

TAMBA'S DRUM

By A. R. STUART

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The very air about him shuddered and reverberated. "No. Tamba! No-o-o . . ."

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IT was hot as sin. The heat beat on him, running the sweat down his face, his neck, his hands. Mixing it with the blood which stained the ground around the native. Nextern looked up briefly as a lion coughed outside the thorn *boma*, then turned his attention back to the wounded man.

The ebony, scarified face was bitten away. Long parallel scratches ran down the chest and half the abdomen had been torn out

by powerful, disemboweling claws. Nextern shook his head as the native gave a final sigh, half cough, half grunt and lay still. He washed and dried his hands, straightened the contents of the medicine kit and snapped shut the lid. He turned to the gunbearer behind him.

The slender, emaciated negro regarded him silently through half closed eyes. Twisting scars chased each other in ranks across the sullen face and wisps of black hair

protruded from his chin.

“Sorry, Tamba,” Nextern said, “nothing I could do for him. He was too far gone when the men brought him in.”

The savage’s expression did not change.

“Why, oh white lord,”—there was a hint of mockery in the guttural tones—“did you not let me try my magic?”

Nextern grimaced. “Look here, Tamba. The man was dying of shock and loss of blood when they brought him in. Surely you’re not going to tell me that you could have healed him with your dancing and shouting? Rattles and gourds and tomtoms are all right for scaring people half to death, but”—he indicated the horrible wounds on the body of the dead native— “don’t tell me you could have drummed up a cure for that!”

Tamba regarded him solemnly, his face remaining grim and hostile. There was a trace of nobility in the features, a heritage from generations of ancestors who had ruled the tribe. A nobility that might even be found on Satan’s fallen countenance. The stamp of true evil. But Nextern was a hunter, a realist, an unimaginative man.

“Thou art a fool, oh hunter,” said Tamba evenly, as one who states a self-evident fact. “Even as all white hunters. All laugh and sneer at Tamba and his little medicines.” The black eyes narrowed suddenly and his face came so close that Nextern could make out the knitted lines of self-inflicted wounds, the redness in the corners of his eyes, the strangely empty pupils behind slitted lids.

“Have you not noticed, white man, how many of your race never return? Have you not wondered and tossed restlessly while the lion, the river horse, the snake pick always the white to kill?”

Nextern felt a cool chill running on centipede feet down his spine. It was true. This was bad country for white hunters.

Something always happened. If a canoe did not overturn, then a hippo charged illogically or a lion lay in wait in a thicket previously well beaten. It seemed funny how few of the blacks suffered from these accidents while always, the white man, ivory poacher or legal hunter, died horribly.

The beater this afternoon was the first example of disaster to a native that Nextern had come across in a long time. He looked at Tamba. The yellow eyeballs and hollow pupils expressed, somehow, hatred and contempt. And a superiority, a feeling that Nextern could not define but which he did not like one little bit. He drew away.

“It is either accident, or”—he studied the witch doctor—“the men have orders to lead the whites into danger and desert them. Nothing has happened to me, I see.”

TAMBA’S face relaxed into a calm, bland smoothness, like the surface of a marsh lake.

“We are ignorant, oh man, yes. Ignorant of your machines and your knowledge of wheels and the lightning that you take from the sky to serve. But we know now”— he gestured with his hand at the gun-bearer—“how to shoot the fire-stick and the small thunder guns you have brought. We learn, oh man, but you do not.”

Once again the eyelids closed, contracting slowly like the lips of a wound. “You do not learn that we, too, have our deaths.”

Nextern shrugged. “Yes, the poison, the spears and arrows, thorn traps and stake pits. These are your deaths. And with one great firestick I can destroy them all.”

The witch doctor drew away from the heavy bulk of the hunter. He turned slowly and majestically toward his hut in the center of the thorn-surrounded village. He walked a few paces and turned.

“We have other deaths,” he said, inspecting Nextern with folded arms. “Other

deaths, indeed.” He nodded his head as if in meditation, then ducked into the dark, low doorway.

Nextern strode after him. Two stalwart guards stepped immediately from the hut and barred his way. He pressed against the spears but, large as he was, he knew he'd have no chance if these two warriors chose to settle the matter their own way. And shooting them would only close this and all other villages in the neighborhood to him and his safari. He shrugged and turned away.

From the hut behind him came the sound of muffled chanting. The voice rose and fell rhythmically, seductively, mouthing strange words and phrases, sounds with no meaning. Nextern had the nervous idea that the sounds were meant to imitate rather than to convey reason. He shuddered. The chant broke off.

As he walked toward the exit through the high stockade, he felt rather than heard something keep time with his steps. The earth moved beneath his feet at each pace. He halted stock still and listened. From the entrance to the hut came the full, round and monotonous note of a drum. Not crisp, not sharp, but slurring, hissing; swelling in volume and dying with each beat.

Harroom—harroom—harroom.

The stick must be muted with cloth, he thought instinctively while the other half of his brain was busy stifling the horror that crawled over his scalp.

Step—step—step. *Harroom—harroom—harroom.*

He was gladder than he consciously knew when he had put the village behind him and marched out into the jungle. Away from the taut hide and hollow log which mocked and called and mocked again. Into the jungle and its silence, its soft, sibilant noises. Away from the heat.

But as he put more and more distance between himself and that foul hut centered

among the mud-walled thatches, the rhythm followed him. At first he did not notice the pounding. He was kept busy watching his footing, guiding his steps through the clutching vines and trailing streamers that caught at him.

That had killed the rhythm. He smiled to himself. Can't very well keep time to this sort of march. No timing at all. Pick up your feet, slide them along, untangle them when necessary. Stop, go ahead, slow down.

And then it came back. But this time there was deeper significance. He did not understand it at first and then, laughing at himself, he realized that it was his own pulse he was hearing. The great arteries in his neck, constricting, expanding; systole, diastole. The soft tissues of his body, not the dried goat's hide, taking up the beat. He shook his head disgustedly.

“Touch of fever,” he told himself.

That evening he took an extra dose of quinine and beat the boys to work off his excess nervousness. There was muttering in camp that night but he paid no attention. He'd show these black, ignorant cowards. Getting out of hand a bit, eh? Well, a few whistling strokes of the *sjambok* and they'd quiet down.

They cowered as he strode into the light of their cooking fires swinging the heavy rhino hide whip by a thong from his wrist. He beat them mercilessly and then turned his back on them and went back to his tent.

He sat down on his cot and began to undress, slowly, carefully, taking his time. Hellish to be coming down with fever now. Good game country, ivory about. He'd been a fool to beat the blacks. They were all right. It was the drum. It was Tamba, back in the village. He dropped the boot to the ground and held his head in his hands.

Harroom—harroom—harroom.

It rustled up, slipping into his consciousness; growing into a quick crescendo, dying with each beat of his heart,

each throb of his pulse. He took another dose and washed it down with whiskey. He shook his head. Bad practice, that, he warned himself. Then he chuckled. He's really got you going, Nextern. A dumb, black, dirty fellow in a child's devil costume. And you let him slip the needle to you.

He lay back, still dressed, on the hard surface of the folding cot. Outside he could see the fires dying. The drum beat constantly—louder, softer, increase, decrease. The bearers lay back in sleep, the embers died. The drum kept on.

He turned, he twisted, he rolled to rid himself of the rhythm. And gradually he found himself railing in time with the pounding; tensing first one side of his body, then the other. He sat up.

Harroom—harroom—harroom.

This won't do—won't do—won't do. I've got to stop—stop—atop. Get out; do something. Walk, run—anything to get away. He put on his boots knowing that somewhere a part of him was screaming to halt. This was fever; delirium.

His feet moved separately, like those of a puppet. Invisible strings jerked each one forward, putting his weight over on that foot, lifting the rear one and setting it ahead. He stalked slowly and stiffly past the dead fires, the sleeping natives. Out through the gate in the thorns.

At night, the jungle is never silent. There is an overpowering oppression, like a blanket of fog, and always the jungle coughs, rustles, screams. Tonight it was different. Somehow the atmosphere had changed. Noises were queer. They were higher—or lower. No ordinary sounds came to him as he pushed his way through fever-born foliage. There were high squeaks and rough sawings. Thuds and shudders of the earth, as though a herd of elephants were pounding near him. The ground was coarse under his feet and occasionally, small boulders rolled away from

his boots.

Once something roared over his head like a bomber with motor gunned full blast. And he heard other things. Giant things they must have been, rushing past him, hidden among the strange, flat, blade-like trees. He heard scuttlings and odd, thin whines.

This was nightmare.

And still the torment went on. Plod—plod—plod. Thud—thud—thud.

Harroom — harroom — harroom. The drum maintained its infernal beat.

HE TRAVELED—hours, days, weeks it seemed in the altered time sense of his deluded mind. As he pulled and pushed and squirmed his way forward the beat of the drum grew louder, more sonorous, deeper. There was something almost human now, in the first wheeze, the first aspirant hissing of the air before the full boom burst resonant in his body. Sobbing, he fought against the compulsion but still it forced him on.

I'll wake up, he thought desperately. I'll come out of it. I'll be weak, exhausted, starved. But I'll come out of it.

He broke out of the last patch of growth and staggered weakly into the open. He fell forward on his face. Sobbing, gasping, finished. But the beat kept on, filling his body and brain with the rhythm he could not still. He rolled over on his back, eyes staring wildly.

He groped his way to his feet and swayed, gazing fearfully at the tremendous structure.

It was a great, lofty cylinder, springing from the ground at his feet, stretching farther than he could see. Up into the mist, around and away from him on either side it went. Mighty cables crossed and re-crossed the smooth sides and disappeared under the lower edge. Strange designs sprawled jaggedly over the smooth wood, and high up, almost hidden in the mist of distance he could make out a

thick black tangle hanging down. As he watched, a great black hand appeared above. The hand opened out into a pink palm and fell, sliding with the grace of a serpent.

Harroom! went the mighty drum.

Nextern dropped to his hands and knees. He wanted to lie down, to sleep, to die if necessary. Anything to get away from the dream. This was the witch doctor's drum. The drum of Tamba. He understood now what was hanging down from the upper rim. Scalps, heads, bones and human hair, that was the thick tangle. And the black hand, the glistening palm. They were Tamba's.

Again the shock of concussion raveled his system. He crawled hopelessly forward toward the drum. Got to stop it.

Harroom—harroom—harroom.

He hauled himself to his feet only to tumble over again with the next step. He crawled and dragged himself up to the drum. As he approached the base, black fingers snaked stealthily over the upper rim. The pink palm kept its beat but the fingers slowly lifted until there was a gap between the ground and the circular edge.

Blind, unseeing, mechanically, Nextern crawled on, gripping the earth with his bleeding fingers. Pulling himself along,

sobbing out his breath, he kept his eyes tightly shut. Suddenly the rhythm stopped. Silence. More sinister, more deadly than anything he had known in the jungle, it fell upon him. He lay flat, arms outstretched, gasping. He opened his eyes.

Blackness surrounded him. Up, up, high above, there was a great circle of dim light. Then he knew. He was inside. Inside the drum!

“No, Tamba! No-o-o...”

His scream trailed into silence. The pounding began again. But this time there was no boom, no sound at all. The very air about him shuddered and reverberated, tearing, pulling at his flesh.

At each concussion the shadow fell. At each concussion his heart beat weaker. At each concussion blood spurted from his mouth, his nose, his ears...

IN a dark, dirty hut in the middle of the high stockade, Tamba ceased slapping the taut hide and lifted the drum. He shook it gently. From inside among the knotted thongs, a small insect fell. Tamba picked it up and, very slowly, holding it between forefinger and thumb, he crushed it.