



*"What the divil  
is it?"*

# Black Dog and Sweet Tongue

A STORY OF PAPUA

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“SAINTS be!” Barry whooped exultantly; “‘tis the real, Mckay! Forty ounces to the ton, if its a pennyweight!”

Sam Trenton took the lump of auriferous quartz from Barry’s shaking hand, and balanced it appraising on his own.

“I guess it is,” he admitted, with characteristic impassivity. “I’ve been searching for something like this ever since I quit looking for the Lost Lode of Montana. It’s all forty, and help yourself. But this,” frowning intently at the strange conglomerate in his left hand, “beats me. It looks like mica,” handing back the gold quartz, and prodding stiffly with the point of his heavy knife at the specimen Fothergill had unearthed. “But it’s as hard as a chunk of granite. What do you make of it yourself, Alec? You reckon to be some

mineralogist – mind, we’re not admitting that you are!”

Dry, dusty old Fothergill turned the steel-blue lump over and over in his long, big-knuckled hand. Red spots and streaks ran like marble veinings through its mass. Trenton, and the excitable Barry, shifted questioning and expectant eyes from the conglomerate to Long Alec’s unshaven mask.

“Well?”

“Well?”

“Aye-e-e!”

“Aye, the divil, man!” Barry yelled. “What the blazes is it, at all, at all?”

“Oh, palladium. Platinum in it, almost certainly. And iridium, I believe. We’d need a fire to make sure—”

“Oh, mother be! Let’s chance one! Why not?”

“Well, any smoke we’d make would probably be sighted from Black Dog’s village. That would be sufficient for most men. But of course, I know it wouldn’t trouble you. He’s probably got a few hundred Mambari bucks eating their hearts out for want of something to hunt. We’d do nicely.”

“We might chance it for once, Alec,” Trenton ventured. “I confess I’m just as sharpset as Barry to know what it’s worth—”

“Of course! Of course!” Barry interjected, beaming to find Trenton for once on his side. “Hey! You divils! Makum big fire one-time—”

“No!” Trenton cut in. “A small one’ll do. And that’s risky.”

Sedu, the headman of the half dozen Woodlark boys who formed the labor party of the little expedition, protested feverishly. Neither he, nor any of his island mates, had relished from the beginning of the journey that the petering out of their employers’ claim in the Yodda Valley had prompted. Another claim could have been had almost for the asking. They were well aware that the foothill selected was one of the “purple patches” scheduled in record and memory, among blacks and whites in the Yodda, as places whence venturers seldom returned.

Fires had hitherto been strictly taboo. But Trenton’s curt orders stilled their chattering tongues. Like the whites, they had learned to respect him and his opinions. He spoke but seldom, and always to the point.

Enough brushwood was gathered to make a blaze. Trenton dropped the conglomerate into its heart. Fothergill screwed together the sections of his blow-pipe, and dropping to his knees, set up a steady draught. An intensely bitter, choking fume soon had all gasping for breath.

“Sorra be!” Barry coughed, “what the divil have we found? ‘Tis a chip off Lucifer’s throne, surely. It smells worse than Liffey mud in August! What the divil is it?”

“Osmic acid,” Fothergill informed him between breaths. “The chlor!”

Trenton had the bottle ready. A tense ten minutes followed while Fothergill applied his tests. Handing back the hydrochloric acid to Trenton he nodded reflectively.

“Saints be!” Barry after a strangling silence protested pettishly. “Can’t you speak at all? ‘Tis like an old rusty hinge you are – needing pushing before you let a squeak out of you. What is it?”

“Much as I surmised. - Osmium, platinum, iridium, and traces of gold. A fortune in it for us all, but we’ll need machinery. The gold in the other seam’s pretty free. We can crush and dry-blow enough of that to-day to pay our expenses, and take specimens of both down to the Yodda with us—”

“And have every man-jack in the Valley on the rush!” Barry objected. “If we even only hinted at this find—”

“What then?” Fothergill countered. “You’ll, need the whole population of the Yodda with you, if you’re going to work here in safety. The more the merrier, so far as I’m concerned. Black Dog has the upper end of this gorge bottled. He and his Mambari swine would rush any outfit that carried less than fifty guns when they’re amok. Stamp that fire out. It would give us away if any of his crowd’s in the vicinity. Let’s get the dry-blower rigged; though there’s wind enough through the gorge to give us all the dry-blowing we need free.”

“I hope that darned osmic stink doesn’t float down to Black Dog’s place,” Trenton remarked. “Sorry now we lit that cursed fire. The stink’s bad yet. We could have carried all the samples needed down to Kokoda and had them assayed there.”

“We can light out at nightfall, and bring a crowd back with us,” Fothergill pointed out. “No use moving out in daylight. Too risky. We’ll make the forty miles back to Yodda in two days.”

Trenton and his partners had been drawn away from the Yodda Valley and its comparative comfort and safety by the eternal lure of the Owen Stanley ranges to the northward and west. Although at few places on its two thousand miles of surface did the Yodda Valley fail to show color for work, the eyes of those who cut themselves adrift from all that spells civilization, to tempt fortune, and gamble health – even life itself – in the *anapheies*-laden belt, turned ever to the towering mountains. If, in the valley – the settling-pan of the vast ranges – gold was to be had for mere sifting, what did those gaunt, granite sentinels guard!

Parties went out – unable to resist the lure – at intervals. True, some won back, with specimens that proved their dreams. Others, in the terse phraseology of the Yodda, “pegged out dead finish – kai-kaied.” Sometimes their bones, well picked, might be found, and exhibited as a warning to newcomers. But, always, the eyes would turn to the mountains.

Itam-Augung – the Black Dog – had, a few years before, been the Mamoose of a populous and fairly peaceful – or, at least, unsuspected – coast village that spread itself halfway between Port Morseby and Samarai. The increasing and unaccountable disappearances of parties whose occasions carried them through his demesne, had led to investigation, and investigation, to a purposeful punitive expedition.

Itam-Augung had not waited for the expedition. He and his tribe had packed bag and baggage, and fled from the coming retribution northward to the Stanley fastnesses. The secret store of modern guns he had detached from their now silent owners, went with him. His coast village he left in flames.

His new village he built in the choke of the gorge in which Trenton's party had made their find. It soon became known to all orthodox headhunters within fifty miles as a good place to keep away from. Access to the broad and bountiful river was effectually barred to others by his presence. The warlike Giras, to his westward, abandoned their ancestral hunting ground, and moved across the swiftly-flowing Gira, so that their sleep might be less disturbed by his stealthy incursions in search of meat.

Manis-Lidah – he of the Sweet Tongue – the Gira Mamoose, had sent very respectful, very civil declinations in response to Black Dog's coarse invitations to visit and dine. Dinners of which he and his were likely to form the piece-de-resistance did not appeal to Manis-Lidah. Rather would he eat than be eaten.

Fothergill and the voluble Barry worked the dry-blower while the Woodlark boys crushed the soft ore. Trenton kept watch, his powerful prism binoculars constantly searching the pad that led to Black Dog's stronghold. Rough though the method of extraction they employed, they had little to complain of when the shadows of the Stanley giants lengthened out, and crept across the foothills.

## II

NIGHT came with startling suddenness. Their light outfit was packed, and slung across the shoulders of the Woodlark boys. Leaving El Dorada to await their return, they set their feet towards the southeast entrance to Black Dog's

gorge, and back to the Yodda. Two miles had been covered when Sedu hissed a halt, and scurried swiftly back to the whites.

"Bushman live for catchum, tuan," he wailed. "Smellum Fire! Smellum fire!"

They sniffed the faint, pungent fume of dried mulberry twigs and leaves. No fire could be seen, but that fires were near none doubted. The wind came straight down the gorge towards them. The fires must be in the track that led from the find to the open valley.

Trapped! Itam-Augung at one end, and, at the other, someone probably equally unpleasant! When they had entered the gorge at dawn the road had been clear!

"Off the pad and into the bush, as quick as your legs'll carry you," Trenton directed huskily. "Whoever they are, they're not here for the good of our health. Work up above them, and let us see what we can make out with the prisms.

"Oh, sorra be –"

But Trenton's advice was so sound that even the argumentative Dan refrained from further disputing it. Leaving the native pad – smooth, winding track, kept grassless by the slur and pressure hard-soled, naked feet through countless ages – they toed carefully up into the higher land of the gorge's sides. Trenton, an old, wary scout, led. All that could hamper their movements, save only their weapons, the prisms, and the specimens in Fothergill's big pockets, they jettisoned, with little hope of ever salving again.

An hour's breathless climb saw them on a rocky ledge, and high enough to look into the newcomers' camp. Fires burned at many points. Screens of brushwood had been built up between each fire and the road down the gorge, so, probably, that Black Dog's keen-eyed pickets should-not spot the red glares.

Trenton, belly to earth, worked his way to the ledge's brim. Parting the long wire-grass tufts, he leveled the prisms and focused them on the devil's congregation below. Searching among the moving figures silhouetted against the glowing fires, he picked out one that seemed familiar – a frizzly-headed savage who minced his steps, and, had he been white, and of the common mob, would inevitably have been the most polite and dangerous of gunmen.

A six-inch nose-stick, thrust through the middle cartilage, held the nostrils wide and flat. Paradise plumes, with the white tuft that told he

had killed his man – their were none there that lacked the white badge – swayed with his head as he swaggered. Red-and-white snakes were painted on his sooty skin where room to crowd one in was available.

“Here. Take the glasses, Barry,” Trenton whispered. “Look toward that big fire – the fifth from the eastward. D’you know that strutter there? Take a good look.”

“Glory be! ‘Tis Manis-Lidah himself!” Barry cried in dismay. “Well I mind the swine. Didn’t I see him captured, and tried at Port Morseby for the wipeout of poor Herman’s crowd? I’d know the beast anywhere. He got away for want of evidence. Well he might – and him after kai-kaing every witness for the prosecution. ‘Tis a sweet corner we’ve backed into, I’m thinking.”

“What’s his game here, I wonder?”

“Laying a trap for his friend Black Dog, very likely,” Barry hazarded shrewdly. “Finding the other horror as uncomfortable neighbor and’s determined to get rid of him if he can. Maybe meaning to block this end, and entice Black Dog down the gorge to attack him, while the remainder of his beauties slip in at the other end and bottle him in. It’d be easy to kill them off at his leisure then.”

“And us, too. The first spy he sends down the track at daybreak will pick up the prints of our boots – the pad’s soft with the rain. Not much fear of their leaving the fires in the dark. Too much afraid of ‘them devil-devil live alonga bush’ to venture. But when the day breaks –”

“Flatten down. They’ve eyes like gimlets,” Fothergill advised. “Keep watch on them awhile, and let’s think things out. One of us may strike a serviceable idea.”

They accepted the taciturn New Zealander’s advice, and stretched flat on the ledge that overlooked Sweet Tongue’s camp. Save for the flickering reflections of the fires on their watchful eyes, they might have been petrified. Through the strong glasses they saw Manis-Lidah pass from group to group, instructing, and apparently perfecting his arrangements for the extermination of his troublesome neighbor at dawn. His mind was plainly fixed on his own plan of campaign. One stubborn, disputatious chief who dared to disagree with him, took a club stroke on the skull that gave his next-in-command instant promotion. Stepping over, the twitching corpse, Sweet Tongue

passed on where his pickets moved restlessly across the mouth of the gorge.

“Say,” Trenton drawlingly broke the silence, “you saw that, eh? Now that was probably an old friend of his. Our chance, if we fall into that maneater’s hands, will be just about –,” a light out-puff of breath expressed all that words could have done. “If ever we wish to see the bubbles rise in a glass again, my friends, we’ve got to be up and doing.”

“Up and doing, eh? What?”

“Well, I figure that Sweet Tongue’s not likely to let any grass sprout on the pad before he gets busy. He must have made a forty-mile sweep to get this end of the gorge. We’ll have to create a diversion – and soon. Either of these bucks will make long-pig of us if we fall into his hands. That’s agreed. I guess we’ll start our own little demonstration right now. We’ve a good four hours before the day breaks. *Jildy gao! I* Let’s get down to the pad again.”

“What the divil are you thinking of man?” Barry demanded. “Is it anxious to shake the flesh off your bones you are?”

“Well, no. I’m figuring how to keep it on. Come on. Come along, Fothergill.”

“Aye. May as well. I suppose you’ve got some notion worth trying out. I’ve none. Good job Barry’s brain didn’t get into gear first,” he chuckled. “We’re between two merciless devils, and it’s a toss-up which gets us. I’ll chance any plan you suggest.”

“Oh blazes!” Barry yielded. “I suppose I may as well give in. Listen to me, both of you. I’ve a third share in the big find, if it ever comes to anything, haven’t I?”

Trenton and Fothergill growled an impatient assent.

“Right. I may be richer after I’m dead. Richer than I am now. If you live, and I don’t, act square to the old woman whose picture hangs over my bunk in the shack. She’s the old aunt who brought me up. Her address is on the back. There. That’s off my mind. Come on.”

Lowering themselves quietly down to the pad again, they halted.

“Off with your boots,” Trenton directed.

“What’s the matter with you?” Barry’s protests broke out anew. “I’ll die with my boots on, if die I have to.”

“You will, at dawn,” Trenton muttered gruff, “if you don’t take the only chance we’ve got.”

"Oh, glory be!" Barry tugged his shoes off, and cast them impatiently into the scrub. "What next?"

"We'll stroll down towards Black Dog's for a start," Trenton answered. "Keep on the pad, and let your feet sink in. Mind the boys walk where it's soft. Follow me."

Turning towards Black Dog's stockade retreat, Trenton led the way. For five miles – until the sharpened stakeheads could be discerned, he went boldly, trusting to the Papuan's acute fear of darkness to keep them behind their mat doors till dawn.

"Bout ship, all!"

Back again towards Sweet Tongue's camp. The journey took two good hours. The feet of the whites were shrewdly scratched with the thick wire grasses and short scrub that lined the path. When the fumes of Sweet Tongue's fires were in their nostrils again, Trenton ordered the Woodlark boys to wait by the pad side. He and his mates went on.

Sweet Tongue's pickets heard the rustling of the grasses. Even fearful shapes could be discerned, shapes that moved on all fours – or so it seemed. That they were evil spirits the pickets never doubted. Prudence counseled instant flight, but Sweet Tongue's club meant instant death. The pickets drew as far from the evil – and as near to the lights of the fires – as they dared. Little likelihood was there of their ever mentioning either the ghostly visitants, or their fears.

"Back now, and up on the ledge," Trenton ordered. "We'll lay low, and wait for the dawn. When they find our tracks – Black Dog's Mambaris', rather –"

"They'll never mistake ours for the Mambaris'," Barry despondently commented. "The boys, aye. Or, maybe Fothergill's. But ours, no."

"Well, it may not come off, but I believe it will," Trenton declared. "I know you thought it all foolish mummery, but you'd no other plan to offer. We'll see what we'll see."

Back on the ledge, Trenton brought the glasses to bear. He chuckled inwardly as he saw the terror-stricken sentries step fearfully across

their limits, casting bolt-eyed glances into the darkness at very frequent intervals. A stone flung among them, would have made them howl and scatter. But stone throwing held no part in the astute Trenton's plans.

Manis-Lidah rested at times, but seldom for long, or easily. Starting up at uncertain intervals, he made the round of his camp; inspecting arms, examining his captains on their parts, moving hither and thither, palpably anxious for the dawn and the struggle with the usurping squatter on his lands. The sentries advanced to their posts when he drew near; drew back from the outer darkness when he retired.

A finger of rosy dawn thrust upward through the mantle of night at last. Her rayed hand followed. The shoulders of the new day came through. Nine pairs of anxious eyes peered through the grass that fringed their shelter at Sweet Tongue's camp below. Sweet Tongue was marshaling his warriors for the advance.

A move was made, the Mamoose at its head. The front of the advancing horde had reached the posts of the night guards, when a boomed warning brought: all to halt.

Manis-Lidah glared unbelievably at the well-defined footprints that crossed and recrossed almost within reach of his sentries' posts. Lifting his head, he stared to where the tracks were lost in the distance.

A splitting snarl, the yelp of the hunting, blood-mad Giras, ripped all sweetness from Manis-Lidah's tongue. His warriors – even to the camp guard – swept after him down the gorge, convinced that Black Dog and those of his warriors who had, as they conceived, stolen down on them in the darkness, had been seized with fear and fled.

"Down!" Trenton snapped, as the tail of the serpentine horde swung round the curve in the pad, and was swallowed by the bush. "Down, and hell for leather for Yodda! Down, while your bones hang together!"