

THE WOOD DEVIL THING



By
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A weird, hair-raising story of a terrible *Thing*, a strange presence that acted without leaving a trace—that came and went mysteriously, and showed a vicious vindictiveness that boded ill for the luckless victim who fell into its power. A story redolent with the breath of Burmese jungles.

SERGEANT McGRATH, “Moro” McGrath, as he was called, of the Burma police, squatted chunkily on the ground cloth of a green waterproof E.P. tent and regarded with thin-lipped cynicism the uppermost of a sheaf of printed notices which the *dak* runner had just brought in.

Fresh from the government press, they announced, in English on one half and neat, round Burmese on the other, that five thousand rupees were offered for the capture, dead or alive, of one Boh Lu-Bain, convicted of dacoity, with murder, robbery under arms, arson, and an appalling list of subsidiary crimes.

The windproof acetylene camp lantern threw sharp, angular shadows across the hard-grain mahogany of the sergeant’s face as it suddenly cracked into a grim smile.

“Huh! Looks like a pretty durn safe offer—seein’ things is as they is,” he grunted to himself aloud, after the manner of white men who spend much time in the far corners of the earth, with only natives to talk to. “Mister Boh is some slick conundrum.”

His lips pressed slowly together again, and he caressed his wooden block of a chin in perplexed introspection. As he turned the case over in his mind and swore impatiently at the queerness of its attendant circumstances, another link was suddenly

added to the chain of uncanniness. From out of the dense, black jungles that ringed the clearing there sounded a wild, quavering cry, so long-drawn and so pitiful that the subdued clamor from the other tents of the little camp stopped short as though cut off with a knife.

Before the long wail had ceased to vibrate through the still, hot air, in some miraculous manner a rifle had appeared in Sergeant McGrath’s hands and he stood outside of his tent, stepping with instinctive caution away from the thin shaft of light which cut far out across the blackness from the tent flap. He listened in the intense silence which had fallen. Then—

“*Hussein Jemadar!*” he called.

“*Huzoor!*”

A tall, uniformed figure appeared out of the darkness and saluted.

“Take two men and see what that cry was about.”

The *jemadar* saluted again and disappeared; and McGrath stood peering like a nighthawk into the blacker shadows across the clearing. Presently an altercation was apparent among the men’s tents. It waxed fiercer; and shortly the *jemadar* loomed up again.

“*Huzoor*, the men are mutinous. They insist that it is the *Nat* devil who shrieks as he rends some

unfortunate, and their knees are limp with fear.”

“Fathers of many fools!” barked the sergeant. “This is no time to make monkey-chatter. There is need of speed. I’ll attend to the men later—when I come back. Make lights and double the sentry. Swift, now!”

For an instant he was a darker blot under the shadow of the trees, and then he merged into the blackness. The native *jemadar* had to marvel for the hundredth time at the speed and silence with which his superior melted into the undergrowth; and then he went to carry out his order and to acquaint the men who were afraid of *nats* of the greater hell which would presently occur to them when the sahib returned.

The sergeant glided swiftly on in the direction from which the cry had come; but, for all his unhesitating promptness, the chills kept racing up and down his spine. There was something mysterious about this case, something not altogether wholesome—to say nothing of plunging at night, and alone, into an inky tropical jungle where soft scuffings and padded footfalls sounded disquietingly from behind the tree trunks, how far or how close to be judged by ear alone. But if there had been light enough to distinguish details by, the sergeant’s face would have shown the same alertness and relentless ferocity as the other night prowlers as he slipped in and out with hardly any more noise than they, and with all his muscles tensed to jump like a cat in any direction at any moment.

Presently he became aware of a gentle crackling of twigs before him. Instantly he pressed himself against a tree, motionless as the trunk itself, straining his eyes into the gloom, while pictures of all the things that might drop on him from above raced through his mind. The bushes swished again, and a dim shape crept out not twenty yards distant and crouched, a shadow among the shadows. Most men would have yelled and fired point-blank at the shape; but Moro McGrath never stirred, only his fingers tightened slowly over the stock of his rifle which hung easily at arm’s length. He had graduated from that most efficient training school, the Philippines. Seven strenuous years had he put in as an independent scout before the high tides of his turbulent soul had drifted him just round the corner into Burma; and he rested secure in the knowledge that he could shoot from the shoulder or the hip or in midair with the speed of an electric

spark.

The crouching shadow swayed up on all fours and came uncertainly forward; then it sank behind another bush, only ten yards away this time. The muzzle of the sergeant’s rifle, still at arm’s length, swung slowly and noiselessly round, and the thick forefinger curled round the trigger, just a fraction of an ounce below the necessary firing pull.

Then the thing groaned.

“God! An’ I near drilled him!” exploded the sergeant. He sprang forward, all thoughts of things that might drop or jump out from behind trees banished from his mind, and lifted the broken thing in his arms. It only moaned.

“Pret-ty durn bad hit,” he muttered. “Got some kind of a gun, too. Feels like— Curse this darkness!” He fumbled a while with the inert arms and legs, and then presently swung them easily over one wide shoulder and strode swiftly to the camp.

The clearing was a blaze of lights, and the sentry had contrived to collect three other supports round himself in the event of an attack by the expected *nat*. The *jemadar* and others came running. McGrath handed over his burden.

“Our uniform—what’s left of it. Who’s the man? Bring a light.”

A man ran up with a petrol flare.

“Allah, have mercy!” burst from the *jemadar*. “The man *has no face!*”

The light flickered ghastly on a clotted smudge where the face should have been. Livid strips of twisted flesh were all that remained. Moro McGrath had seen what was left after the terrible sideswipe that a bear may sometimes deliver; but this thing was just a horrid crimson mess. It was as if some malignant giant hand had deliberately blotted out all chance of recognition. The sergeant drew in his breath with a whistling sound.

“Take him to the doctor, *babu*, quick! An’— here, take also this remnant of a rifle. Prepare report. I follow.”

He went to his own tent to wash up, for he was one of those men who somehow contrived to look neat and trim under the most impossible circumstances—a remnant of his soldier training. As he cleaned up, his eye fell again on the reward notices. The cynical look came back, tinged this time with something of awe.

“Five thou is a heap o’ money; *but*—personal I don’t want it bad enough to go scoutin’ up *that*

valley. Can't altogether blame my fellers for talkin' *nat*. Wonder what in thunder could 'a' done that to that poor devil." Thank Pete it's Brandon's district—"

He broke off and listened again, with his head cocked alert like a lynx. From out the jungle came another rending of undergrowth, heavy-footed and ponderous this time. The sergeant slipped out of the tent and once more became a motionless shadow at another point in the clearing. The crackling came nearer.

"Man!" muttered McGrath. "A big un. White, an' a city feller, I'll bet."

A tremendous figure broke out of the bushes not four feet from him, and plunged on past him, all unconscious. The man made straight for the lighted tent, and the watcher glided after him like a ghost. The big visitor strode into the shaft of light from the tent flap, and then wheeled like a bull *gaur* as the sergeant's voice broke on him from right at his heels:

"Durned if it ain't Dickie Travers! How'd you blow up here? Fired from the laboratory job in Rangoon?"

"Moro, old scout! Say, I'm dashed glad to see you! They told me back at the village that I'd find your camp on the Kindat Road. Tried to scare me at the same time by swearing that the woods here were full of devils, all red-hot and howling. But say, I want to see you awful bad; you're the only man in Burma who can help me out, and I had to risk the devils." The big man laughed and stretched his great shoulders.

"An', since you think you can lick your weight in devils any day, you jest came along, hey?" the sergeant grinned quizzically. "Well, there's more in heaven an' earth, son, an' particularly in the almighty jungle, than is dreamed of in Rangoon city. C'm' on in an' moisten up an' unload your chest."

The younger man needed no more urging to break into a long and enthusiastic harangue, the coherence of which was considerably marred by continuous and unnecessary digressions devoted to glowing descriptions of a certain third party. The sergeant chewed on a pipe and grinned tolerantly at his friend's ardor, though, as the story progressed, his dark face took on an expression of concern. Finally he rose very deliberately and knocked out his pipe, carefully dropping the ash into an empty tobacco tin.

"Well," he announced, with conviction, "if you think the girl's worth this damfool scheme of yours, you got it good an' proper; worse'n I ever gave you discredit for. Now lemme tell you somep'n about this Boh man. Listen careful, now.

"This Lu-Bain chief is the hardest proposition in dacoits since the famous Boh Da-Thone. An' he's no ignorant savage, lemme tell you. He's a Pali scholar an' a graduate of Rangoon College. Also he's a high-class gun artist, an' incidental the ugliest brute in Burma. Got a face like a gorilla; an' his actions are just about as inhuman."

"I don't care," persisted Travers doggedly, setting his lips with grim determination. "I've got to get that money."

Moro McGrath spun round on him from his short walk up and down the tent and shot out a sinewy forefinger at him.

"Wait a minute, son! Don't be so malice an' prepense against the man. The parade ain't commenced yet. Listen! This Boh party accrued a considerable gang an' waltzed around the country in the usual way, destroyin' the populace most prodigal, an'— Well, we had to get after him with two or three detachments, an' we hived most o' the bunch—there's some eighteen or twenty heads stuck up in the Taungyen market place for identification right now—but this Boh ideal is a slick number, an' he gets away clear. I chase him an' one or two other hard citizens into this valley of Hankow, which is the thickest, stinkiest, malarial jungle in all Chindwin, an' which, thank Pete, is out o' my district; an' here he lays up, bottled.

"So far, fine an' dandy, thank you. But now listen, son, careful. The Burmans an' my fool Punjabi constables say it's plumb impossible for any human bein' to live in that jungle 'count o' fever an' snakes an' beasts an' hell all else. Wherefore, with *pucca* native reasonin' most circumstantial an' proper, they prove that he's changed himself by means o' magic into a high-class wood demon, or *not*, all teeth an' claws an' smoke."

"Hold on!" interrupted Tracy eagerly. "How d'you know he's bottled? What proof have you that he's not gone out of the valley?"

"Proof an' to spare. Every now an' then some jungle man comes in scared stiff an' reports how he seen the famous yellow silk *gaungbaung* headdress an' the rifle with the solid-silver stock; an' once in a while friend Boh sends along a little proof, extra

an' unsolicited, jest to show he's happy an' keepin' his end up. F'r instance, a jungle man comes in the other day with his hands tied behind him an' his ears hung around his neck on a string, an' he throws up a yarn about devils howlin' an' dancin' in the dark that'd paralyze you. An' not long after, a raft floats down the river with one o' my own men, crucified an' generally used up somethin' horrible." The sergeant grimaced and shuddered at the recollection. Then he continued with deliberate conviction: "Now all that's plain dacoit humor, an' don't raise my belief in devils any; but— Now, mark me, I maintains right here that the Boh's gone crazy with the heat or the hardship or the loneliness or somep'n; but the rest o' the story ain't normal; there's somep'n I can't figure out, somep'n outside human range. Listen:

"More recently these outbursts of enthusiasm has taken on a—a kinder unwholesome nature. Two jungle men come in in a canoe with a body whose arm is wrenched complete off. *Torn*, mind you, not hacked. Then comes another, crushed jest to pulp; every bone broken, like he'd fallen out a flyin' machine. The Burmans say right away it's a *nat*; the strength required to do those stunts ain't human. An', by God, it *ain't!*"

Sergeant McGrath paused and looked darkly up through his eyebrows at his friend. Travers was visibly affected by the uncanny recital; his usual attitude of careless confidence had left him, but the determination showed relentlessly in his face.

"It's weird, Moro, old scout, and maybe dangerous; but you don't head me off yet," he maintained seriously. "I'm out after that reward, and I'm going to get it."

"Hm!" grunted the older man. "Sudden death or sudden matrimony; you lose either way. Well, there's another chapter been added to the story just before you come in. Maybe we can get some information at firsthand—if the poor devil can talk. C'm' on to the hospital tent."

The fussy little native doctor explained with much circumstance in the exaggerated whisper of his kind that his skill had so far revived the man that he was able to talk and anxious to make his report.

"Have you found out who it is?" asked McGrath in a responsive whisper, unconsciously affected by the technical jargon and calculated impressiveness of the "profession."

A mass of bandages heaved itself up onto an

elbow on the cot and saluted.

"It is Misri-Khan, sahib, *nambar sebentin*," mumbled a muffled voice from out the wrappings, and then proceeded, weakly and with many relapses, to unfold an amazing story, the gist of which was: First, that he, Misri-Khan, was a brave man, and, therefore, ignoring the devil stories, had scouted up that dim valley where all others feared to go, looking for tracks of the *Boh*. Secondly, that the total absence of tracks convinced him that the *Boh* had indeed become a *Nat*—for *Nats*, of course, traveled over the ground without leaving trace. Nevertheless, did he continue on the trail for the honor of the service, and would the protector of the poor see that he received suitable reward therefore? And finally: "On the second day, sahib, as I sought in the darkest part of the forest among great trees of *Padouk* and *Sal* many cubits high, it happened that I heard a great rending of wood, and—Allah is my witness, sahib—lifting my eyes, I beheld the father of all the *Nats* tear a great tree asunder and spring at me from the bowels thereof. The face was the face of the *Boh*, only more terrible, but the arms were of the thickness of a man's leg, and hairy as those of a spider. *Huzoor*, I have distinguished service medal; but at that sight my knees were turned to water, and I fell upon the ground; yet did I remember to fire my carbine. I am also second-class marksman, sahib, and at that distance could I assuredly not miss. Yet the ball went through the devil, and he leaped upon me, howling magic words which I knew not. That is all, sahib. He left me for dead; yet by the favor of Allah did I recover and crawl with much tribulation to the jungle's edge, where the sahib, may Allah reward him, found me. There is yet one more thing, sahib. The *Nat*, having smitten me, took my carbine and bent the barrel as a bow is bent. In witness whereof the gun is now in the hands of the *jemadar*. *Bus*, I have finished."

McGrath asked a few more questions, gave some directions for the man's comfort, and then, with significant and pointed silence, took his friend by the arm and led him out to examine the rifle. It was as the man had said. The steel barrel was bent into an arc. McGrath took it to the light and examined it with critical, narrowed eyes. The puzzled expression on his face increased to dark amazement.

"Now that's durn queer," he muttered. "I figured it might possibly have been hammered that

way, or even bitten by some powerful animal; but lookut here, Dick, there's not a mark; the bluein' ain't got a scratch on it. An' a darn queer story; of course padded out a whole heap with the good old Oriental fairy stuff; but there's somep'n mighty unhealthy in this whole business, Dick, my son. D'ja still feel all het up to go *Boh* devil huntin'?"

The determined lines on Travers' face assumed an expression of dogged obstinacy.

"Queer it is, Moro," he admitted grudgingly. "But this bogy talk is all hot air. Anyhow, if it was the devil himself, I'm not going to back out now. I've got to get that reward, and in a hurry, 'cause if I don't, her old dad's sending her home to God's country next month. But look here, Moro, old scout, you don't stand to gain anything out of this; you don't have to come. In fact, I'd hate to drag you into it; I can get a guide and go alone."

McGrath looked sourly up at him from under one raised eyebrow.

"You're in love," he snorted, "so I ain't takin' offense at anything you say. Sure I don't *have* to come. I ain't gettin' married; so I don't have to figure on a violent death as a cheerful alternative. But I know you when you look that way, an' if you're so durned desperate as all that, someone's got to take care of you. 'Tain't my district, an' I ain't hankerin' to prospect that valley, but—well, I got a feelin' that I'm the goat."

Travers shot forth a great paw and gripped his friend's hand with an enthusiasm which amounted almost to adoration in his frank, open eyes. The sergeant extricated himself hastily and hid his confusion under a gruff growl of:

"Aw, I need a holiday, anyway; an' I got a new gun to try out. 'Sides, don't you talk to me about a guide. You can't get any man to take you into that valley; an' I can't send any o' my fool Punjabis; they'd be worse'n useless. There's only one man I know who's got the guts, an' that's Mounng Tha-Dun, an old Burman hunter; an' he won't go without me, you can lay to that. So it's got to be jest We, Us, and Company."

Moro McGrath was a man who knew men. His diagnosis of the morale of his police constables was unerring. His natural impulse was to drive them, as he well knew how; but he reflected that he could not very well force them to accompany him on a private venture outside of his district. He was also peculiarly accurate in his estimate of Tha-Dun. The old tracker never hesitated. He came with direful

warnings, it is true, and much misgiving; but his confidence in McGrath's experience and resourcefulness was infinite.

So it was that only three men stood the following evening shoulder deep in a patch of *kaing* grass at the lower end of the forbidding-looking valley. They looked microscopically insignificant in their giant surroundings. High overhead was a mat of huge, interlaced branches through which the discouraged sunlight filtered with difficulty. Below a dense tangle of undergrowth out of which giant trunks shot sixty feet clear from the moist earth and gleamed ghostly pale in the perpetual twilight.

McGrath surveyed the gloomy surroundings with deep disapproval.

"Travers, my boy," he growled, "we've got one helluva job in front of us. It's goin' to take days to crawl through this, huntin' for a trail. If we find one, an' spot the *Boh* an' his fellers first, well *an'* good. If Mr. *Boh* spots us first—well, he can handle that silver-plated gun of his like an expert. Meanwhiles, no noise, no campfires, no dry clothes, *an'* no fresh grub. I'm goin' to have *some* holiday. Whosit says, 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread'?"

"Meaning how?" demanded Travers.

"Well, we're havin' all this picnic so you can commit matrimonial hara-kiri; an' I've read somewheres that in heaven they neither marry nor are given in marriage. I infers that angels fear to tread."

"And that I'm a fool," laughed Travers, with a perfect understanding of the deep strength and determination that lay beneath his friend's misogynistic grumbling. "You're a cold-blooded beast, Moro, and a wicked cynic; but you're a crafty hunter all the same, and I guess you're right about cutting out all betraying fires and being mighty cautious. Today's march wasn't so bad, but I suppose the real campaign begins tomorrow."

"No, sir!" the other dissented immediately. "It begins right here, tonight. This is Hankow Valley, son, an' we don't take no chances on Mister *Boh* bein' away visitin' friend *Nat* this evening."

Tracy, with the omniscience of youth, was rather inclined to be impatient at the old campaigner's caution; but he was reminded of the reality of their nearness to danger with startling unpleasantness. With the setting of the sun every insect sound hushed—birds there were none in that

somber tangle of trees. It was just that period of brooding mystery which falls in the tropic twilight between the sleeping of the day creatures and the waking of the beings of the night, when the period of real silence brings a surprised realization of the undercurrent of sound which has all the time been constituting the voice of the jungle. As the little party gathered wearily round their cold, cheerless meal, the eerie silence was suddenly broken by a weird, wild, whooping noise far up the valley, beginning with a low wail and ending up in a staccato, coughing shriek.

Moung Tha-Dun fell on his face and began muttering invocations to his guardian spirits.

"*Ahai!*" he moaned. "The *Nat!* It is the *Nat* who calls *Thakins*; let us depart from this evil place."

Even the white men were affected. The chill dusk, the gloomy valley, and that uncanny sound, all combined with the fantastic stories which they had been hearing to build up a creepy sensation of unwholesome mystery.

"What is it, Moro?" whispered Travers, with blanched face and wide, staring eyes.

"Damned if I know," replied the other uneasily. "It sounds kinder vaguely familiar, but I can't place it. Gee, I got chills crawlin' all up an' down my back. Wish we dared risk a fire. Guess we'd better watch two at a time tonight."

But the night passed without mishap, though once again, before darkness closed down on them, the fearsome sound rose and swelled in the distance. However, with the daylight came renewed confidence and a feeling of self-conscious humiliation at their nervousness of the night before. They discussed their plan of campaign eagerly, and arranged to work carefully up the valley, abreast of each other, and search for tracks; they were to separate so as to cover as much ground as possible, but should always remain within calling distance, in the event of anyone being pounced upon by some unknown thing. However, even with the satisfying knowledge of the proximity of friends, it was no drawing-room party. The undergrowth was appallingly thick and thorny, and progress was black, as well as heartbreakingly slow. Tha-Dun's attitude, with his imminent fear of the supernatural, was positively heroic, and what lent weight to his gloomy theories and forebodings was the fact that for five whole days never a track was found, though regularly as the darkness closed in that ghastly cry filled the air.

"It gets me," swore McGrath. "Not a durned scratch of trail of a single live thing. Even the animals have been scared out. That poor devil of a constable without a face spoke truer'n we ever gave him credit for. There's been no rain for two weeks, an' if there was any living thing in this unholy place we'd have found tracks by now."

Moung Tha-Dun dismally assured him that this was but to be expected, for *Nats* left no footprints, and the only reason they had escaped so long was that it was waiting for a favorable combination of the stars to spring upon them and rend them.

But that day at last brought to light a trail which seemed only to lend weight to the Burman's forebodings. McGrath, who was working up the center of the valley, gave the mewing otter call which had been agreed upon as a signal, and brought the others hastening to his side. They found him with set lips, and the corrugations of his hard forehead crowded together in disquieting thought, bending over a skeleton.

"Look at that!" he directed their attention in a low voice. "His ribs have been crushed in like eggshells. See, in two wide bands. Jes' 's if some giant had taken an' hugged him."

"Giant is right," agreed Travers, with a feeling of awe. "No human being could have done it. What do you think it can be?"

"Durned if I know," speculated McGrath, searching back in his mind for some parallel. "A big snake might do it, but then a snake that could do that would easily have swallowed him."

Both voices had unconsciously fallen to whispers as they stood in the presence of this mystery, and they cast uneasy glances over their shoulders, half-expecting to see some fantastic monster creeping on them.

Moung Tha-Dun had meanwhile been searching the surrounding bush. "*Thakin,*" he called tremulously. "Of a surety the *Nat* has done this thing, for yonder lies his gun, and no *man* would have left such a prize behind. Moreover," he added impressively, "the *Thakin* knows that poor jungle people have no guns."

"Well, what of it?" queried McGrath, not catching the drift of his meaning.

"None but a follower of the *Boh* would carry such a gun, *Thakin.*"

"God! I never thought of that. The *Boh* sure wouldn't go killing his own people; an', if it ain't him, then who's doin' all this mysterious murder?"

“The *Nat!*” insisted Tha-Dun darkly.

“*Nat* be hanged!” growled McGrath. “Anyhow, it’s durned funny, whatever it is. Looks to me that it’d be healthier not to separate so promiscuous. It’ll take longer to cover the ground, but it’ll be a heap more comfortable to my spine.”

As they began to approach the region from which the nightly howlings proceeded, they were able to distinguish the fearsome sound more clearly. “*Whoo-oo Wha-aa Aa-ee-ee!*” it would rise, with blood-chilling shrillness, trailing off into a high-pitched chuckle which had not been audible before. But familiarity, in this case, surely bred no contempt. Each time that the sound burst with startling suddenness upon the dank evening air the three would instinctively shrink together, and then look at one another shamefacedly.

“Damn it all!” exploded McGrath in exasperation. “It ain’t the infernal noise that gets us; we’ve all heard worse before. It’s the time an’ the place an’ the boggy stories mixed in with it that makes us jump. We got to steady up our nerves for when we do come across the thing.”

“Tell you what,” interposed Travers, “it seems that the Thing—I don’t know what else to call it—comes out only in the evening; if that’s so, we have nothing to fear as long as daylight lasts, such as it is in this dismal hole in the ground.”

The others immediately agreed with him, and the party accordingly proceeded with more confidence. All thought of danger at the hands of the *Boh* had left them. The total absence of tracks convinced them that any human beings who might have been in the valley had long since left it or were dead. But their assurance received a rude setback, and the whole mystery was forced into startling prominence a day later, when they came upon unmistakable tracks—human tracks.

Moung Tha-Dun, whose foreboding terror vanished at the sight of something that he could understand, was down on all fours in an instant, questing, nosing like a hound. He led them some little distance, cunningly examining the ground and the bushes on either side before he spoke.

“*Thakin,*” he whispered, “the trail is that of a man running, fleeing from some great fear, for he has run blindly, cutting his feet on the stones. Yet—*there are no footsteps that follow.*”

Moro McGrath, who was no mean tracker himself, had observed the same phenomenon.

“Funny! Damn queer!” he kept repeating in

staccato barks. “What the devil did he run from? Go ahead, Tha-Dun. Better load with buckshot, Travers; your Paradox at close quarters is better than a rifle.”

The trail led disappointingly to rocky ground, where it was speedily lost; but Moung Tha-Dun, who was in the lead, presently uttered an exclamation of delight and darted forward. He returned with a beaming face.

“Behold what I have found, *Thakin!*” he jubilated. In his hand he held a long strip of yellow silk.

“Well, what’s there to be so blamed happy about?” demanded McGrath impatiently, even his drawn, wire nerves all of a jangle with this dark enigma. “The gink has dropped his headdress in the scare, that’s all.”

“The *Boh’s gaungbaung, Thakin,* was of yellow silk,” grinned the other. “And if it be the *Boh* who fled, why, then, he is assuredly not become a *Nat,* and I have nothing further to fear.”

Travers groaned. “Is that all? Damn it, that only deepens the mystery. What the deuce *did* he run from? The *Boh* wasn’t a man to be easily frightened from what you all tell me. Then what was this awful thing that scared him so?”

McGrath leaned, frowning, on his rifle for many minutes before he spoke, as was his habit when thinking. “Boys,” he stated at length, “I ain’t beginnin’ to guess what kind of a banshee this is, but one thing’s clear. We ain’t counted on the *Boh* any of late; an’ if these tracks is his, we got to watch out for him as well as for the Thing. All we can do is be durned leery; an’ I’ve a notion we’re bound to find out somep’n soon; we’re right in the middle of things here.”

He was right, though he was far from guessing the horrible way in which enlightenment was to come.

That night as they sat in their camp, waiting with a sort of fearful fascination for the familiar sound, a terrible cry rose on the night air. A human cry of deadly terror.

“*Amma-lé!*” it shrieked. “Spare me! Let me go! Let—” The words were cut short by a scream of anguish. In the appalling stillness that followed the three thought they could distinguish the low, fiendish chuckle which usually terminated those awe-inspiring howlings. They sprang to their feet with blanched faces, snatching up their rifles as they did so. For a long time they stood motionless,

peering apprehensively into the dark.

"It's no use, boys," said McGrath shakily at last. "We can't do a thing in the dark. We'll jest have to sit right here. An' I don't care what happens; we're goin' to have a fire tonight."

"I'm with you!" agreed Travers emphatically. "A damn big fire!"

None of the three slept a wink the whole of that interminable night, and with the first breath of dawn they started out to discover that grim tragedy of the dark. It did not take long. Signs were plentiful enough. They soon came upon the ashes of a campfire under a great tree. Alongside lay the body of a man, gaunt and emaciated with starvation. But it was not the pinched frame with the bones almost protruding through the skin, nor the expression of awful terror stamped on the brutal gorilloid face that made the white men turn aside with sudden nausea. Neither hunger nor fear had killed the man. He lay on his back in a welter of blood with *half his chest torn completely out*. From beneath his body protruded the butt end of a rifle, gleaming silver through the clotted red. Even Moug Tha-Dun was affected. Death was nothing to him, and he had looked on worse mutilations before, the work of *dacoits*; but the horror of the superhuman force that had been brought into play gripped his soul. He shook it off, however, as instinctive habit began to assert itself, and he commenced to search for tracks. Carefully he went over the ground, examining every blade, every leaf. At last: "*Thakin*," he whispered, "*here also there are no tracks!*"

"Damn it, man, there must be!" cried McGrath. "This thing ain't a ghost. It can't vanish into smoke. If it's material enough to tear a man in half, it must leave solid tracks somewhere." Suddenly an idea struck him. "Travers," he barked, "d'you remember exactly how that other fellow lay?"

"Yes, he lay on his back, too. Why?"

"Hell, no, I don't mean that! He lay under jest such a low-spreading tree, didn't he?"

"By George, that's so! I never thought of that. You mean that the Thing swoops down from a tree?"

"Pree-cisely. An' I'm goin' to see." With the prospect of immediate action and probable danger the fierce leopard light glowed again in his eyes. "Now you watch out good an' careful above. I got to rely entirely on your shooting."

Without further hesitation he scrambled up the

trunk into whatever the leaves might hide, and began working his way along a great overhanging bough which passed over the body some seven feet above. Travers waited apprehensively.

"Here it is!" suddenly came the excited voice from above. "Here's a smear of blood—an' here's another! An' here's—well, I'll be damned!" He was directly above the body now. His voice dropped. "Here's the bark rubbed off in *two wide bands!*"

He swung clear and dropped lightly to the ground. "Now what d'you think o' that?" he demanded.

"It's evident that the Thing comes from a tree," answered Travers in a frightened whisper. "But what are those two wide bands always? The coils of a snake?"

"A big snake gripping the branch for a stroke might leave jest such a mark; but—there ain't no snake in the world could do that awful thing. I'm beginnin' to have a idea, son. That there noise is strikin' back kinder familiar. 'Jest the beginnin's of a idea. But it's too horrible; too durned fantastic; I gotta see more before I can tell you. But there's one thing clear. We *got* to keep away from overhanging branches—an' we can build all the fires we want. The *Boh*, poor devil, has squared up with the bank. There ain't nothin' owin'. Travers, my son, we'll camp right here; an' I'll guarantee the big show for this very night."

He selected a place nearby, free from low trees, and the day was spent under his direction in clearing away the surrounding scrub to guard against surprise and leave plenty of room for action. Then, as dusk drew on, they built a roaring fire over the unfortunate Boh's camp, and, at his further suggestion, retired to their clearing to wait.

"D'ja get me?" chuckled the cunning hunter. "That'll bring the Thing into the light, while we remain hid."

They were still discussing possibilities and plans when Moug Tha-Dun raised his hand with a warning gesture. His quick ear had detected the approaching sound of swishing leaves. They lay silent, while the disturbance came nearer. From the snapping of twigs and the soft thuds among the high branches it was evident that some large body was making its way toward them. Finally it could be heard in the upper branches of the lit-up tree. The three watchers were keyed up to an intolerable pitch of half-apprehensive excitement. What would

the next few seconds disclose? Their overstrung imaginations conjured up all sorts of ghostly forms. But some fiendish, intuition seemed to make the Thing suspicious. It made querulous noises and shuffled about behind the screen of leaves above in evident hesitation about descending.

Suddenly McGrath reached for Travers' gun and glided off into the darkness without a word. Even through his excitement the latter could not help admiring the snakelike skill of his friend. The situation now became intense. The unknown horror in the treetop, and McGrath swallowed up in the silent dark! Travers had to keep a grip on himself to prevent himself from shouting aloud. Suddenly the Thing moved again. It shifted its position. Travers heard the quick click of a lifted hammer, followed by a flash and a report. There came a short, coughing roar, and a vast shape hurled itself full twenty feet to the next tree, and went crashing off into the darkness.

McGrath rushed up, falling over his words. "Did you see it? What was it like? What the hell have you got in this gun?" All in one breath.

"My God!" stammered Travers. "It looked like—like a devil."

Moung Tha-Dun was on his face. "*Amma-lé!*" he wailed. "The *Nat!* It is a *Nat*, indeed!"

Meanwhile, McGrath had snapped open the breech and torn out the empty shell. "Oh, fool! Fool that I am!" he groaned. "To take up a gun without looking at the load! Man, you've got No. 4, an' I told you buckshot! Course I only tickled him. Here, gimme my rifle, an' load up this toy with somep'n solid! Tha-Dun, father of an idiot, quit your howlin' an' get up an' hustle! We got to build a whole circle of fires now. It'll sure come back; an' there ain't no use in tryin' to hide now!"

They threw themselves fiercely into the work, collecting up all the brush which they had cut during the day, and frantically chopping more, halting every minute to listen for the malignant Thing's approach. Progress was cruelly slow.

"Moro," panted Travers, "we'll never do it; and don't forget we've got to keep our fires going. I guess if we make two more big blazes in a triangle they'll light up all lines of approach."

"Guess you're right, son," grunted McGrath. "Take one each. Tha-Dun, you pile s'm' more stuff on the first!"

They had barely got their defenses lit, when a swoop and a crash in the trees announced the

creature's return.

"D'ja get that?" snapped McGrath. "It comes from another direction. *It can think!*"

It almost seemed that he was right. With devilish cunning the Thing kept out of range of the firelight, coughing and whooping with rage as it circled round behind the high screen of leaves looking for an opening, while the three men slowly pivoted with it.

For an hour this deadly game continued.

One of the fires began to burn low. A malignant ill fortune seemed to direct that it should be just the most difficult one to tend. At this point the rushing stream cut a swath between deep clay banks, and the giant trees hung lower over the water than anywhere else. The men watched the sinking flame apprehensively.

With uncanny intelligence the Thing quickly noticed its advantage, and hung about at that point, growing bolder.

"We *got* to pile up that fire," muttered McGrath. "See here, fellers! I'm goin' out a ways an' draw it to one side, an' one o' you make a run for it."

He looked carefully to his rifle, and ostentatiously went off in the opposite direction, almost disappearing in the dark shadows. It was sheer heroism. The Thing began to circle round toward him. Moung Tha-Dun thought he saw his opportunity, and raced out to the dying fire. He piled on an armful of brushwood, when the creature saw the trick. With a howl of rage it swung itself back and downward.

"Look out, Tha-Dun!" yelled Travers.

But it was too late.

An enormous leap carried the Thing to the nearest tree. From there it dropped full thirty feet to the ground, and, with a bound, was on him. The wretched man had barely time to draw his heavy *dah* and slash at the hairy chest, when two long arms shot out and gripped him. There was a quick spurt of blood, a choking shriek, and a dark mass rolled together on the ground. Travers, pale with horror, dodged about, leveling his gun and dropping it again, afraid to fire in that light at the confused heap. Then Moro McGrath rushed past him, right up to the clawing, howling mass of venom and fight, and, thrusting his rifle close up against the thick, hairy neck, pulled both triggers at once.

The heavy charge almost tore the great head from its shoulders. A convulsive shudder tensed the

huge frame, and it leaped back, clawing the air. It spun round, tottered a moment over the sheer bank, and then lurched forward into the swift black water beneath. At that moment the flames burst through the fresh pile of brushwood and lit up the ghastly scene. Moungh Tha-Dun lay with his neck and back and limbs all twisted into the impossible contortions of a straw dummy. McGrath did not need to lift the broken form.

"Poor devil!" he muttered, turning away his head with his customary qualm. Travers leaned on his gun, white and shaken with horror.

"What was it?" he queried hoarsely.

McGrath looked darkly down the bank where the Thing had disappeared, shaking his head with tightly pressed lips.

"I wonder," he replied finally. "I had a sort o' suspicion; that noise, you know. I'd heard somep'n like it down in Borneo once." He sank into gloomy contemplation again. After a while he added: "An' those two wide bands always; they'd point unmistakable to the grip of some enormously

powerful hands an' arms. I'd 'a' said it was a freak specimen of the *Mai-As* ape, or orang. They sometimes run to a size like that; but—"

"But good God, Moro, what made the thing so malignant? Why should it have become so malevolent?"

"Dunno," said McGrath shortly. Then he added suddenly: "Perhaps the *Nat*. There's more things in heaven—an' the jungles, son, than all you science sharps know about."

He sat a long while in gloomy introspection. At last he jumped up and shook himself as out of a dream.

"Cm' on, son!" he barked, with swift return of his customary energy. "We got a heap to do before we're through here. I want to get outa this unholy place with the daylight. I've had enough holiday to go on with for a long time; but—there's promotion for rounding up the last of the *Boh's* gang—an' I guess you'll be wishful to find a telegraph office in Kindat, an' send about ten dollars' worth o' message to Rangoon city in a hurry."

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