rolled and took only a glancing blow.

He reeled to his feet.

Vorley was backing away, eyes darting to the black-shadowed depths of the hut, to the skin-draped front entrance. For the moment no alarm. For the moment safety. Voodoo drums just starting to beat, getting mood for the evening dance.

He glanced around for the girl. She was backing away. She didn't see Limey Jack. Limey seized her, drew her arms behind her. She fought, started to scream. He dropped one arm, clamped a hand across her mouth, muffling the sound.

Yankee Jim was advancing, trying to watch both men. Vorley backed away, whip still held by the lash, the butt swinging back and forth.

"No. Yankee-swine!—you hear me? Stay away. You fight, and they will come. They will capture us all here mit chief dead. Then will we all die. Me, you, Limey Jack. All our skulls boiled mitout flesh and stuck on pointed stakes by voodoo hut. Girl's skull too. All white in jungle sun on pointed sticks for thousand years."

The *assagai* had fallen to the ground. Vorley picked it up. The girl was struggling, eyes protruding, face turning dark, fingers clawing at the cockney's hand.

YANKEE JIM STOPPED. It was true he didn't dare fight with Vorley. The alarm would go up, and they'd be found with the murdered chief. Afterward death by torture, their skulls on pointed sticks as Vorley had said.

Jim hissed at the girl, "Stop fighting. You hear me? Stop fighting!"

She obeyed him.

"It's the only way. You'll stand a chance of getting away after dark if there isn't an alarm. I'll stay here until you're

safe beyond the stockade."

"Ho!" A chuckle sounded in Vorley's thick throat. "So a hero. Yah. You will stay and we will go. Now it is Vorley who have girl to himself. Not as you plan back by waterfall. It will be Vorley who collect moneys for reward—if so I choose."

"Damn you, get going! But I'll be along. On your trail. And no harm had better come to the girl."

Vorley didn't like the sound of the words. He backed toward shadow, whip in one hand, assagai in the other, the corners of his heavy mouth twisted down. With an unexpected movement he pivoted and flung the assagai. Its copper head flashed in candleflame and fanned air close to Yankee Jim's cheek. There was a dry, breaking sound as it drove through the bamboo wall. Alarmed voices rose in a chorus from the village street outside.

Yankee Jim cursed him. He strode to the entrance—reached it just in time. A young warrior rammed him.

Jim moved on, dropping the drape, apparently not noticing the warrior's leveled assagai.

"Ay-obwa!" Jim said. "Nothing wrong."

The warrior still wanted to push past.

"Baminga!" Jim grinned, touching the white friendship bead midway on the native's multi-colored necklace.

It was an easy voice—a familiar word. They combined to reassure the strong young fellow. He gave ground, lowering the point of his assagai a few degrees.

Only a slight evening glow remained in the sky. Darkness would be dense along the stockade, and this diversion would help. Other natives were gathering around. An old man hobbled up carrying the assagai that had passed through the wall. A fire burning by the fetish hut cast light that brightened and dimmed, gleaming from oiled bodies and copper ornaments. The thicket of skulls on pointed posts looked yellow-white.

The old man shook the assagai and chattered half-intelligibly in the N'cimbo tongue, pointing toward the wall through which it had emerged.

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"*Ay-obwa!*" Yankee Jim repeated.

He felt in his pockets. Generally he had a few trinkets for gifts, but this time all he could find were five Mauser shells. He passed them around. "*Ay-obwa,*" he kept repeating.

A big guardsman came pushing through, moving men aside with the shaft of his *assagai*. He was the same guardsman who had met them at the outer gate that afternoon. He was peering at Yankee Jim, eyes narrow and suspicious.

Jim faced him. "*Baminga!*"

"*Baminga!*" the guard repeated, but after hesitating to touch the friendship bead on his neck, he walked on toward the door, *assagai* pointed hip high.

The game was about up. Yankee Jim tried to estimate the amount of time that had passed. A minute, maybe. It was long enough. Only eighty or a hundred paces separated the rear of the hut from the stockade. Vorley would have the girl over by now, he'd be in the shadow of those papaya trees. Now it was time for Yankee Jim to think about saving his own hide. He'd have to get out alive for the girl's sake. Besides, there were still half a hundred litres of that old-time square-bottle *schnapps* in Luassa, and he had a desire to drink it before surrendering to heat and jungle fever.

The guardsman was going to force his way by. Jim would have to go in with him. They'd be alone for a few seconds. It would be his best, his only chance.

He moved aside to let the guardsman pass.

From inside rose the scream of a slave woman.

Jim spun, started inside the hut. The guardsman seemed to anticipate the move. He turned with the spear, aiming the flat side of it at Yankee Jim's head.

A glancing blow. Jim was still on his feet, but the ground seemed to be slanting under him. He tried to reach the door. Instead he rammed the bamboo wall.

Men were on every side. He battered them off. He was trying to get up. The door nowhere around. No safety inside anyway.

Men were dragging him. He still fought. The torture of Vorley's whip had

weakened him. He was tired. He stopped, rested on one knee while natives held both arms.

Sounds came to his ears. They were wailing inside. Slave women. They'd be slashing their veins and rolling across the floor mattings to show anguish for their master. More voices. Slave women's wailing drowned out. A high-pitched *ke-ke-ke* of voodoo death chant asserted itself.

V

FATIGUE rendered Yankee Jim half conscious. When realization came, he was lying on his back, arms stretched wide, wrists bound to piece of timber not unlike a crucifix.

Drums were beating—tom-toms of a dozen sizes all throbbing the rhythm of the black dance.

He twisted from side to side. Thick, oil-tanned thongs had been wrapped around and around his wrists. No chance of breaking free.

He lay on his back, eyes closed, feeling the drums—the jolt of their vibration across the earth. By minute degrees the tempo was mounting. Rising and falling with the drums came the wild, vengeful chant of natives.

He knew what would happen next. The tempo would suddenly change, and they would come over for him, lift the crucifix to which he was tied, and carry it to the fire and stand it there. They would dance more wildly then with each warrior finding bits of thatch to throw at his feet until the heap had grown waist high. It might take till midnight, till next morning, or noon. Finally, when they were ready, fetish priests in black masks would come from the voodoo hut and poke a burning stick into the heap. The stick would burn closer and closer, and that would be the real torture—watching, dreading the flame. At last, after an eternity, a shaving or thatch blade would catch and spread around him. After that the end would be quick.

He opened his eyes. Two guardsmen stood nearby. Both carried *assagais*, both watched the dance with hypnotized eyes.

He twisted at the bonds, harder than

before. He made a quick movement and one of the guards glanced around. He turned, bent over, looked to see that the knots were still tight.

Yankee Jim smiled back grimly. He let himself relax.

The tropic stars were bright and close now that the rains were gone and harmattan had not brought its yellow haze of dust from the far Saharah. He was lying by the wall of Na-Pemo's big hut. Its overhanging thatch eave made a ragged cut across the night sky.

The drums beat on—deep boom of rhino hide, the middle range of antelope, the staccato of monkey skin. The sound seemed to rise and fall, numbing the senses.

He lay still. A man could be hypnotized, even killed by the booming of drums. It seemed hours since he'd struggled with the thongs. He tried again. Feeling had left his hands. He rocked from one shoulder to the other, and the movement brought pain once more to life on his whip-cut back.

"Bwana M'kumbwa!"

The voice was close to him. He rolled his head, trying to see. Assagai-guards still there. No one else. He started to answer, paused, licked his lips. The voice had been familiar. A second and he remembered. N'gamo. That's who it was—N'gamo, the boy whom Vorley had beaten half to death in Luassa village. He'd left him behind at the waterfall. The boy had followed. This was his home village—Kamkamba. It had been easy for him. He'd said back in Luassa village that he would be Yankee Jim's boy forever, but often such native promises didn't mean much.

"You be still, Bwana M'kumbwa!"

Yankee Jim's lips pulled away from his teeth in something like a grin.

The wall trembled a little. He knew then where the boy was. He's entered the hut, found the spot exactly above Yankee Jim's head, and was pulling the bamboo slats apart.

An arm appeared. Light from the fire gleamed along a machete blade. It was a long reach. Yankee Jim could feel the

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sharp steel as it slid between his wrist and the plank to which it was bound. A sharp twist, and the machete's keen edge bit through thong.

There was scarcely a sensation of being free. He'd been bound too tightly—for too long. He drew his hand an inch or so, opened and closed his fingers, he didn't risk any more.

The other hand was too far. He could hear N'gamo making a new opening. It was hard lying still, now that escape was so close. The *assagai*-guards were only a couple of steps away, back partly turned, bodies oiled and gleaming by firelight.

The machete again. This time it took a moment of sawing to sever the final wrappings.

Yankee Jim was free. The arm moved out of sight, leaving machete stabbed in earth. He forced himself to lie still for a few seconds yet. He'd have to give the boy his chance to get away.

He drew one arm in, then the other. Slowly. The guards did not see. Sitting up was another series of slow movements. No movement abrupt. The machete was in his hand.

He located the door to the hut. It was around a curve in the wall.

He stood. One of the guards looked. Not startled. It took him a fraction of time to realize the man was his *bondele* prisoner.

The guard uttered a sharp cry, lifted his *assagai*, let drive.

Jim was too close. He batted the shaft to one side. It smashed through one of the main supports of the wall. The guard tried to retrieve, but it stuck fast.

Yankee Jim hurtled the shaft. He ran, taking long strides. Spears and arrows whisked past. He stayed close to the wall and shadow hid him. He saw the rear door to the hut, ducked inside. Dark. He still ran, trusting his memory.

No one near the front door. He stood still as natives ran past. He left the hut, walking. A running man would be noticed. Sixty or seventy meters to the stockade. Drums still beating and hypnotized natives still danced around the fire. He wedged a foot between two stockade posts, swung over the sharpened tops, dropped to

the ground outside.

There was a stretch of open ground bright with moonlight, then the blessed darkness of jungle night.

YANKEE JIM had been traveling at an easy, swinging stride that covered kilometer after kilometer of jungle foot-path. He stopped among high lagoon trees.

In the distance, drums were beating. Tom-toms in the village. They would beat on for days, even weeks, in mourning for Na-Pemo. There was another sound. The two-toned voice of a message drum.

He'd told Vorley only a half truth in saying no white man ever learned the tongue of the drums. After twenty years, in the deep Congo a man gets to be more native than white. He gets so hearing the drums makes pictures in his mind. It is not a code that the drummer sends—none of your white man's dots and dashes. It is infinitely more subtle. His deft manipulations of high and low tones become blended into something that actually approximates the speech of man.

Tonight the drums had a particular significance for Yankee Jim, because they were speaking his name, and the name of "*Noka Bondele*"—that would be Vorley.

Jim went on through moonlight, through forest shadow, past dead warriors lying in orchilla weeds, down the spray-wet steps of the waterfall.

A drum now from downriver. That would be sending messages back to Kamkamba. Varley and the girl. They had gone that way. The drum said more that Yankee Jim could not catch.

Vorley would be heading overland where canoes waited at the swamp of Ifabwa. No tracing him once he reached the swamp—not through that limitless morass.

Thirty kilometers. There was a chance Varley could make it before the heat of afternoon forced a pause. Of course the girl would complicate things. That gave Jim a chance.

He turned south across rising grassland. Another two hours of travel. The drums again. This time from a new direction.

The big *bondele* had turned west. M'bini. That would be the ancient footpath from 'Fumbrio Pass to M'bini village.

He found the place where the footpath forked west marked by a dark line through head-deep savannah grass before it plunged into black jungle.

Travel had long ago deadened Yankee Jim's muscles. He kept traveling automatically. Fatigue had settled like opiate through him.

The path was utterly black with no ray of starlight finding its way through the hundred-foot sponge of leaf and vine. Instinct, the echo of his own movements, these things guided him along its bending course.

A root. He fell. Once on the ground he realized how tired he was. He sat up, fumbled through his pockets, found tobacco pouch, papers, a chemi-dry box of matches.

Fine leaf had accumulated in the bottom of the pouch. It was mostly *bangh* which natives blend with tobacco to put an extra punch in the already strong *In-yorka*. He twisted up a cigarette, lighted it, inhaled in deep drags.

Yankee Jim had known the day when he could travel from night till morning, then eat and travel again. But there'd been too many square bottle of *schnapps*, too many days in the hammock, too many years of jungle fever.

The *bangh* gave him new strength. A drum. He sat up, surprised by the unexpected loudness of it. It seemed to beat almost at his elbow. Sound carried clearly along the footpath.

The drum said something about *Big Bondele*, something about Rosha Village.

The Roshas. Undersize, scavenger tribesmen who frequented the deep jungle. Many years ago he'd stopped in a Rosha village near there, and the scrawny blacks had first fled to the bush, and later returned to wait on him in a servile, dog-like manner.

Vorley would seek out such a place. He'd heard the drums. He'd be trying to escape them. He'd feel secure in such a jungle clearing away from the main footpath.

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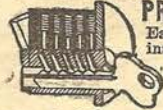
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Yankee Jim went on. A couple of kilometers. The footpath widened. A native village had stood there long before. Elephant grass grew high across the old cassava patch. Some nut and raffia palms resisted the parasitic vines of the encroaching jungle.

He stopped, trying to remember. The opening was nearby, but things looked different by night. At last he located the narrow side path. It descended to a muddy stream, climbed the other side. A man had to look out for crocs after night in places like that. Drums once more. He recognized his own name in its beating. The drummer had been crouched unseen by the footpath, or he had a "*girot*" as eyes for him. Half a minute and the message would be relayed to Kamkamba. An explorer with the Oxford foundation once told him the drums could relay a message from the Cameroons to Kenya coast across the waist of Africa in three hours.

It was farther than he expected to Rosha village. Morning was a hint of gray over high hardwood trees. A tiny clearing with bare earth looked like snow in mixed dawn and starlight. Surrounding the clearing were dome shaped huts that looked like mere piles of thatch.

He looked at the village from a distance of a couple of hundred meters across a little, half-stagnant stream.

No sound or movement. He descended, waded knee-deep through muck and water, started up the other bank. Fresh dampness made dark spots on the earth. He dropped to one knee. The dampness had been left by a man's feet. Someone had crossed the stream less than half an hour before.

He stood up, apparently as tall and careless as ever, but there was a catlike wariness in his step. He drew the machete. A blade of Arabian steel, native-mounted in wooden handles.

SOMEONE would be waiting along the path. Maybe a Rosha sentry, and if so Jim did not want to harm him. It might be Vorley—or the Cockney.

He took two more steps. A strip of moonlight cut the pathway. An ambusher

would wait for him there.

Yankee Jim twisted unexpectedly to one side. He anticipated movement. There was none.

Jim's eyes, long used to darkness, made out a branch lying across the footpath. Knee high. It had been placed there. He'd been too long in the tropics not to recognize the trigger pole of a deadfall. Farther on a small tree trunk had been bowed back.

Yankee Jim stepped over the trigger pole. Movement in the shadow. Close. Moonlight glimmered on knife steel.

A man in whites rose close ahead of him. He'd been crouching under the vines. Limey Jack.

Jim seized his wrist.

Limey Jack was not heavy, but fear gave him a sudden, madman's strength. He twisted aside, trying to free his wrist. His heel slipped on rotting deadwood. His weight helped, and his wrist slipped from Jim's grasp.

Darkness and jungle tangle hid Limey for an instant. He was crawling downhill like a terrified lizard.

Jim bent, grabbed his collar. He could have killed Limey with a swing of his machete. He didn't. He trod on the man's knife-wrist, twisted the collar in a choke-hold. He didn't want Limey dead—he wanted him to talk, to tell where Vorley had taken the girl.

His finger twisted the collar tighter. Limey's breath rattled through his tortured throat.

"Where are they? What's Vorley done with her?"

Limey was flat, eyes distended. His mouth was open. Trying to say something. Jim relaxed his hold. Limey's head darted with a feline movement. His teeth sank in Yankee Jim's wrist.

Sudden pain made Jim let go. Limey writhed away, sprang to his feet. He ran uphill. For the moment, fear of Jim had made him forget the trigger. He tried to stop at the last instant. A scream ripped from his throat. He flung his shoulders back, arms high, but bent knees touched the branch.

The bent trunk was released like a mighty bow. There was a roar of air, the

thud of a machete driving through bone and flesh.

Limy Jack was still upright, held there on limp knees by a machete driven through his chest. It had been bound to the small tree trunk which was bowed back and held by thong and notch-trigger that the merest touch would dislodge.

Jim touched his body. He swung to and fro with the sway of the tree. Dead.

A girl's voice startled the air. Her cry was cut abruptly.

It had come from the village.

Yankee Jim climbed the trail. No movement in the village clearing. Those coward Roshas natives would probably be skulking in jungle shadow. A man had to be careful of them. Cowards are always most dangerous. He didn't want a poisoned arrow in the back.

Jim circled the clearing, keeping to the screen of parasitic vines hanging from wide branches of khaya trees.

He almost stumbled over a native. The man hopped to his feet like a 'gila monkey, but Yankee Jim seized him by his top-knot, flinging him to his buttocks. The Roshas weighed scarcely a hundred pounds.

"Big Bondele?" Yankee asked.

The Roshas knew what he meant. Jim pulled him to his feet. The Roshas kept making affirmative signs with his head, led him through skeins of vine along a path where branches arched so close Jim was forced to bend double.

They entered a smaller clearing where a cluster of miserable huts had been built. Dried thatch looked moldy gray.

"Kay-ah?" Jim asked in Congo jargon.

The Rocha understood, pointed out the largest of the huts. Jim released him. It was a dozen strides to the hut.

The hut doorway was low. Jim bent over, stepped quickly inside. He moved along the wall, stopped.

DARK. No sound or movement. The hut was close from the stale-strong odor of rotting thatch and uncured skins. And another odor. The sweaty, oily odor of Vorley's body.

He stood with shoulders touching the

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wall, machete in hand.

The girl screamed.

He set himself for the impact of Vorley's body. Instead a weight smashed him to the earth.

The heavy, lead-weighted butt of the whip. It had been aimed for his head, missed, struck the thick part of his neck.

He was down on hands and knees, the hard-pounded dirt of the floor beneath him, ears ringing, but still conscious. Vorley close above. He loomed in the darkness, breath wheezing through nostrils, groping, whip ready for another blow.

Yankee Jim stood up. Machete ready. Vorley must have glimpsed a glimmer along its blade. Too close for the whip butt. He grabbed Jim's wrist, rocked forward, ramming with the huge weight of his body.

Jim had felt his strength before, but only momentarily. Now he realized the true quality of it. Massive and apelike.

He tried to twist his knife-arm free. Vorley's fingers were like steel clamps. They staggered, rammed the wall together. Thatch and bamboo bent with the shape of Jim's back, trapping him, preventing him from moving to either side.

He could feel Vorley's sweaty warmth, his breath short coming in grunting wheezes. Vorley had dropped the whip. The fingers of his free hand had found Yankee Jim's throat, they pressed down, crushing bone and cartilage.

Vorley spoke. "So. Now end of trail. For you, *Herr* Yankee-swine. Yah. Now will we see—what happen to man—throw *schnapps* in Vorley's face."

There was no escape. He was not a match for the man's massive strength. The hand was closing more and more tightly, pinching off breath. Yellow lights of unconsciousness were shooting across Yankee Jim's eyeballs.

There was one chance left. Their combined weights might break the wall of thatch and bamboo. The two of them—driving together.

His knee came up, doubled, found Vorley's groin, uncoiled. He didn't expect it to break the man's stranglehold. It staggered him back for an instant, though.

Made him grunt. He thought Jim would try and weave aside. He rammed forward with the strength of his stud-horse legs, and Yankee Jim drove his own weight in unison.

They struck the wall. It collapsed in a heap of dust and thatch and torn bamboo.

The big man's hold had slipped. He flung himself belly down, trying to pin Jim amid the debris to find the throat again.

Jim stood, lifting the big man on his shoulders, one hand on crotch, the other on throat. He intended to tilt him, hurl him head down. The weight was too much. He reeled. They fell in the hut's darkness.

Jim came to a crouch. Vorley was cursing. Light of morning came through the shattered wall. It showed Vorley on hands and knees, patting hands across the earth, searching for the machete.

It was a crude, native knife. He must have got it from the Roshas. He was crouched, edge of the blade up.

Yankee Jim's own machete was gone. He didn't know where. He could have escaped, but the girl was still there. Vorley circled, placing himself between Jim and the torn wall.

Jim turned with him. His heel came in contact with heavy, yielding object. He recognized it. The whip.

He bent, snatched it up.

Vorley sprang at the same instant. Knife swung underhand, aimed for the base of Jim's abdomen.

Yankee Jim had room to retreat. He went back one long stride, the whip swung, its lash wrapped itself around Vorley's wrist.

Jim bent his long body double. The lash tightened, jerking Vorley to one side. He struck the ground on one knee.

The whip loosened and freed itself. Vorley was momentarily off balance. He tried to turn. The whip roared air, struck his broad face, tore it from temple to chin.

He squealed from pain, reeled back, struck the wall, rebounded. The machete was still in his hand. His left arm was uplifted in protection against the lash.

The whip again. From a new direction, laying open the other side of his face.

Vorley reeled. In the small room he was like a wounded rhino. Temporarily blinded, fanning with both hands, making wild swings with the knife.

He'd have run for his life, but his antagonist had him cornered.

The whip hummed air and made a dull, *chick!* as it struck the flesh of his shoulders.

"No! No!" Vorley had slipped belly down and was pushing himself up, pawing with left forearm, machete still in his right hand "No. Mercy!" *Herr Gott!* I will go. Yah. You let me go. To jungle. I never come back..."

The whip struck, ripping his shirt from one arm and shoulder.

"No. You hear me. White man. White man in jungle must stick together. You would not lash a white man. Mine eyes. I am blind, *Herr Yankee.*"

He wasn't blind. He could see to dodge the lash. He went half down trying to escape, legs doubled under him. His left arm darted out, and the lash wrapped itself. Vorley jerked. The machet was pointed forward. He was trying to pull Yankee Jim to his death on the blade.

But Jim was balanced, and Vorley was not. He swung back, pulling the big man face down across the floor.

He stepped back and swung the whip. Its lash tore off the back of his shirt. It came again. Vorley reeled to his feet, skin running blood.

He made it outside. Escape was the only instinct left in his brute mind.

He ran with Yankee Jim following. Dawn was coming, making strips of red above the *khaya* trees. A trail wound through jungle, through foot-grabbing muck, through weed-filled mire and green slime where clouds of mosquitoes rose.

He fell, got up, reeled on. It was a blind, staggering gallop until the depth of slime slowed him. He churned on, blind and elephantine. The mud came to his thighs, to his hips. He beat his arms, still swinging the futile machete.

He realized that Yankee Jim was no longer following. He tried to retrace his steps, wallowed blindly with swordgrass higher than his head. He sank deeper

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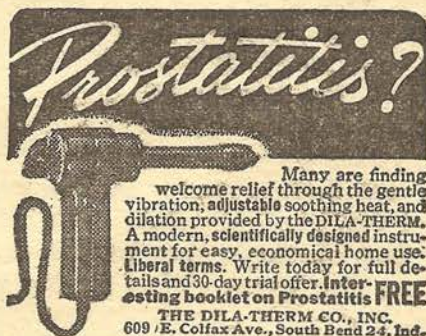
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and deeper until at last the mire closed over him . . .

VI

YANKEE JIM had followed Vorley a quarter-mile into the swamp. Then he turned back. The man was done for.

He reached the village clearing as dawn sunlight commenced hunting the openings through *khaya* trees. The girl saw him, ran to the hut doorway, stopped and waited with a half scared expression in her eyes.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll not harm you. I'll take you back to shalomar."

"You know who I am——"

"Your Selma's daughter. Selma—Conway." After all these years he found it hard to pronounce the name "Conway." Name of the man who married the woman James McGraw had loved.

The girl seemed small and pitiful in her *batik* cloth robe and the tatters of a white, knee-length dress.

He touched her shoulder. She seemed to grow weak at the sign of sympathy. All the fight gone from her. She was sobbing, teeth clenching her lower lip, but no sound from her throat.

"It's all right," he said.

He let her weep against his chest. The years vanished, and for a moment it seemed he was once more with Selma, that night on the terrace back in L. M. with the Portuguese violins playing waltz music.

After a while her sobs became less. She still clung to him.

"Vorley didn't harm you!"

She shook her head.

"Why would your mother send a man like that to rescue you?"

"She didn't. I hated Vorley. He was once a foreman on the concession, but mother drove him away for beating the natives. He hung a native boy by the thumbs and beat him to death with that whip. It was Vorley who hired them to carry me away——"

"Hired *who* to carry you away?"

"Emboa. A N'cimbo renegade who worked at the concession. But Emboa took me far away where even Vorley could

not find me. He knew the Cobalt Combine planned to send prospecting crews beyond Kamkamba, and they would have held me as hostage forever."

"Vorley had a note to James McGraw——"

"He took it from Jan Heuter, the man that Mother sent to find me. He killed Heuter and his men from abush. He bragged of it last night." She grabbed his arm, "You won't leave me. Ever."

"Ever? Yankee Jim smiled. "Not till I take you home. To Selma and your father."

"My father is dead."

CANOES were waiting at the swamp of Ifobwa. Yankee Jim kept thinking of Selma, of the message she'd addressed to him. The letter she'd signed "Always, Selma."

Always. The word struck him hard. She was a widow now, and she'd signed it "Always."

The canoe slid through swamp water leaving choppy waves of the paddles behind it. Sitting in the bow Yankee Jim could see his reflection in the greenish water. Hollow cheeks covered by dark whiskers, eyes prominent. The jungle had changed him. It had made a different man of him. She'd never care for him now.

There was a resthouse on Kova Plain where the *Commisaire* stopped during his twice-yearly trips of inspection. A house-boy shaved Jim, cut his hair. He put on a suit of whites that had been left hanging in the *Commisaire's* room. They fit well enough. He looked at himself in a rusty bit of mirror. He was like a stranger.

He grinned and rolled an Inyorka cigarette. A stranger, but one hell of an improvement. The intervening years seemed like nothing. He wondered if it could be possible for a man to cover them all at a single stride and leave all the rottenness and regrets behind.

Shalomar was a white house of cobble and hardwood sitting aloof and serene on a grassy knoll overlooking miles of plantation land. The girl sprang to the canoe dock and ran uphill, crossed the lower verandah, disappeared inside. After a

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wait ten minutes, Jim saw a houseboy in a starched white stengah-shifter walking downhill carrying a parasol.

"Bwana Yankee Jim?"

"Yes."

"Mama. Bondele-mama, Mama *n'kumbwa*, she say you come."

Jim walked beneath the parasol, entered the deep shadow of a hall, on to a drawing room with wide French windows and jalousies drawn against the sun. She was standing in the middle of the room, waiting.

He'd dreamed of this meeting. She would be standing near the door, waiting for him. Selma, slim and lovely, wearing a starched linen dress.

He met her eyes. They were narrower than he remembered, and tiny wrinkles had accumulated in their corners. Her skin looked hard from cosmetics. Her hair, once glossy, had turned dull and brittle by years of tropics. All of the softness of youth was gone from her face.

She was looking at him, waiting. Her lips were parted a little, showing the tips of her blue-white teeth.

The house suddenly felt hot and breathless.

She was speaking. Thanking him for returning her daughter. Saying something about a reward. He shook his head. Money was no good to him. He had everything, more than all her money could buy. A hammock on his own verandah, a cache of square-bottle *schnapps*, a woman to bring it to him.

He'd taken off his sun helmet. The *Commisaire's* sun helmet, newly pipe-clayed. He turned it in his hand.

She was expecting an answer. He said in a voice unexpectedly loud and harsh.

"I want no reward. I've had all the reward I need."

He backed toward the door.

She lifted her hand. There was something imperious in the gesture. It was the gesture of a woman who had learned to command men.

"You're—Yankee Jim?"

"Yes."

"You—never knew a man named—James McGraw?"

James McGraw. The name that had been his. He'd gone so long as just plain "Yankee Jim" that the sound of his real name was strange to him.

"Dead. Dead in the jungle these eighteen years."

He hurried outside. He was in the sun with his helmet off. He put it on, walked faster than a white man should ever walk. The canoe was waiting. He sprang over the gunwale, called his paddle boys.

Shalamar disappeared around high walls of hardwood trees along the river. He leaned back, lulled by the steady stroke of paddles.

They were taking him back. *Schnapps* and his woman to carry it to him. A good woman despite her brown skin and her body grown so fat that a sarong fit her like bolt-cloth wrapped around a bale of sisal.



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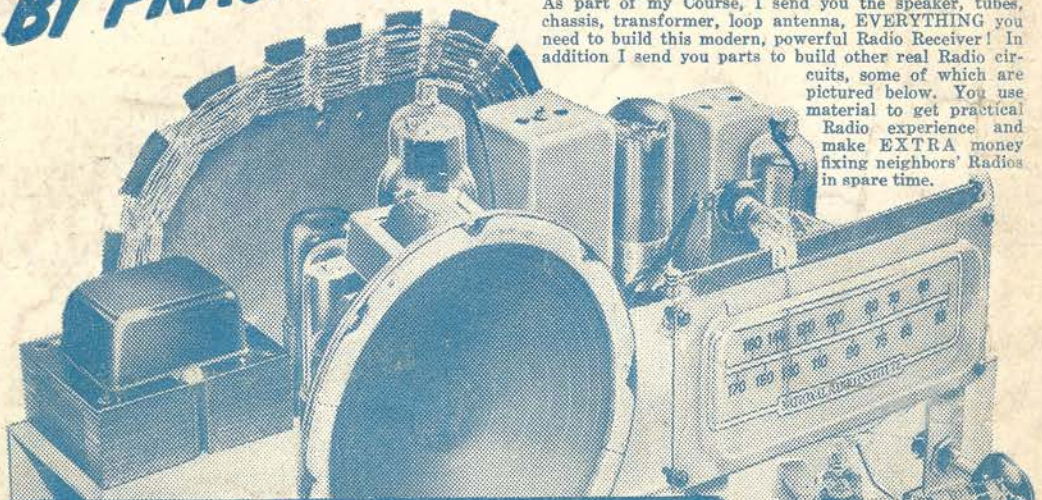
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