

# The Dagger of Macbeth

By Stephen Chalmers

## CHAPTER I. THE DARK ISLAND.

THAT island is as dark as ever it was, despite that American influence has changed semibarbarity in its Caribbean neighbors to almost ultracivilization. The Dark Island, I shall call it, which term includes two republics, for where one portion of the island is black and speaks French and revolutes as regularly as an alarm-clock, the other portion, its black slightly modified by Andalusian blood, speaks Spanish and revolutes at lengthier intermission—like, say, an eight-day clock.

Both sections have one thing in common. In Caribbee French or aboriginal Coromantee or Negroid Spanish, that thing is called by different names; but they all mean the same thing, which will presently appear—*forbidding, ugly, brutal, weird, damnable, but interesting.*

What Ronald McBeth did there was a mystery to me. I had known him at college—Edinburgh—before either of us heard of Horace Greeley's advice to enterprising youth. Years later he noticed my name attached to an article in the *Geographic Survey* on the head-hunters of the Eastern Archipelago. He wrote a tentative note from somewhere south of Panama and I came back at him with a hail-old-fellow-well-met which assured him I was indeed myself and no other.

We corresponded at intervals thereafter, sometimes years elapsing between letter and reply; for McBeth was as unsettled as myself. One time I would hear that he had just emerged from an Antarctic expedition and, a few years later, that he had survived—

by luck—a journey into the region of the Amazon headwaters. I remember how he quoted at the end of that letter, which was all stained with sweat:

“With one man of the crew, alive.  
What put to sea with seventy-five.”

On my side, I was usually absent on some ethnographic survey—white Eskimo or a lost tribe of Aztecs—that sort of thing; so that often a letter from McBeth would lie on my desk for a year before I found it, and then Heaven only knew where McBeth might be reached, save through the *Adventurers'*, to which club he occasionally had recourse, via cable and a much-harassed consul.

But at last he seemed to settle down like a sane person. I did not hear of it until after my return from studying the *Singing Apes*. He was managing a gold-mining concession in the dark island of which I have spoken, somewhere in that Spanish-African section of it. He hoped I would visit him. He had nothing to offer, he said, save every possible inducement to stay away! There was nothing interesting about the mine, he stated, because they hadn't started to mine and didn't know when they would—or could! The country, he gently hinted, was “rotten” with fever and such towns as it boasted, alive with cholera, due to the pleasant native habit of using any sort of water for every sort of purpose and not having any appreciation of its qualities as a cleansing medium.

All of which fascinated. If there is one thing that appeals to me it is a hopelessly unregenerate people. I draw the line at degenerate, although a lady relative of mine cannot see any distinction. But just think of

the opportunities to the ethnographer or the anthropologist, or whatever you please to call the man in my business! What, for instance, are the ideas of such a people on morality? Is there anything they hold sacred, even if it is a white snake or a blue crocodile? If they have a religion of any sort they are not, at least, unregenerate. Professor Provan disputes this. Provan holds that religion as a form of actual degeneracy does occur, and—

However, even if one rides a hobby, that hobby should be stabled on occasion.

As I say, McBeth invited me to—stay away. Wherefore I went, making the visit to my college friend an excuse—or vice versa—for an expedition into the darkest depths of that dark island. Of my observations I shall say nothing here; my expanded notes will presently appear in the *Journal of Ethnographic Survey*. Suffice it that darkest Africa had never anything on Dark Island. The former was to be expected; a small section of it, four and a half days from Sandy Hook was not.

The country was rich in minerals, hardwoods, everything worth while to the powers that colonize; but nothing was being done, nothing could be done, short of first submerging the island—and its population—for half an hour beneath the blue, cleansing waters of the surrounding Caribbean.

But the people did have something they worshiped, and it may be that Professor Provan is right.

In due time I met McBeth in this migrated chunk of darkest Africa. He greeted me and my native company at the door of a low-roofed bungalow, which was surrounded—at a respectable and only fairly smellable distance—by numerous thatch-and-wattle native huts. He was tall, large-boned, rather hook-nosed, sandy-mustached, gray-eyed—very gray-eyed—and I never saw such powerful thighs on a man. One noticed these long, narrow, curving thighs by the listless

way a loose revolver-belt caressed them when he moved. His clothes—such as they were—were not of recent date.

“Dr. Livingstone, I presume!” I hailed.

“Son of a gun!” said McBeth in his familiar, curiously clipped way of speech. But when he smiled I knew he was changed only on the outside.

Well, that is all about how McBeth and I came together again in the heart of Dark Island.

I stayed with him for a fortnight, meaning to stay longer; but—well, we had to come away at the end of that period. In the interval I rested up and spent hours assuring myself that I understood my own notes. There was nothing—absolutely nothing of interest—to see around this other-side-of-beyond where McBeth was living and having his business.

There were several forbidding peaks around the little hill about which McBeth’s “settlement” clustered. Down the main valley roared a torrent at all seasons, fed by innumerable freshets from the descending ravines, or gashes, where there was always a shower visibly in progress. The place was not without a certain natural beauty, but the lords of mankind had no idea how to utilize those gifts.

These hills were full of gold; McBeth showed me proof inside of an hour; but not only were the natives too shiftless to work it for themselves, but too lazy to work it even for white man’s wages. To bring in an army of brawny white men was something that simply could not be done, short of turning over the entire gold output to whatever swarthy gentleman with a stovepipe hat, an admiral’s epaulets and spurs strapped to big, bare, black feet, happened to be *presidente* for the—er—moment.

So McBeth’s days were spent waiting for something to develop either in the way of a concession reasonably clamped or American capital—or confidence—while he ate his heart

out watching that wonderful torrent wasting its power in riotous tumbling.

You will judge that McBeth was a most unromantic person. I mean by that that he refused to see anything romantic or picturesque in anything. Perhaps one would be more accurate in saying that, so keen was his sense of these things that he was ashamed of, and tried to hide, the "weakness." He knew more poetry than I ever read, and in the evenings he would sometimes illuminate a silence with some sub-lime quotation which he would break off at its most sublime point with: "And all that sort of stuff." I realized that the man was a mine of information regarding the things I wanted to know about those un-regenerate, or degenerate—what you please—people; but either I was a poor miner or he was as impossible of mining as that gold which held him there.

His head man was called Tamayo, which is really a Spanish name. A more evil-looking person I never clapped eyes on. It is no play upon words to say that he looked like the devil. By that I mean he was handsome in a sinister way; half negro, half Spanish; with a hooked beak, keen, snaky, black eyes set close together, and long black hair with just a suggestion of a crimp in it. His whole body in movement suggested stealth, steely strength and serpentine suppleness. I had a secret desire to see him leap at something—just as one is fascinated by the serpent ready to strike, the tiger ready to spring—just to see the lightning speed of it.

That man was a demon. I was not mistaken. The first time I saw him—or, rather, he saw me—he looked me over with a slithering eye from head to foot and then his nostrils twitched in a way that was somehow insulting. Later, I mentioned my antipathy to McBeth.

"Rotten bad—all through," said he.

"Then why do you keep him on?"

"Useful," said McBeth. "Got brain.

Man I had before—Porto Rican—unpopular. Tamayo got him."

"How?"

"Knife—ear to ear. Caught asleep."

"Lovely!" I said, chilled as much by McBeth's crisp, casual manner as by the episode.

He was cutting out his pipe as he spoke, employing the point of a curious-looking knife. I had previously noticed the handle of it protruding from his belt-sheath and been attracted first by the ancient appearance of some carving on what appeared to be a sawed-off buckhorn and then by the fact that from a tarnished silver claw setting at the top of the haft some ornament was missing.

"That's an odd knife you have, McBeth," I ventured, to change the conversation to a less discomfiting channel—I decided to conceal my dislike of Tamayo.

"Old thing," said my friend. "From Scotland."

He had laid the knife on the table and I reached for it.

"Why—it's a Highland dirk!" I exclaimed.

"Course. Lots like it."

## CHAPTER II.

### "THE DAGGER OF MACBETH."

BUT It was a very old dirk. I recognized that at once. Two-edged was its blade and the tempered metal was of no modern make. Evidently it had been forged and beaten into shape with a hammer. The hilt was curiously chased and the horn, a section of stag-antler, was carven into figures of a wild boar on one side and an ancient crest on the other. I recognized the crest of Macbeth, but did not utter the question which half-jocularly

suggested itself. I knew Ronald McBeth was of that blood which spilled and was spilled with lamentable frequency in the ancient days of Scotland. But if there was one thing that roused McBeth it was any reference to the fact. I have heard him growl in his throat when some correspondent—intending a compliment no doubt—spelled his name “Macbeth” instead of “McBeth.”

“How did you come to lose the stone? Usual cairngorm, I suppose?”

“Cairngorm—yes,” said he, filling his cut-out pipe. “Some black magpie. Pried it out in the night.”

“But what for? A cairngorm stone is worth only a shilling or two.”

He stopped in the act of lighting his pipe and looked over the match-flame at me in a curious way. But he said nothing and went on puffing his pipe into a glow. I supposed he thought I had asked a foolish question; as indeed I had. The beautiful yellow stone called the cairngorm, so lavishly studded in the brooches, claymores and dirks of Scottish highland costume, is nevertheless worth next to nothing as a gem. But it was new to these people of the dark island jungles. McBeth had probably said enough in two words. A “black magpie” had been decoyed into petty larceny by its glitter.

That was all about the dirk—then. I stayed on, working at my notes, without which I must have been bored. I saw little of McBeth in the daytime. But for those occasional loquacious—for him—spells in the evenings and my knowledge of the true gold of the man, I might have been ready to write him down a sullen boor. He spent the greater part of his days prospecting for more gold against that hoped-for day when he might be able to convert it into bullion.

My own people—I mean the twenty or more coast natives whom I had coaxed into service less by money than curiosity and the privilege of carrying real guns and

ammunition—my own people did not quarter with McBeth’s natives, but set up camp—with my host’s approval—on the other side of the torrent. Neither did they mix with McBeth’s people, openly despising them, in fact.

And why should they not? Those blacks of mine had lived in civilized towns where there was a sewerage system, even if it did run down the middle surface of main street. Nearly all of them had had a hand in setting up and knocking down *presidentes*: two of them had been *generales* in revolutionary “armies,” and my head man had a four-in-hand necktie! They were a superior class altogether and now that they carried such guns as I had furnished for my own protection, McBeth’s people became as mere worms under their august strut, mere transparencies before their distant gaze.

My wants—meals and so forth—were supplied in McBeth’s absence by a very handsome half-caste girl who went by the curious name of Rama. From the first I had observed her as I had the head man, Tamayo. She was very light in color; but perhaps that was due to illness, for it was; only a day or two before I discovered that she was a young mother. I saw her one day between meals nursing a baby that could not have been more than three weeks old.

The child was much fairer even than she. I wondered about the father. Next to McBeth, Tamayo was the only light-colored person in the settlement. I fancied Tamayo might be Rama’s husband, for in his presence she evinced the fear and deference one would expect in the wife of such a silent, sneering devil-person. But McBeth undeceived me.

“Child’s near white,” said he. “Father was Salmo Pilar—Spanish—my assistant. Usual native arrangement. Widow now.”

“What happened to the paternal Pilar?” I asked with foreboding.

“Died suddenly—ground glass.”

Again I felt a chill. I had some notes

on ground glass and bamboo fur as native measures in cases of personal antipathy.

“Tamayo?” I ventured.

“Possibly,” said McBeth, flashing me a quick glance. “But why Tamayo?”

“The woman. I thought, perhaps, he was the husband, but—she’s scared to death of your amiable head man.”

“Got ’em all scared,” said McBeth. “Bad lot. Trouble-maker. Got more power than I. Why I keep him. Useful in my business. Must have labor when time comes.”

I set down these incidents just as they occurred. They seemed to have no connection then, but they linked up swiftly-enough, presently.

A morning or two later, after breakfast, I heard McBeth muttering savagely while he moved restlessly about our low-roofed living-room, clapping a hand to his hip one moment, then rummaging among the papers on his desk. In his left hand he held a twisted rope of native tobacco.

“Knife,” he grunted. “Must ha’ laid it on this table. Odd.”

I had noticed that it was not in the sheath at his belt; which was odd, for McBeth was a creature of methodical habit. Probably he had left it on the table after cutting a pouchful of tobacco on the previous night. He did not remember doing so; which he thought very curious, although I did not. That’s the trouble about mislaying things; you don’t remember doing it.

“Anybody in here this morning?” he asked suddenly.

“Only Rama,” I said, burying myself in my notes.

He went on grumbling and rummaging about the room. Plainly he was greatly perturbed by the loss of that old highland dirk. All at once he uttered a surprised “Huh!” I looked up. He was standing in the middle of the room, soundlessly whistling through pursed lips.

“Magpie again,” said he. “Remember now. In my belt when I turned in. Gone now. Answer?—in the night.”

I somehow had a vision of Tamayo, the gentleman who had slit the Porto Rican’s throat from ear to ear and the same, probably, who had put ground glass in Salmo Pilar’s coffee-sugar—Tamayo, the saturnine, softly entering while McBeth and I slept and deftly removing that dirk from its sheath. There was cause for thankfulness that the thief, having a knife so handy, had not tried its qualities on the exposed throats of a couple of white men wrapped in slumber sweet.

That day McBeth did not go into the bush, but stayed around the settlement, coming and going restlessly. I never saw a man so silently ruffled over just a petty theft.

“Did the value it so much?” I asked.

“Sentiment—that sort of thing,” he growled. “Very old dirk. Tradition. Don’t know how much Shakespeare had to do with it.”

Then I understood. It did not seem possible that that could be the same dagger, and McBeth himself seemed inclined to make light of the tradition. But if it was— I did not blame him for regretting its loss.

Around that dagger memory and imagination recreated a famous scene. I saw Macbeth himself, at dead of night, cold sweat oozing from his every pore, ambition fighting against—what was it?—cowardly fear or manly conscience? In the guest-chamber Duncan, the king, sleeping in fancied security beneath the roof-tree of his host. And then the woman, more ambitious than the man, her face hard in the candle-light that glistened on the cairngorm of the dirk in her lord’s hand, and her voice harder still as she whispered: “Infirm of purpose. Give *me* the dagger!”

And here was the descendant of the Macbeth, in the jungles of a far, dark island, growling less—as it seemed to me—that he had lost that infamous weapon than that he

had to borrow my *cuchillo* to cut his tobacco twist!

Well, the knife did not turn up that day, or the next, or the next. McBeth seemed to forget the matter except for a few minutes after breakfast each day, when he growled as he cut his twist with my knife. No doubt the dirk had gone the way of its cairngorm ornament, the latter awaking a cupidity to possess the setting. Some half-savage black had it, doubtless, and gloated over his treasure, dazzled by the great yellow eye of the cairngorm, his savage instincts roused by the sense of man-superiority this two-edged blade brought to him.

In the mean time, the woman, Rama, was acting queerly. Her fairness was now a sickly pallor. Her eyes were haunted, her whole atmosphere hunted. The way she served our meals would have brought discredit to an incompetent, underpaid waitress in a third-rate quick-lunch. It was when she dropped a pot of cabbage-palm soup from her nerveless hands that McBeth challenged her—not at all unkindly, be it said.

“Look here, girl!” he said in negroid Spanish. “What ails you? Baby sick—or what?”

He used the word *pequena* for baby. I thought the woman would fall. In more or less choked articulation she said something like:

“*Niña—pobre niña—muerto!*”

“*Lo siento!*” said McBeth with genuine sympathy. “When did the baby die, Rama? What was wrong?”

She stared in a helpless sort of way at McBeth. Then her eyes flashed with the fire of mother-love, mother-hate. It seemed to me she was about to say something that would throw light upon the baby’s death, a light that would not cast the shadow of blame upon herself; but she suddenly checked herself. Her jaw literally dropped and that same hunted look came into her eyes, which were all at once fixed upon the doorway.

Involuntarily I turned. There stood Tamayo in the oblong of sunlight. He looked more devilish than ever. While he addressed McBeth in suave tones his eyes rested upon Rama. She, poor girl, was indeed a spectacle to arrest any one’s gaze in that moment.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE CALL OF THE MUNBO-JUMBO.

“*BUENA dia, señor,*” said Tamayo in his corrupt Spanish. “What is the senor’s pleasure for the afternoon?”

McBeth gave his instructions and later himself joined Tamayo in some excursion into the bush. I was left alone with my notes and was still busily engaged with them an hour later, when I heard a scraping at the door. There appeared around the edge of the sunlit oblong a round black head slit across by a grinning mouth. It was a Jamaican negro—a stray from his own island. He was more of a fool than a knave, servilely anxious to please, and from the first he had seemed determined to attach himself to my service.

“*Buccra,*” he whispered, grinning and squirming, “yoh wan’ see sumtin’ funny dis night? Yessah? Yessah! Me tek yoh de-deh—there—after night time come. No, sah, me no ’fraid! Me see plenty-plenty foolishness same like in Jamaica. Yoh jis’ put silvah-piece under yo’ tongue an’ nuttin’ can hu’t yoh.”

“What the devil are you talking about?” I asked, alert nevertheless. Was it possible—

“Yessah! Dem is gwine hab obi dance dis night in de bush. Yoh jis’ gib me silvah-piece foh put under me tongue an’ me show yoh sumtin’.”

*Obi!* The word suggested “snake” to me. A snake-dance in the jungle of the dark island? Splendid! But I did not let my grinning friend know how well pleased I was. I

wondered what size silver-piece that capacious mouth would take as a charm against the malevolent influence of the snake-god.

I told him I would think about it and might send for him later. I wished to consult McBeth. Besides, I was still much in the dark as to the nature of the promised event.

McBeth returned about sundown. He was scowling ferociously. When I told him of my grinning visitor and his offer to reveal jungle mystery his face momentarily cleared.

“That’s it!” said he. “Knew something was in the wind. Orgy to-night. That’s it. Where’s Rama?”

Rama, it turned out, had not prepared supper.

Rama had disappeared.

“Humph!” grunted McBeth thoughtfully. “Canned meat. Blythwood. Best I can offer. When ’d she say that baby died?”

“She didn’t say. Tamayo turned up and—”

“Probably nine nights ago. Ninth night to-night—sort of wake. No sleep for us. Row all night. Batter drums. Howl. Keep ghosts away.”

“My would-be cicerone mentioned something about *obi*,” I ventured.

“Oh—mumbo-jumbo?” said McBeth, momentarily interested. “Thought it was baby ‘nine-night.’ Similar stuff. Different names — ñañigo — obi — hoodoo — brujeria—that sort of thing. Jamaican, was he? He’d say *obi—obeah*, perhaps. Originally African—snake-worship or similar rot. Always evil. Bush gods always evil. Negative sort of worship, you know. Don’t pray for good; pray to avert evil. Interesting in its way.”

“I’d like to see it.” I suggested. “It’s rather in my line, you know.”

“Nothing to see,” McBeth grunted. “Story-book stuff all that—story-book stuff. Bunch of dirty blacks—and Tamayo’s the worst of ’em—howling around a fire, dancing

corruptions of coast ragtime. Dressed up like savages. Try to think they are and usually succeed when they’ve had enough rum. Wind up by killing a kid goat or a white cock. Drink the blood hot— eat meat raw. Rotten!”

“Still—”

“Of course, if you want to,” said my host quickly. “We’ll trace the affair by the drums.”

As he had finally fallen in with my wish I was somewhat surprised when, after nightfall and canned meat, my grinning man Friday turning up and making mysteriously signals to me from the doorway, McBeth roared at him:

“Get out, you black swine!”

He who was more of a fool than a knave, but not such a fool at that, vanished, merging suddenly with darkness. The mighty anger of McBeth was his greatest safeguard in that isolated place.

My host said nothing when just before we started I strapped on my automatic pistol. His own revolver belt dangled loosely about his powerful thighs—but then it was always there. He smiled a little, but no doubt he felt that if it did me good to imagine a spice of peril in the adventure. I was entitled to all the thrill I could get out of it.

For some little time we could hear the throb of drums faintly in the distance. I was sure it come from the east, across the river and probably from some valley beyond the peaks. I was a little surprised, therefore, when, emerging from the bungalow, McBeth started in the very opposite direction. I said nothing then, following in silence.

We went out by the opposite side of McBeth’s settlement which, I observed, was all in darkness. We did not encounter a human being. Temporary desertion of the place was attested by the lugubrious howling of a number of mongrel dogs.

“The call of mumbo-jumbo!” said McBeth, jerking his head toward the dark,

silent huts.

The moment we reached the edge of the jungle to the west, McBeth swung in his course until I saw by the dipper that we were heading due north. This course brought us to the torrent of which I have spoken, but some distance above the settlement. McBeth knew the ground like a child's primer and led me unerringly to where a suspension bridge of woven lianas and bamboo poles spanned the gorge. At the bottom of this I could see the white turmoil of the mountain stream.

On the other side we continued north, then northeast, and finally almost made a circle of our course, traveling eastward through the jungle and guided over an invisible trail only by a narrow belt of starred sky above us. Once McBeth laid a hand on my arm and pointed downward to the right. There, upon the small hillock around which the mine settlement lay in the amphitheater of hills, a single light burned in McBeth's bungalow. Dark blots to the right of it suggested the deserted village. Between us and the village the torrent showed in an irregular streaky-white line, and on this side of the stream were numerous little lights in the camp of my own people.

The latter seemed to have neglected, or not received, what McBeth called "the call of mumbo-jumbo." We could hear their broad laughter over some game they were playing—gambling, of course—gambling their very shirts, such as had them—my own distributed ammunition perhaps. Mingling with their shouts and laughter the throb of drums came distinctly from the east.

We had thus worked around so that no longer did the peaks stand directly between us and the sound. I marveled at McBeth's caution, considering the contempt in which, patently, he held the whole excursion and its objective.

"Self-respect," he said. "Wouldn't have these people imagine me curious about

their doings. Why I sent Jamaican away. Also went in other direction."

But as we came nearer that throbbing of drums, I fancied his own curiosity began to get the upper hand. We crossed the shoulder of a ridge and descended into a densely jungled ravine, out of which arose a rhythmic medley of sound. There were human voices chanting, hoarsely but subdued. I wish I could set down the tune of that chant, if tune it could be called. It was like no tune I ever heard; yet in dreams—boy dreams—I seem to have heard something like it in the back of my brain when reading of some barbaric orgy where brutal death brooded over the scene. It was not so much unmusical singing as a musical muttering to the soft clapping of hands, the shuffle of bare feet on beaten earth and, through it all, the insistent drum-throbbing that came to the ears with the sensation of blood beating in one's temples.

Presently through the tangle of the jungle appeared a red mist, growing into a dancing flare. McBeth halted me with a touch. In the flickering light, by which we could see, but were ourselves unseen, he looked up and around him. He presently pointed to a giant *ceiba*-tree, the trunk of which stood near to us, but one of whose grotesque arms reached out almost over the clearing where the fire was. By signs McBeth made me to understand that we must climb the tree and creep out on that limb as far as we dared without being seen from below.

Not without some difficulty we gained the first fork of the giant tree. Thereafter it was easy enough to work ourselves out upon the limb, which alone was as thick as the trunk of a good-sized tree. We had to move very cautiously, half straddling, half crawling, keeping our legs up and our shoulder, close to the upper surface of the limb. We finally halted our progress when we were directly above the inner edge of the circle below. Even there we could feel the heat of the fire which

blazed in the center, but it was not unbearable and its light served to reveal the surrounding scene in detail.

There was enough of interesting detail to occupy us for a few minutes to the exclusion of the scene as a whole and its meaning.

The two main objects that caught the eye at once were the fire—naturally—and the hideous thing that McBeth whispered was “old mumbo-jumbo himself”—that is to say, the supposed god *obi*, or *ñañigo*, or *voodoo*, or *brujo*—whatever he happened to be called by these particular worshipers.

#### CHAPTER IV. THE THIRD EYE.

IT was not, after all, a snake or anything like one. The idol was about eight feet high and set up against the face of a cliff which backed the cleared, beaten-earth arena where the fire blazed. It was apparently constructed of some kind of dark clay, modeled in the rough and painted after it had been hardened by fire. It was no fine example of the plastic art, even among a savage people. The thing had no limbs, only a shapeless body hunched at the shoulders and a short, thick neck, upon which sat an abnormal head thatched with long grass for hair and a crown of upright spears of palm-fronds. The nose was a flat, broad blob of clay, the nostrils redly painted to appear wide apart and distended. The mouth was like most savage attempts at such delineation—a quartered-orange effect, filled in with saw-tooth lines. The lips, thick and pendulous, were painted a bright vermilion, and the chin seemed to drip the same sanguinary hue from the bestial mouth.

The god had three eyes; two in the usual place for eyes, but set grotesquely wide apart; the third, larger and gleaming brightly

in the very middle of the forehead.

“My cairngorm!” muttered McBeth. And then I saw that the third “eye” was indeed that great, yellow stone.

There was nothing to be done about it just then. McBeth had the satisfaction of knowing where the cairngorm was and now had a fairly good idea of the identity of the thief, for unless my eyes deceived me the high priest of this strange religious orgy was the head man, Tamayo. He sat—but wait a moment!

Around the fire moved about a hundred Negroes—Negroes more or less—Negroid people. Mostly men; but there were women, too. All were dressed in the most fantastic manner, a favorite costume being female in the men and male in the women.

Without exception their dark faces were plastered with some chalky smear overlaid with streaks of brilliant paints. Each and all seemed imbued with the spirit of extreme masquerade such as characterizes Guy Fawkes parades in England, Hallowe'en in Scotland and, in the neighboring island of Jamaica, the “ohn Canoe” masques of Emancipation Day. The so-called John Canoe masque of Jamaica is, I think, a survival or a mild outgrowth of Obi worship.

These almost ludicrous figures moved around the fire in a curious shuffling dance, each individual seeming oblivious to the rest, each appearing half dazed, as if in a trance. And ever they muttered rather than sang that horrible chant which I would give a great deal to be able to set down. It still haunts me, and if it once resounds in my memory I know I am in for it all day or all night. You know that maddening persistence of a silly phrase in doggerel music?

Diagonally across from Mumbo-Jumbo were the “musicians”—four performers on goat-skin drums and a strange, bedaubed contortionist who scraped nothing more or less than an old file against a *cassava*

grater. He kept perfect time with these rasping instruments which he scraped together, now above his head, now behind his back, now under one high-lifted leg, now under the other. Occasionally his enthusiasm took him amid the dancers and while he pranced with them he would add his voice in some wild stanza to the accompaniment of the drums and the file-and-grater.

As the dancers circled the fire they had to pass the hideous clay god and the figure of the high priest, who sat at the base of the idol, his head almost hidden in a brightly colored blanket, only his eyes—which were unmistakably the eyes of Tamayo—peering at the fire. In the center of the latter an immense pot swung from a tripod of green hardwood sticks. Tamayo seemed oblivious to the dancers, but each and all, passing in their weird gyrations, spread out their hands, with the palms upward, in deference either to *Obi*, or his high priest, or both.

“Big session!” grunted McBeth. “Glad I came.”

Thereafter my own interest heightened and I settled down on that broad limb to enjoy the whole performance.

Presently Tamayo stirred and rose to his feet. The “music” did not cease; the dancers did not pause; rather the former grew louder and the latter increased their efforts. Tamayo touched a passing dancer, a woman in dungaree pantaloons and with her face hideously painted. At a word from the high priest she ran to the side of the clearing where, next to the orchestra, several baskets were lying, covered with clothes. From one of these she extracted a white live cock with its feet tied together.

This she brought to Tamayo, who took the snowy rooster and held it up to the god, *obi*. The firelight gleamed sinisterly on McBeth’s cairngorm. The doomed rooster flapped and squawked frantically in Tamayo’s grip. That worthy drew from under his

enveloping blanket a machete and with one sweep decapitated the cock.

The first stream of red blood from the severed trunk he swished in the face of the bestial-appearing idol. Then he swiftly lifted the still flapping, though headless, fowl over his own upturned face and allowed some of the hot blood to drip into his mouth. With a sudden shriek at the drummers and the dancers, who increased their efforts, he began to pluck the rooster, throwing the white feathers among the disciples, who picked them up without ever halting in their gyrations. They seemed to attach some superstitious value to those feathers. Tamayo, in the mean time, put the plucked fowl—without disemboweling it—into the great witch-pot over the fire.

“Chicken-broth!” chuckled McBeth.

But nothing could have induced me to sample it, especially when to the soup-pot was added an *Iguana*, which was plunged, living and emitting its raucous squawk, into the scalding brew. And at the death-squawk of that hideous but—they say—edible reptile, the drummers and dancers let their joy be unconfined, while the contortionist file-and-grater artist certainly outdid himself.

It was all very interesting to me. I glanced at McBeth, who lay stretched out ahead of me on the limb. I looked from him to the scene below and at the cairngorm from the dagger of Macbeth set in that hoodoo idol’s head. And I thought queer thoughts. The *brujeria*—witchcraft workers dancing around the pot; the guttural sounds of the surrounding jungle; Tamayo, chief *brujo*, placing the giant lizard in the pot—and the descendant of Macbeth staring down at the strange scene with Heaven knows what thoughts moving in his own mind.

Double, double toil and trouble.  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.  
Fillet of a fenny snake...

And then my heart momentarily stopped beating. I was nearer to the fork of the tree than McBeth and all at once I became aware that a third person was crouched on the limb between me and the crotch of the *ceiba*. It was a half-nude figure, black as Tophet, the only relieving points two shining eyes.

My hand crept to the automatic. The eyes turned upon me and I heard a faint voice, chattering with fear.

“*Buccra*,” it whispered almost incoherently. “See me yah, sah? Me beg yoh, wan piece a silvah fo’ put under me tongue!”

It was the Jamaica boy—my man Friday. Vastly amused in the reaction from fright, I groped in my pocket, found an American half-dollar and passed it to him, hoping it would at least keep him quiet. With the utmost solemnity he took it, opened his capacious mouth and stuck that half-dollar under his tongue. After that he seemed more at ease and settled down on the limb behind me to his own peculiar enjoyment of the affair.

But the interest suddenly took a tragic turn. As if cut off by a pair of shears the “music” ceased, the dancers came to a halt and all eyes turned toward Tamayo. That devil-person had dramatically thrown off his enveloping blanket and stood up straight and menacing before the idol, his right arm aloft, his saturnine countenance. Stained with blood, turned to the worshipers and his demoniac eyes ablaze. He wore nothing but a snake-skin belt and a pair of grass sandals.

Not a word did he say, but the arm came down with a gesture of absolute command and finality. Down upon their faces fell the worshipers, all except the woman who had served Tamayo the offerings to *obi*. This creature ran to the baskets and took from one that was slightly larger than the others something that looked like a bundle of rags. But a faint wail came from it and then I knew that they had a baby there—a human baby!

## CHAPTER V. FRIDAY AND THE FINISH.

“DON’T like that!” I heard McBeth mutter.

But he did not move—just then. Neither did I. I was paralyzed with a certain fear, a fearful certainty. It was, then, not all story-book stuff? Had we happened to stumble on a first-class revival of the old heathen rites?

I was ready to do anything, but somehow initiative had deserted me for the moment. Perhaps I still relied on McBeth’s leadership. Perhaps, after all, I was merely anticipating, and imagination’s preconception had got the better of my sense of probabilities. There was yet time enough. One shot would prevent the thing, although into what dilemma that one shot might plunge us I hated to think.

My eyes had never left the scene below. Again came a whimpering sound, but this time it was not a baby note, but the deep-breasted sound of a woman sobbing, yet fearing to let her sobbing be heard. I traced the sound to the outer circle, at the point farthest from the *brujo*-doctor, toward whom the painted woman was advancing with the infant, now unwrapped from its rags and squirming in her upheld hands. The other woman, she who sobbed, was flat on the ground, but her face was slightly raised and the eyes that stared at Tamayo were the eyes of Rama.

It was then that I realized the whole brutal truth. They had taken her infant from her to be a human sacrifice to the evil god, *obi*. And she—poor, ignorant wretch—had been compelled to submit to the decree of Tamayo, high priest of *obi*, to keep silent—for she herself was of the cult.

My heart bled as I looked down on that woman where she lay, powerless, herself as much a victim as her child, her only fault that her baby was as nearly *white* as *obi* could desire. My hand was on my automatic and I

had drawn it, when—

“My dirk!” I heard McBeth exclaim under his breath.

I did not look at my host, my attention being further riveted by the new link in the chain of circumstance. Tamayo had taken the whimpering child in his left hand, holding it up by the feet. In his right hand had appeared a curiously shaped two-edged knife—a highland dirk—McBeth’s at a glance!

So! It had all been part of the same mumbo-jumbo scheme—the cairngorm, the dirk, the baby. But it was no time to attempt reasoning about the processes of the connection. Tamayo was getting ready for that one stroke which would spill the child’s blood most rapidly.

A cold sweat was upon me. I forgot McBeth. I did not even wonder what he might be doing or planning to do. Only I saw. Only I obeyed that impulse which makes a white man respected. I leveled the automatic, resting it on the *ceiba* limb, and took careful aim at Tamayo’s heart. But between the command of the brain and that command’s transmission to my forefinger, another hand than mine took charge.

McBeth dropped from the limb directly over Tamayo’s head! I did not know he had left my side and crawled further out to that vantage point. He threw all his weight of bone and sinew astride the high priest’s neck. I heard something crack. I saw Tamayo collapse like a tree struck by lightning, McBeth on top of him. I heard the wail of a child and the cry of a woman. I saw Rama dash forward and snatch up her *pequeña* from the beaten ground. I saw a great stirring among the *obi* worshipers. All these things I heard and saw in a flash, and lastly, the fallen Tamayo roll over on his back, revealing the dagger of Macbeth sunk to the hilt in his ribs.

Whether he was quite dead, whether his neck was broken under McBeth’s terrific descent, whether McBeth turned the dirk upon

Tamayo or Tamayo fell upon the weapon in his own hand—I do not know—McBeth has never expressed his own opinion.

But all these things happened in a few seconds before a greater semblance of hell broke loose upon that scene.

“To me, Blythwood!” roared McBeth from where he stood with his legs planted wide apart over the body of Tamayo. In his right hand he held a revolver with which he fanned the air before that howling mass of black barbarians.

What had become of man Friday I did not know. It was a moment for but one thought at a time. McBeth’s revolver spat fire and a gigantic Negro who had attempted to rush him crumpled up and fell. At the same instant I, having crawled farther out on the limb, dropped at McBeth’s side and opened fire with my automatic. My appearance, coupled perhaps with the fear that my armed people were behind me, checked the threatened rush for a few moments.

“Hold them a second!” said McBeth in my ear.

Out of the corner of the eye that was trained along the automatic-barrel I saw McBeth lean over the body of Tamayo, then disappear for a moment behind me. At that the mob came on with a sudden outburst of rage. I know now that it was McBeth’s action which goaded their fury beyond fear of our weapons. He had plucked the dirk from Tamayo’s heart, turned around, reached up and coolly pried the rest of his ancestral property from the brow of the great god, *obi*.

But a second later he was back at my side. Between two quick shots into the shrieking, seething blacks he said:

“Got it, Blythwood. But we’re tight fixed.”

We were. I did not have an extra clip for my automatic. I doubt if McBeth had shells other than those in his two revolvers. When the first of the latter was emptied he

thrust the weapon into my left hand as he drew his loaded second and grunted:

“Club! You’ll need it. Better than automatic.”

And then, without the slightest warning, the *brujo* people scattered and took to the bush. In ten seconds we had that arena all to ourselves, except for the body of Tamayo and a sobbing woman who crouched against the cliff wall behind us with a baby in her arms. McBeth was not deceived, however; neither was I. Swiftly we looked around for shelter. I was for taking to the jungle to our left or right on the chance of escaping in the darkness; but McBeth did not even comment on the suggestion. His eyes were fixed on the wall of rock behind the idol. There the cliff slanted inward slightly—off plumb.

“In here!” he snapped. “Mumbo-jumbo will protect some. They’ve no guns. Rocks from above won’t touch if we hug close.”

So in we got, flattening ourselves and compelling the woman to do likewise against the in-slanting face of rock. *Obi*—or mumbo-jumbo, as McBeth contemptuously called the thing—formed some sort of protection in front.

Presently a rock crashed down from above, dropping in the narrow space between us and *obi*.

“Hope they don’t hurt jumbo,” said McBeth coolly. “So far, so good.”

Yes—but how was it to end? I had no answer, nor had McBeth. That answer, however, came unexpectedly, although not before we had spent nearly an hour, besieged by stones and rocks, watching the demolition of that partly protecting idol in front, dreading what would happen to us when the fire died down and went out, leaving us in darkness.

The answer was announced in due time by an uproar which told its own story. Man Friday was our salvation. Seeing our peril he had discreetly descended that tree by the regular route, made all speed through the

jungle over the ridge to the camp of my people and removed the half-dollar from under his tongue just long enough to make himself understood.

The way those coast fellows sailed into their own people was a racial disgrace. But then they were highly civilized persons from the city and they had two *generales* among them, to say nothing of guns and ammunition and a chance to shoot off the latter.

But we did not have it all our own way even then. We fought a retreating fight right back to McBeth’s place; and there we were besieged all night, while at the advice of my host, I packed up for a hurried trip to the coast. He had decided that a vacation was about due himself, meaning, however, to return to his gold concession when the time was ripe to work it.

Thrice during that night the *brujo* people fired the bungalow, and as many times we extinguished the blaze and fired the enemy! At dawn we started for the coast—four days of hard going. Not a soul was in sight as we marched out of that settlement; but that the *brujos* were still on the warpath was evident in the several ambushes and more or less open attacks we suffered during the first two days and nights. Then they gave us up.

We had taken man Friday and Rama and her baby along with us. On the way Rama told her story—to McBeth. It was she who had pried out the cairngorm at the order of Tamayo. When that devil-person noted the awe with which his less intelligent associates regarded the strange yellow stone, doubtless the idea dawned of making it an *obi* fetich and the knife to which it belonged. Rama, again at Tamayo’s secret command, filched the dirk from McBeth’s sheath while we slept and Tamayo probably decided to “consecrate” it as the sacrificial knife of his voodoo altar.

The unfitness of choosing Rama’s baby as the first victim of the knife the baby’s mother had stolen, probably never occurred to

that devil-person, Tamayo.

Man Friday, I duly rewarded with enough silver to keep off *obi* for a year or two at least. I shipped him back to his own island, Jamaica, after vetoing my own thought to keep him as a henchman. Rama and her child were turned over to the care and the discretion of the American consul at ——

Well, he is still, I believe, in office

there and he had trouble enough with us at the time. He had hard work keeping us under cover at the consulate and getting us out of the dark island where we had violated, with armed force, the lives, personal liberty and spiritual happiness of a people who, as Professor Provan more than ever maintains—

However. McBeth says he is going back; and it would be just like him to do it!