

The Incubus

THE darkness that is Africa is brilliantly depicted in this weird story of a white man alone in the jungle.

SPEAKING in after years about that period of his life, Lloyd Merriwether, being a New Englander and thus congenitally given to dissecting his motives and reactions and screwing them into test-tubes, used to add, by way of psychological comment, that it wasn't the big things that mattered in a crisis, but the small ones; and that, by the same token, it was not the big things one missed when one was away from that blending of hackneyed efficiency and pinchbeck mechanical process called Civilization, but the petty, negligible ones—those that have grown to become second nature, almost integrally part of one's self, like one's eyes, or ears, or nose.

Now—he would say—take, for example, a razor-strop or a box of talc powder. Take a bottle of eau de Cologne or witch hazel; or, if you prefer, a nail buffer, a pair of toilet scissors, or what not.

Silly, foolish, tinsel things, you say? Rubbish a man can do without just as well? Well—don't you believe it! Not for a single, solitary moment!

Oh, yes! You can do without all that truck when you are home, all snug and taut and comfortable—with shops around you on every street so that you know you can buy them, if the spirit moves you and you have the price. Sure.

But suppose you find yourself somewhere at the back of the beyond, where you can't buy the fool things for love or money—absolutely cannot get them. Why, at that very moment, those flummeries become vital—vital not from a pathological angle, because you always want what you can't get, but really, truly, physically vital.

It was that which meant the tragedy of the whole thing.

You bet. Tragic! Although—not—because it was so ludicrous, straight through. For, you know, I was quite out of my head when that fellow from the Angom Presbyterian Mission picked me up. What was his name? Oh, yes. Morrison. Doctor Sylvester Morrison, an Englishman, and a very decent chap.

I WAS a raving lunatic when he found me. Sat there screeching some musical-comedy song of a few years back—"Gee—but this is a lonesome town!" or something of the sort.

Say! It must have sounded funny, back yonder, in the heart of Africa, with the sun rays dropping straight down from a brazen sky to shatter themselves upon the hard-baked surface into sparkling, adamant dust—to rise

again in a dazzling vapor.

Oh, yes. Very funny, no doubt!

And then I went for Doctor Morrison with my knife. Lucky for him that I had used my last cartridge.

Well, to go back to the beginning, I felt a presentiment of coming disaster shortly after I was faced by the fact that those ochre-smearred, plum-colored Fang coons had run away during the night, as fast as their skinny legs would let them. I never did find out what made them stampede, nor cared to discover the reason why. You know what they are like—half children and half apes, and chuck-full of animistic superstitions and the inhibitions that go with them. I guess they must have heard a drum-signal boom-booming through the night—some brute of a flat-nosed, tattooed medicine-man brewing his smelly craft somewhere in the miasmatic jungle to the north, and giving them the tip that I was "dam bad ju-ju." At any rate, there I found myself that morning, on the upper reaches of the Ogowe River, a day's journey below Boue, a week from the coast, and all alone.

I was rather annoyed. You know, Africa raises Cain with a white man's nerves and general amiability. And if I could have caught one of those runaway coons, I would have given him what was coming to him with my hippo-hide whip. But it was no use trailing them in the jungle. The wilderness had swallowed them, and so I contented myself with cursing them in English and Freetown pidgin.

Afraid of being alone?

Not I. You see, I wasn't a greenhorn, but an old African-der, dyed-in-the-wool, dyed-in-the-trek, and able to take care of myself. I knew that particular part of the French Congo better than I know my native Cape Cod, and I really did not need a guide; nor porter for that matter, since I was to go the rest of the way by canoe.

Nor was I afraid of any stray natives popping out of the bush. I've always been friends with them. I am not an adventurer—seeking for the rainbow, the pretty little rainbow that usually winds up in a garbage can—not an explorer, nor a soldier. I am a businessman, pure and simple, and I needed the natives to bring me rubber and ivory and gold-dust, while they needed me to get them their particular hearts', and stomachs', desires—American cloth, and beads, and pocketknives, and Worcester sauce, and Liverpool trade gin, and rifles that didn't shoot and similar truck. Of course, I did 'em brown whenever I had half a chance, and I guess they returned the compliment. So we had mutual respect for each other, and I wasn't scared

of them—not the slightest bit.

As soon as I discovered that my Fangs had stampeded, I took stock of my belongings, and I saw that they had not taken much—in fact, nothing except the little water-proofed pack which contained my toilet articles, mirror and razor and shaving-brush and comb and all the rest.

Struck me as funny at the time. I said to myself that those Fangs were fools—damned fools. They might have helped themselves to some of my other packs as easy as pie. Food, you know, tobacco, beads, all that. But they had not. Why? God only knows. I told you before that they're half children and half apes.

So I had a good laugh at their expense.

Well—I didn't laugh much a few days later.

THERE I was, then, in the crawling, stinking heart of Africa, all alone, and—for the moment, at least—cheerful enough. For I am a businessman, and I told myself that those fool negroes had saved me a tidy little penny by bolting, since I owed them a month's wages. Too, I was well supplied with everything a fellow needs in the wilderness, from quinine to matches, from tabloid beef to—oh, tabloid fish cakes. My health, but for occasional, woozy fever spats—they being part of Africa's eternal scenery and accepted as such—was first-rate, and my canoe a snug, comfy little affair that pulled as easy as a feather.

I decided that I would just drift along down the Ogowe River to the estuary, and no hurry—not a darned bit of hurry. The Ogowe is not a treacherous water; the channel is clearly marked most of the way, and the mangroves sit rather well back—like hair on the brow of a professional patriot, eh?

As to the pack with my toilet articles? Well, what did it matter? There weren't any women kicking around loose in that part of the Dark Continent to care or fuss if my hair was long or short, my complexion smooth or stubbly, my fingernails round or square. Blessed relief, in fact, to be independent of one's outer man, I thought.

So, I repeat, I was quite cheerful—for a few seconds, perhaps minutes.

BUT, almost immediately, I knew that my cheerfulness was faked—faked by myself, subconsciously, for my own, private, especial benefit; almost immediately, I sensed that vague, crushing presentiment of coming disaster I told you about—and my nerves began to jump sideways and backward, like a whisky-primed Highland Scot when he hears the whirl of the war pipes.

Of course, being a sensible fellow, and not imaginative, I tried to crystallize my nervous presentiment. Couldn't, though. It was too subtle, too elusive—too damned African, to put it in the proverbial nutshell. All I was sure of was a sort of half-feeling—and I've had it before and since—that Africa was not a continent, but—oh, a being, a sinister, hateful, cruel, brooding monster, with a heart

and soul and desires—rotten desires, mostly—and that this Africa hated me, because I was white, because I was an interloper, because I had no business there except—well, dollars and cents.

Yes. A mass of rocks and rivers and forests and jungles, this Africa, but with the physical, even the spiritual attributes of man—and I used to brood on that thought until often, in my dreams, I felt like taking Africa by the throat and throttling it as I would an enemy. Silly, too, since I needed Africa for the benefit of my bank-account and the encouragement of my creditors.

Never mind, though.

I just couldn't crystallize that damned, sneaking, ghastly presentiment, and so, knowing even at the time that it was a lie, I said to myself:

“Fever, old man! Go ahead, and do the regular thing!” I did. I dosed myself with quinine and Warburg's and a wee nip of three-star just to top it off. Then I packed my canoe with a fairly steady hand, jumped in, balanced it and pushed off, gliding between the banks of the Ogowe River.

REMEMBER my telling you that I had intended drifting along slowly, that I was in no hurry? Well, the moment my paddle fanned the water, I reconsidered, subconsciously. I decided, again subconsciously, that I was in a devil of a hurry, that I must get away from the hinterland, from the Congo, from the whole of Africa.

I said to myself that, arrived at the coast, I would catch the first mail-boat bound for Liverpool and then on to America. No—I wouldn't even wait for the mail-boat. I would go straight aboard the first dirty tramp steamer that came wallowing up from the south, and beat it home. Home! That's what I needed! And rest, rest—and a white man's big, crimson drink in a white man's proper surroundings—with white-aproned saloonkeepers and stolid policemen and, maybe, a night-court magistrate or two all complete. I wanted to be shut for a while from this stinking, brooding, leering Africa. I wanted America, the white man's land, the white man's blessed, saving vices and prejudices.

How I longed for it, longed for it as if it were a woman, as I paddled down the river! Of home I thought, of foolish things—New York, and dear, garish Fifth Avenue all agleam with shop windows and the screaming brasses of passing automobiles, and the soda place around the corner on Forty-second, and the night boat to Boston—and a solid hour with the ads in back of the magazines. And then I looked about me and I saw Africa, putrid, acrid! And, gee! How I hated it—hated it!

I pulled myself together. Sure, more quinine, more Warburg's, and another nip of the stuff. Back to the paddle with all my strength—and the canoe flying along like a sentient being. I paddled as if all the furies were after me. Just opened a tin at random, sneaked forty winks now and then, and off again, though my hands were raw and

blistered, my back sore and strained till I nearly shrieked, my legs numb from the knees down, my eyes red-rimmed and smarting with watching the current.

Three days. Four. Five—

And the work! And the sweat! And the heat! Why, man, all the heat of all the universe seemed to have gathered into a tight, crimson ball poised directly above my eyes. But I kept right on, with always the picture of home before my mind's eyes. Home, white faces, hundreds and hundreds of them, houses of stone, paved streets, a sun which did not maim and kill, then dinner, plain, clean, as dinner should be, the theater, and over it all the sweet home scent.

On the sixth day, I fell in a faint. Picked myself up again, rescued my paddle that was about to float away downstream, swallowed an opium pill, and called myself a fool. Perhaps it was the last helped the most. At all events, I was off again. But I felt weak. I felt conscious of a sickening sensation of nameless horror—and—do you know what I was afraid of?

I'll tell you. Myself. Yes, myself! I was afraid of—myself. Momentarily, I crystallized it. Myself—and you'll see the reason presently.

THAT day I did get into a mangrove swamp; a thick and oozy one, too, with the spiky orchids coming down in a waxen, odorous avalanche, and all sorts of thorny plants reaching down and out as if trying to rip the heart out of my body, as if trying to impede my progress, to keep me there. My hands and face were lacerated, my clothes torn, but I didn't care. By main force, I jerked the canoe free and was off again, whipping the water like a madman; and the fear, the horror, the vague presentiment always growing! And my hatred of Africa, it nearly choked me! And the loneliness! The loneliness which lay across my heart, my soul, my body, like a sodden blanket, and the fear that I would never reach home.

I lost all track of time. A week to make the coast, I had figured; and here it was at the very least the tenth day, and still my paddle went, still the river slid before my eyes like a watered-silk ribbon, still Africa unrolled like an odorous, meaningless scroll, still at my back rode horror and fear.

I don't know how I missed the main channel, got lost in one of the numerous smaller rivers that empty into the Ogowe. At all events, late one afternoon, I found myself in a narrow, trickly stream, with my paddle touching ground every second stroke, and the banks to right and left like frowning, sardonic walls. It wasn't a river any more—but just a watery sort of jungle trail, hardly discernible, wiped by the poisonous breath of the tropics into a dim, smelly mire which frothed and bubbled and sucked and seemed to reach out for those who dared tread its foul solitude.

I pushed on, through an entangled, exuberant commingling of leaves and lasciviously scented, fantastic flow-

ers that vaulted above me like an arch, cutting my way through the mangrove that opened before my canoe, with a dull, gurgling sob, then closed behind me, with a vicious, popping gulp, as if the jungle had stepped away to let me through, leisurely, contemptuously, invincibly, to bar my way should I attempt to return!

On—and then, I don't know what happened to me. I don't know if night came, or if the creepers closed above me, shutting off the light of the sun, or if, momentarily, I became blind. I only remember that although, like an automaton, my hand kept on wielding the paddle, everything turned black around me . . . and the next thing I remember is that I shivered all over as if in an ague, that cold sweat was running down my face, that I groped for the quinine—could not find it . . .

Too, I remember, a sudden glimpse of jungle natives—dwarfs, you know, the useless African tatters of a pre-Adamite breed. I saw two or three of them in the blackish-green gloom of the trees, flitting past, gliding, indistinct. They blended into the jungle, like brown splotches of moss on the brown, furry tree-trunks, and they gave no sign of life except a rolling flash of eyeballs—white, staring with that aspect of concentrated attention so typical of savages. I recollect, vaguely, shouting at them, for help, I suppose, my voice seeming to come across illimitable distances.

Too, I recollect how they ran away, the jungle folding about them like a cloak. Then I felt a dull jar as I fell on my hands and knees in the bottom of the canoe and rolled over. CAME to, I don't know how many hours later. I was cold and wet and shivery, and then I noticed that rain was coming down like a cataract. And at once I knew that I was dying. Dying! Sure. Straight through my delirium, I realized it. Realized, too, that only one thing would help me to cheat death: a sound roof over my head, sound flooring under my feet, sound walls about—a house, in other words. A real, honest-to-God white man's house where I could take off my clothes and keep dry and warm, and give the quinine and the Warburg's a chance to work.

A house! In that part of Africa! Might as well have wished for the moon!

And then, suddenly, I saw it—yes, a house!

It was not a hallucination, an optical illusion, a mirage, my delirious mind playing follow-the-leader with my eyes—and my prayers. It was real. Solid stone and wood and corrugated iron and a chimney and windows and doors all complete, like a bit of suburbia dropped in the jungle. I saw it through the steaming, lashing rain, on a little knoll due north, perhaps a quarter of a mile away from the river.

I jumped out of the canoe, landed, with clutching hands, in the mangrove, pulled myself up, ran as fast as I could, stumbling, tripping, falling, plunging. I hardly felt the thorns that scratched my face and hands and tore my clothes into ribbons.

I struggled on, with the one thought in my mind: the house—warmth—life! How had the house got there?

Weeks later, I found out. Doctor Morrison told me, sitting by my bedside in the hospital. It seemed that some imaginative chap of a West Coast trader had come up to London on his yearly spree. He must have been as eloquent as an Arab, for he met some City bigwigs that were reeking with money, and persuaded them that the French Congo hinterland was God's own paradise, and just waiting to give them fifty percent on their investment, if they were willing to come through handsome. They were, and they did. They supplied a working capital big enough to make a Hebrew angel weep with envy. "Gaboon, Limited," they called the new company, with laconic pride, and for some reason—the usual, you know, social stuff, Mayfair and Belgravia flirting with Lombard and Threadneedle streets—they appointed some fool of a younger son as general manager, the sort of gink whose horizon is limited by Hyde Park Corner and Oxford Circus, and who knows all about the luxuries of life, which to him are synonymous with the necessities. Well, he went out to the coast, up the river, took a look at the scenery, and decided that the first thing to do would be to build a suitable residence for his festive self. He did so, and I guess the imaginative West Coast trader who was responsible for the whole thing must have helped him. Naturally—think of the commissions he must have pocketed from the Coast people: commissions for stone and wood and glass and bricks and cement and whatnot.

Yes, that was the sort of house our younger son built for himself. Darn the expense! He was stubborn if nothing else. The house was built; he moved in, and three weeks later some flying horror bit him in the thumb, and he promptly kicked the bucket. About the same time our imaginative West Coast trader disappeared with what was left of the working capital of "Gaboon, Limited," and nothing remained of that glorious African enterprise except the house, that incongruous, ludicrous, suburban house in the heart of the tropics—Westchester-in-the-Congo, eh? I guess the natives must have considered it "bad ju-ju," for they left it severely alone.

And it was bad ju-ju. I know.

LL right. I made for it, running, stumbling, soaked to the skin. I pushed open the door, and, at once, I became conscious of a terrible, overpowering fear. Rather, it seemed as if the vague, crushing foreboding which I had sensed all the way down the river had suddenly peaked to an apex; as if the realization of that presentiment—the physical realization, mind you!—was waiting for me somewhere within the house. Waiting to leap upon me, to kill me!

But what could I do?

Outside was the rain, and the miasmic jungle stench, and fever, and certain death—while inside?

I STUMBLED across the threshold, and, instinctively, I pulled my revolver from my waterproofed pocket.

I remember how I yelled at the empty, spooky rooms:

"I will defend myself to the last drop of my blood!" Quite melodramatic, eh? Incredibly, garishly so, like a good old Second Avenue five-acter where the hero is tied to the stake and the villain does a war-dance around him with brandished weapons.

I couldn't help myself; I felt that ghastly, unknown, invisible enemy of mine the moment I was beyond the threshold. At first he was shrouded, ambiguous. But he was there. Hidden somewhere in the great, square entrance hall and peeping in upon my mind, my sanity.

Momentarily, I controlled myself with a tremendous, straining effort. I said to myself, quite soberly, that I had come here to get dry, to take off my clothes, and so I sat down on a rickety, heat-gangrened chair and began kicking off my waterlogged boots. I got up again, in a hurry, yelling, trembling in every limb.

For he, my unknown, invisible enemy, had sat down by my side. I could feel him blow over my face, my neck, my hands, my chest, my legs, like a breath of icy wind. That's the only way to put it. So, as I said, I got up again in a hurry, and I ran away, shrieking at the top of my lungs, peering into every corner, revolver in my right hand, finger on trigger, ready to fight, fight to death, if my enemy would only come out into the open—if only he would fight!

"Coward! Oh, you dirty, sneaking coward!" I yelled at him. "Come out here and show your face, and fight like a man!"

And I laughed, derisively, to get his goat; and then I could hear his answering laughter, coming in staccato, high-pitched bursts:

"Ho-ho-ho!" Too, I heard him move about, somewhere right close to me, behind me, and I decided to use a stratagem. I decided to stand quite still, then to turn with utter suddenness and take him by surprise; to pounce upon him and kill him. Surely, I said to myself, if I turned quick enough, I would be able to see him.

So I stood there, motionless, tense, waiting, my mind rigid; my heart going like a trip-hammer; my right hand gripping my revolver; my left clenched until the knuckles stretched white. And I did turn, suddenly, my revolver leaping out and up, a shout of triumph on my lips. But—he was not there. He had disappeared. I could hear his footsteps pattering away through one of the farther rooms, and, too, his maniacal, staccato laughter.

Oh, how I hated him, hated him! And I ran after him, through room after room, shouting: "I'll get you, you dirty coward, I'll get you! Oh, I'll get you and kill you!" AND then, in a room on the top floor, I came face to face with him! It was quite light there, with the sun rays dropping in like crackling spears, and as he came toward me, I could make out every line in his face.

Tall he was, and gaunt and hunger-bitten and dreadfully,

dreadfully pale, with yellowish-green spots on his high cheekbones, and his peaked chin covered with a week's growth of black stubbles, and a ragged mustache. His face was a mass of scars and bleeding scratches and cuts; and in his right hand he held a revolver—leveled straight at my heart.

I fired first, and there was an enormous crash, and—

Sure! I had fired into a mirror, a big mirror. At myself. Had not recognized myself. What with lack of razor and shaving-brush and looking-glass—and delirium—and fever— Yes, yes. It's the small things, the little foolish, negligible things one misses when one is away from civilization.

Pass the bottle, will you!

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