



The Watcher at the Ford

by L. Patrick
Greene

THE highway leading from the kraal of Marfwe, a headman of the Barotse tribe, to the land of the white men—is a narrow path leaving its snakelike way through the thick jungle growth. It is rarely used and in places it is hard to distinguish from the numerous game trails which cross it. But at two seasons of the year it is a well trodden path.

Twice a year, when the newly recruited laborers are on their way to work in the mines, and again when they return gaily dressed in multi-colored raiment, bedecked with trinkets and reeking with cheap perfume, the jungle creatures are affrighted by the boisterous shouts and songs of the natives and for many days thereafter shun the trail about which still hangs the strange, detested man scent. Just before the Zambezi River is reached the jungle growth becomes even thicker and thornier, flesh-tearing brambles hang low across the path. Apes gambol in the branches high overhead and shriek maledictions on the lesser folk who walk on earth.

Trekking here is slow—slow for a man in the fulness of his strength—slow to the returning laborer, his heart on fire with eagerness to return to his people and show off the knowledge acquired while in the service of the white man.

Even Marfwe found the way all but impassable, and Marfwe, though he was no longer a young man, had the strength of a lion in his

mighty shoulders. So, with an indomitable courage and determination, as though driven by some power within, he struggled onward, hacking furiously at the creepers which sought to bar his way.

Behind him, eyes heavy for lack of sleep, bodies bent with weariness, walked six women—his wives. They were heavily laden, and as they walked they chanted a dismal dirge. Occasionally the cadence was broken by one, bolder than the rest, who raised her voice in protest.

“We can go no further, O Marfwe. Let us rest ere we drop to the ground and sleep the long sleep. How much longer must we suffer for the folly that drives thee on?”

He only answered:

“Have patience, ye black cows. After a little ye shall rest.”

Now the way led up a steep incline, and murmuring as of the wind soughing in the tree-tops, or the rushing of mighty waters, caught the ear.

“The journey nears its end,” said Marfwe.

“It is well,” muttered she who had spoken before, “else would I die.”

The jungle growth became less dense and at the top of the rise they came out of a small, bare plateau. Before them flowed the mighty river, and the women, forgetting their weariness, pressed forward eagerly for a better view, and seeing,

gazed spellbound in awed amazement. Truly the Zambezi is the mother of all waters, and the story of ages is told in her rushing waters.

The song of the river was almost a lullaby. One by one the women dropped to the ground and slept the sleep of utter exhaustion. But Marfwe sat and watched knowing that Lady Zambezi is most dangerous when seemingly asleep. Ever changing like a capricious woman, she rushes on to her death at the place of thunder, to Mosi-oa-tunya—the Victoria Falls.

The sun set in the west and for a time all was dark, a brief lowering of the curtain before top rising of the moon. The apes hushed their chatter, and all was silent save for the droning of myriads of mosquitoes and the murmuring of the rushing waters. But still Marfwe stirred not. The moon rose and passed slowly on her journey and still Marfwe watched.

With the coming of the morning sun the women bestirred themselves lazily, then rising one by one went slowly down to the river to perform their ablutions.

“Guard ye well,” warned Marfwe. “Perchance a schelm, a crocodile has its habitation hereabout. The scent is strong.” And indeed an almost overpowering scent of musk filled the air.

“Get ready the food,” Marfwe ordered when they returned, “for in an hour’s time ye must be on your way to the kraal.”

Silently they obeyed him and when they had eaten he said:

“Take with ye but little food, for I stay here until the work for which I came is accomplished. Return ye to your huts. Lightly laden ye should there arrive ere, the setting of two suns. See that ye tell no man of my coming to this place, or that ye know aught of my purpose.”

“Nay, lord,” said one. “It is not fitting that we should leave thee here, alone, unattended. If ye would not have us all, at least choose one that she may stay and minister unto thee. It is not meet that one, such as thou art, should act the part of a poor man, or of a youth too young to have a wife to labor for him.”

“What I have said, I have said,” answered Marfwe. “See that ye keep my counsel.”

“It is well,” said another. “Of a truth we cannot tell thy purpose when it is not known unto us.”

Marfwe affected not to hear, but sat watching the waters before him.

The woman shrugged her shoulders and

turning to her companions, exclaimed:

“Tcht! Sisters. Marfwe the Warrior, hath become a vain dreamer. Let us be going. See, the sun is mounting higher, and the trail before us is long.”

With one accord the women rose to their feet and cheering themselves with the song of the “home-coming,” started on their return journey.

Long after the songs of the women had died away in the distance Marfwe sat motionless, his eyes fixed on the rolling river. It was as though he were bewitched by some mighty spell which held him fast bound.

“It is good,” he muttered, at length. “Here will I wait and watch. But now to build me a hut, for who shall say how long the watch will be?”

Three weeks Marfwe labored at his hut. Near to the place where the trail entered the river at the Ford did he build the hut, yet so cunningly did he build that it was hidden from the sight of any who might pass by that way. Three weeks did he labor for he did not work steadily but sat for long hours watching the Ford.

He had seen the river in her many moods. Now flowing calm and placid like molten silver under the benign rays of the moon. Again whipped to a raging devil by the fury of a sudden storm, a black evil thing that showed its white fangs as it met opposition, from the half-sunken rocks which marked the Ford. And again, swollen out of all proportions by a tropical cloud-burst, and yellow with the mud washed down from the surrounding hills—no longer a leaping, living thing, scintillating with light, making rapierlike darts, but—a yellow, murky tide that threatened to overflow and inundate the land; a slow inexorable battering ram.

And the next day Marfwe had seen the mighty river — whimpering like a beaten thing, as though spent by its previous exertions—at its lowest ebb. At the Ford the water was only knee deep but Marfwe knew full well that the crossing was no less dangerous. On either side of the Ford were deep pools and always the current ran swift. Besides at such times the crocodiles were more active. He had seen two of them being carried down-stream by the flood at the rate of five or six miles an hour. And these two had joined the other and had taken up their abode on the sand-bar which marked a turn in the river just below the Ford. And as Marfwe watched them, their bodies in the deep water, their lower jaws resting on the sand-bar in shallow water, their mouths wide open,

sucking in the myriads of little fish washed down by the flood, he rubbed his hands together and chuckled gleefully.

One night—the moon was full and her light as clear as day—a buck, hard pressed by wild dogs, leaped past him into the river. The scent of musk suddenly became stronger. The water was whipped into a frenzy by the furious lashing of crocodiles' tails as they fought over their prey. Then silence save for one half-choked plaintive bleat and the howling of wild dogs disappointed at the loss of their meal.

Thereafter, when Marfwe hunted and made a kill, a goodly portion of the carcass he threw into the river and gloatingly watched the evil spirits of the river fight for the tasty bit.

Two moons had passed ere the coming of Marfwe to the place of the Ford, when he was disturbed at his evening meal by the shouting and songs of men on the opposite bank of the river.

He jumped to his feet and snatching his assagai ran to the river bank directly overlooking the Ford. On the other side, in the half light of the dying day, he could see some eight or ten natives.

He peered steadily until the lighting of a fire satisfied him that the travelers would not attempt the Ford that night.

"It is no matter," he said. "It is better to work by the light of day."

Nevertheless he slept but little that night, and many times left the shelter of his hut to pace impatiently on the bank of the river.

On the rising of the sun he watched them take the Ford, watched them climb slowly down the steep bank and enter the water. They held hands, forming a chain, and moved very slowly, the leader feeling his way with a long stick. They shouted as they waded, and the leader and the one who followed in the rear incessantly beat the water with the sticks they carried, as a matter of protection.

Half-way across the line halted and now Marfwe could easily discern the features of the men.

The fierce light died out of his eyes, his weapons fell from his hands, and he squatted on his haunches. But still he watched, though his attitude was now one of a passive onlooker.

Once again the line moved forward—even slower than before, for here the river ran swifter and deeper.

Of a sudden the man at the end of the line stumbled and lost his hold on the man before him. Before he could recover he was swept off his feet

and carried away by the current. He disappeared under the surface of the water and there was no further trace of him, save a reddish tinge in the water.

The only effect upon the others of their comrade's fate was to urge them to redouble their efforts.

"Greetings to thee," said Marfwe, when the travelers had finally reached the top of the steep bank and had thrown themselves on the ground that they might recover somewhat of their strength before they continued their journey.

He who had led the way across the Ford, looked up and grunted:

"Eh, bor. Greetings to thee also." Then seeing Marfwe's head ring he made a mock salute.

"Thy pardon, O Headman."

"It is of no matter," answered Marfwe indifferently.

"Of what kraal art thou?"

"Shumba's kraal, O Headman. Four days' trek to the west from here."

"And hast worked in the mines?"

"Even so."

"Then knowest thou of certain of my people—of the kraal of Marfwe?"

"Aye. They will be here in a few days. They come after the white man hath built a way across the river."

"What mean ye? Truly ye speak words of folly."

"Not so, old one. The white man says that too many hath gone to the land of the Great Spirits through the gate of the Ford—even as ye saw one go this day."

"It hath been this way since before time was. Can the white man change it?"

"Without doubt. Great is the power of the white man."

"Then why stayed ye not until the way was made safe?" asked Marfwe scoffingly.

"Twelve moons hath passed since we left the place of our fathers. We are eager to count our herds' increase and to greet our women folk. As for him who hath gone—what need to mourn for him? Shall not all that he hath be divided among us?"

"Aye, that is so," assented Marfwe.

The other looked at him curiously.

"Art waiting for others to come, O Headman, that ye may cross in safety? An it be so, we will cross again with thee."

"Nay. I have no desire to meet the fate of him

who was one of ye.”

“Then is it permitted—”

“Nothing is, permitted,” interrupted Marfwe. “But say now. When comes the white man?”

“On the morrow he should be here. Now farewell, O Headman. Already we have tarried too long.”

At his words the others rose to their feet, grunted out a farewell salutation and soon, chattering and gesticulating like so many apes, were soon out of sight and hearing.

For a long time Marfwe stood gazing disdainfully after them.

“Tcht!” he spat out at length. “And it is such as these who hold themselves better than we old ones. They disdain the wisdom of the fathers and laboring under the earth like worms become like little children in whom there is no strength. Would we, in days gone by, have watched one of us carried away by the schelm as was this one to-day? Nay. But they, reckoning the wealth earned in the white man’s service, wearing the white man’s clothes and aping his ways, count that they have gained— not lost. And now,” he burst out passionately, “the white man, not content with causing my people to become weak like little children, would come between me and the purpose for which I came to this place.”

And on the morrow, as foretold by the returning native, came the white man.

Many porters the white man had with him—fully ten score, and all carried heavy loads.

Marfwe, hidden from view, watched them, as under the white man’s direction, some stretched a stout cable from shore to shore, while others put together a large box—a punt it was—but Marfwe, not having seen or heard of one before, could not call it by that name.

He watched with eagerness the crossing of the workers who came to make fast the rope on his side of the river. There were many of them, and as they were linked together by the rope they carried, they had one hand free with which they beat the water continually. And such a noisy demonstration did they make that the crocodiles did not molest them.

When the rope had been tied securely to a tree jutting out from the bank, the leader of the workers signaled to the white man on the other side. Then the flat-bottomed boat was carried down the bank and floated on the water. The white man got in and pulled himself across by the rope.

Marfwe’s eagerness to see more clearly the

operation led him to part the bushes before him, and in doing so he brought himself in full view of the workmen.

They ordered him to come to them, and when he showed signs of flight surrounded him and brought him to the bank just as the white man clambered up to inspect the strength of the knots by which the rope was tied.

He glanced up as his men drew the struggling Marfwe toward him, and, pushing back his sun helmet, wiped the perspiration from his face.

Marfwe, seeing him now clearly, called out:

“How now, Dinabantu? Do ye stand idly by and let these black dogs of thine misuse me? This was not thy custom in other days when we hunted together. When I dragged ye away, sore hurt, from the charge of a ‘rogue’ elephant, ye did say that thy life was mine. But perchance ye have forgotten.”

“What! Is it thou, Marfwe?” the white man cried joyously. “Nay, I have not forgotten.”

“Let go of that one,” he ordered his men. “He is my friend. There is nought of evil in him.”

“But what,” he went on, turning again to Marfwe, “dost thou here? Me thought thou hadst forsaken the hunting trail, and surely thou art not on thy way to work in the mines!”

Marfwe scowled.

“Thou wert always a jest, O Dinabantu. Nay, I do but wait here to give a welcome to certain of my people.”

“Thou meanest?” The white man sensed a world of sarcasm in Marfwe’s tone.

“I mean just that. Say, O Dinabantu, why do not your people leave us black ones alone?”

“Art still mining that grievance?”

“Aye, and ever shall. The white men are turning my people into a race of fools and weaklings. Old traditions are forgotten, old customs scorned, and in their place ye give us less than nothing.”

“Yet is there now peace in the land where before our coming was naught but bloodshed—so that a man knew not if each setting sun would see his sojourn in this land ended.”

“Better that, white man, better that than this. Then we were strong and lusty, and when one died it was the sudden death of battle or of the hunt. But now my people who hath worked in the mines return to us as though dead—yet living. Their spit of salutation is red—not white. Once their war songs would have sounded on the night air, but how they huddle before the fires and mourn for things unattainable.”

"You hit us hard, Marfwe. The white man hath been somewhat of a curse upon this land. Yet heed ye, out of evil cometh much good."

"Mayhap, Dinabantu. But am I resolved that the evil shall not touch my kraal.." Marfwe spoke fiercely.

The white man looked at him curiously, then as though changing the subject, he said lightly:

"And what mighty persons are these whom Marfwe, a headman, a rich headman, look ye, waits hither to greet."

"It is a small matter, perchance, and one that concerns me only. Yet, because thou art my friend, I will tell thee. Certain of the young men of my kraal disobeyed my commands and went, twelve moons ago, to labor in the mines. Aye, they set me on one side and made a mock of me before the people. Shall I then permit these to enter again into my place? I tell thee no."

"But couldst not send others? Warriors of thy kraal?"

"Aie! No! It is to my shame I say it. There are none left in the village who will listen to my commands in this matter."

"And thinkst that thou can turn them back?"

"That is in the hands of the Great Spirits."

"Then see ye to it that ye leave the matter in their hands, for friend of mine though thou art, shouldst thou break the law, I must deal harshly with thee."

"Aie! Thou wert ever just."

"It is well. Now let us talk of other things. Remember ye the day we—"

Sunrise the following day saw the white man and his safari once again on trek. But before he departed he made several trips across the river in the boat, taking with him the native who was to be left behind in charge of the ferry.

"See ye," he said in explanation, "how that I pull the boat over by the rope which is stretched from bank to bank. Heed well that, at the time of crossing, ye never let go of the rope, else will ye be carried swiftly away by the current. When I come again other ropes will I tie to the boat making things at all points safe. Also see to it that ye make the boat fast at such times ye are not using it." Other commands the white man gave relating to the toll the ferryman should take and like matters.

"Heed my commands well," he had concluded, "for should I hear that thou hast in any way disobeyed, punishment will follow. In a

month I will return to make the way truly safe."

Thirty days later the white man came again to the Ford, and signaled for the boat to be brought over for him.

Then he who had been left behind as ferryman came out on the opposite bank and, gesticulating violently pointed downstream.

"The blamed fool," ejaculated the white man. He failed to moor the boat and it was washed away. Bring that fool here," he ordered, "that I may hold speech with him."

When his commands had been obeyed and the shrinking ferryman stood before him, the white man said:

"Do not men call me 'The Just One'?"

"Aye, lord."

"Then tell thy story before I hand thee Over to be beaten."

"In this way it happened. Thou must know that since thy departure many days since, many people have I taken to and fro across the river. Aye, it seemed that all the people in this land had heard of this wonder and came hither that they might cross the water and yet remain dry. And I dealt justly by them as ye decreed and charged as ye ordered. And at all times Marfwe — he who as here when ye came that other time—made the journey with me. Him I did not charge for he aided me in the work of crossing. A strange man, Marfwe, Inkosi. A man of few words."

"Which thou art not," interrupted the white man. "However, say on, that the story may be fully told."

"Aie! Have patience, lord. A strange man I say was Marfwe. Oftentimes when but half-way across the river he would hold on to the rope with his hands and lift himself out of the boat, and, so hanging by his hand would make the shore. Truly the strength of an elephant is in those arms.

"There came a time, we had been working hard that day and I was busy preparing the evening meal, when we were hailed from the opposite side,

"Answering their hail, I cried: 'Who art thou?'"

"Men of Marfwe's kraal. Hasten and get us, O sluggard."

"Now was I of a mind to let them bide until the morning, but Marfwe said: 'Bide ye here. I alone will go. They are my people. It is for them I have watched these many days.'

"And so I suffered him to go, Inkosi. Have I not said that I was tired, having labored hard?"

"Without trouble Marfwe took the boat across

and I saw the men go down to him. It seemed to me that they talked long ere they entered the boat.

“Slowly the boat started to cross again, for it was heavily laden and only Marfwe was pulling. They were but twenty spear lengths from the bank, Inkosi—so near that I could hear the men jeering Marfwe, urging him to pull harder—when Marfwe stumbled and all but lost his hold on the rope. Aie! and how they laughed at him. Again he slipped and this time the rope went out of his hold. He jumped for it and held it, but the boat had gone from under him and was floating swiftly away.

“Swiftly I say the boat was carried away, and the men who had laughed now cried aloud in fear. Aie! It was as though they saw the death before them. They tried to change the course of the boat – using their hands as paddles, but it was in vain. One jumped into the water and swam for the shore. A bare spear’s length he went and then was dragged under. And the others, now sensing indeed the fate in store for them, for crocodiles swam beside the boat, screamed like little children and

huddled up together as though for protection. And this but made the end more speedy. The boat overturned and then, Inkosi—

“Ah, the screams still sound in my ears at night.

“Of a truth the evil spirits of the river feasted well that day.

“And now Marfwe, who had this while been hanging from the rope, watching, acted as one bereft of his senses. He laughed aloud, Inkosi, the laugh of one well satisfied. Then he got to the bank in safety, nor spoke further to me of the ‘happening.’

“On the morrow he departed for his own place.

“‘Tell the white man, when he comes again,’ he said, ‘that Marfwe watches no more. The vengeance of the Great Spirits is a just vengeance, and evil shall not enter my kraal.’

“‘The story is told, Inkosi,’ concluded the ferryman. “ I pray thee let the punishment be light.”