

When Brasset Forgot

By
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I.

I HAD always regarded Brasset as a curious kind of human duck, a strange mixture of somnolence and brain, but it wasn't until his death that I really believed him a trifle mad. The newspapers at the time chronicled the passing of Professor Henry Layterman Brasset, with the usual accompanying stuff from their "morgues," and ample tribute was paid to his splendid research work in the Congo. He was tireless and energetic and original. He labored in many fields. In fact, to this man the world owes the famous Brasset rubber compound for tires, a preparation that has saved the United States government thousands of dollars in equipment maintenance. And when he died there was much sincere sorrow in the scientific world.

The medical certificate stated that death was "from natural causes," the press agreed with the doctors, the public believed what they were told, and so the world knew nothing to the contrary. But there were two men who were in a position to prove at the time that the professor's death was distinctly unnatural; one was Taylor, who will be remembered as the brilliant editor of *The Meteor*—the other is myself.

For ten years a strict silence has been kept by us about the truth of the Brasset tragedy, but I think, and Taylor thinks with me, that the time has come to present the facts. It may possibly do some ethical good, and now that Brasset has become

almost a myth no harm can result from lifting the curtain.

I am writing of events that took place in the fall of 1906. We had been dining together—Brasset and Taylor and I—and I was in particularly fine fettle, owing to the unexpected acceptance of a set of articles I had ground out on India. In addition, Taylor had commissioned me—I was the gayest of free lances in those days—to write up some special matter on rubber, which commodity was then all the rage. Hence this dinner with Brasset. During the dessert the talk ranged over a dozen varied topics, and later on I recalled the circumstances which led to becoming acquainted with the professor.

I first met Brasset at Nice, when he was on the eve of being swindled in a particularly complete style by the fascinating Nelly Forsyth, and I had the satisfaction of spoiling little Nelly's pretty game once and for all. Brasset seemed profoundly grateful about this, though it wasn't really much to bother over, and thereafter we were good friends. Nelly, by the way—but that's another tale.

The next time I ran across the academic chappie was in London, at the Albert Hall, where I

was covering the annual meeting of the Royal Geographical Society. This was some three years after the Nice episode—the professor was wont to say, in his dry way, after the Nice un-Nice episode—and I must confess I had partially forgotten all about Nelly. But the thin, metallic tones snapping from the platform brought back a good deal.

His address was quite the most interesting event in a most uninteresting program, and he told his audience—which was composed of six parts professor and two parts nondescript and the press—a few things concerning rubber, its preparations, its values, its uses, where it comes from, and what is done with it, and talked so learnedly that we all felt quite expert on the subject as a consequence.

“You are the gentleman I met at Nice?” he said, when I went up to him at the conclusion of the meeting “Under—well, rather distressing circumstances. Am I right?” I told him he was, and congratulated him on his excellent memory.

Well, on this particular night, when we were at dinner at the Savoy, over our cigars, Professor Brasset suddenly switched the current of conversation from Lloyd George to spiders, and on this peculiar topic he waxed discursive. He said he had been devoted to spiders all his life. “They give me more delight than perhaps you imagine.” We stared. He rambled out about African spiders and English domestic spiders and spiders from the Andalusian fastnesses; he told us about spiders that feed on small sparrows and spiders that will eat man’s flesh, if they can get it.

“I have seen spiders,” he said, “that would—but possibly you gentlemen would be sufficiently interested in our subject matter to see some rather curious specimens.”

“I should,” Taylor replied, and when I nodded confirmation the professor capped it by using and leading the way to the street, where a taxi transferred us, in fairly adequate style, to the Brasset flat.

Brasset was accounted eccentric because he had an aversion to entertaining. To my knowledge, he rarely invited a man to his apartments, though he was generally eager to dine a chap at the club or accept the hospitality of others. He lived with a manservant, and as he laboriously opened the door he explained with much prolixity that the man was away for two weeks “No wife, by my own choice, and no man, by his,” he chuckled.

We soon made ourselves at home. He had

some drinkable whisky and some ripping cigars, and we talked and smoked and drank for a couple of hours, and while Taylor and Brasset argued some dull point about another professor’s book, I found myself wondering why Brasset had made the concrete rule of not inviting people to see him, except on state occasions. The explanation turned up a few minutes later.

“Would you care to see my spiders now?” the professor inquired politely, and, without waiting for a reply, led us to a door of a room at the other end of the apartment.

The door was painted a dull brown, almost a russet brown, and nailed along the bottom of the door were some thick, even pieces of felt. In addition to a Yale lock, it was fastened with two strong padlocks, caught between staples. While the old fellow was bending over his series of “locks, bolts, and bars” I glanced at Taylor, and he at me, quizzically.

Soon the padlocks were off, and then Brasset turned the key in the main lock, and as he did so he called out something in an unknown tongue. I think it was Arabic, but that’s only a weird guess on my part. Anyway, it was as though the sound of his voice had unlocked something in the room, concurrently with the unlocking of the door by his key, for no sooner had he shouted than we heard a sudden and strange noise inside.

I can best describe that noise by saying that it seemed like the tapping on the floor of a thousand dead men’s finger tips. I had never heard anything quite like it. Said Brasset:

“I must warn you both that on no account must you speak while in the room. If you do, I cannot be held responsible. So long as you are quiet all will be well. Come!”

He pushed open the door and entered, and we after him; then he closed the door carefully and quickly behind us. The primary and dominant impression was that we had, by some quixotic mishap, strayed into an undertaker’s embalming room after a big railroad accident I felt disgustingly sick. The stench was awful. But in a few, seconds the nausea fell away from me. Taylor, who was never what you would call robust, seemed inclined to faint, for he turned deathly pale, but with an effort pulled himself together, too. Brasset alone was unmoved. Freely with the unautomatic certainty of a man who feels wholly familiar with his surroundings, he moved into the room saying something in his gun-metal tones and the clattering, rasping, patting noise increased!

We stood rocklike, while Brasnet went right across the room, still keeping up his weird chant, his hands outstretched toward some object. What it was we could not see, for the room was dark.

Suddenly he stopped. Shrill and sharp the chant pierced the air, and a funny feeling began to tingle in my hands. I don't know if it was fear; I don't know whether Taylor was feeling the same, but I do know that we kept a rigid silence, remembering Brasnet's injunction.

The silly song rose into a minor strain, we heard Brasnet clap his hands together very softly, and then a light blazed. I say "blazed" because it seemed like a blast of yellow flame in that warm black room. In reality it was an electric bulb, shrouded carefully with dull, brownish paper. So the room appeared as obscure as the professor's native melody. But what light there was was amply sufficient.

Brasnet knelt on the floor, singing his damned Arabic or whatever it was, and on his hands, his knees, his shoulders, all over the floor, on the walls, on the ceiling, in thick nests, in ones and twos and clusters and dozens, were *spiders*.

No normal man objects to seeing a spider once in a while under ordinary conditions, or even a couple of them, but I have to confess that the sight of a university professor in a dress suit, who had come straight from a respectable dinner at the Savoy, almost smothered by countless spiders, sickened me.

The things padded about the floor, ran up and down Brasnet's legs, pulled their way through his hair, walked across his face, hid in his beard, sat on his nose, crawled in and out of his ears, and generally nested on him. The creatures who could not get near him he picked up by the handful, while they appeared to register content, as the saying goes. It may have been genuine affection on their part and genuine regard on Brasnet's part. God preserve me from such affection!

The chant went on unremittingly, and then Brasnet rose, shaking himself free from his ugly pets, and held out something indistinct in his right hand. We looked closely, and saw that it was a little dead mouse. Taylor's breath came and went in quivering gasps which he tried to stifle.

The professor rapped out a long and twisted phrase in the jargon which the spiders seemed to understated and they ran up his body in masses and along the outstretched arm, toward the mouse. I tried to count them, but my brain refused to work; at the lowest computation there must have been a

thousand spiders on the man. And there were others in the room.

They reached the mouse. Brasnet's hand was hidden behind a palpitating, seething cloud of dark bodies and countless legs; one or two bright red legs here and there; two or three of the spiders uttered faint sighs, and we heard the mouse eaten.

That was the last straw for Taylor, for he turned abruptly and said in very healthy and unmistakable English: "Good God! Let's get out of this!" and stumbled to the door.

Instantly there was a silence, and you could literally feel it. The spiders suspended their meal and appeared to listen. Brasnet jerked, under his breath, "Quick!" and we both made for the door. Brasnet followed us. He shut and locked the door and from within we could hear them at the door, for all the world like thousands of clay pellets being thrown at the brown panels. They were trying to get through.

"It is unsafe to speak in there," said Brasnet as we walked to the living room for a stiff drink. "They become exceedingly fierce if you say anything to them, unless one uses the particular dialect I employ."

"Which is——" I questioned.

But Brasnet was lost in thought.

II.

A FEW weeks later I wanted to ask the professor about a point in rubber, and one morning I rang the bell at his apartment. I rang it six times as matter of fact without response. There was no sign of either professor or valet.

I telephoned Taylor at the paper, and told him he had better meet me at Brasnet's flat. While I was waiting I hunted up the janitor of the building, but he proved as stupid as the race of men foreordained to be janitors, and all he had to say was that the valet—only he termed it valett—had not returned, and he knew nothing of the professor.

Taylor came presently, and, after talking over the situation, we decided to risk interference and get into the apartment. We allayed the janitor with a durable piece of fiction, to the effect that we wanted to see the place with a view to renting it, and a tip evoked a duplicate key. We succeeded in ridding ourselves of him for the time being, and entered. Perhaps it was ominous, but we both turned instinctively toward the room with the dull-brown door.

I called "Brasnet!" and as the noise of my shout died away we heard the familiar clattering, padding sound from inside. "Brasnet!" There was no response. "Brasnet!"

"He's in there," I said to Taylor, and cursed myself for saying it, for something told me I wasn't far wrong. Taylor nodded.

"Burst the door in," he said.

I thought to show how absurd his remark was by pointing at the padlocks, when I realized the padlocks were off. I tried the handle of the door. The door was unlocked!

After that it was just a matter of simple

discovery. The professor's body lay on the floor, and the yellow light, which had evidently been on for some days, showed the state of things in their hideous completeness.

What had once been flesh was now a chaos of spiders. The clothes hung in patches and threads about the bones, and only a minute piece of skin remained. Along the floor, toward us, the intruders, sidled hundreds of spiders, some fat and bloated, some thin, but all bent on the one objective.

We banged the door to and went out into the sunshine.