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Jungle Drums

by Ken Cooper



He claimed all women were animals—and the girl was at his mercy. Then the leopard men attacked, and jungle cruelty sucked them into its hideous toils. Could nothing save her?

IT WAS a low, gasping protest—almost a faint scream—but Dirk Crowder seemed to be the only one in the thronged Freetown Hotel ballroom who had heard it. He was in the middle of an ungraceful waltz with Governor Merryweather's fat, frowzy wife, an obligation which he, as attaché to the American consul, owed the British overlord of Sierra Leone, but he stopped abruptly and drew away from the full-bosomed profusion of his partner.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, "but I thought—" His keen gray eyes scanned the room. He saw Dr. Rawlins, the American mining expert, conversing with a group of men, but Alice, his daughter, was nowhere in sight.

"You Americans are so, so impetuous," the governor's wife was saying. "One moment I rest comfortably in the arms of the handsomest young man on the West Coast of Africa, and the next moment I find myself utterly deserted. Have you heard the crack of doom?"

Again the cry came—this time more faintly. It seemed to emanate from the terrace balcony.

All evening Dirk had been tense and apprehensive. He knew Alvin Parker, the young consular aide who had recently been relieved of his post because of drunkenness and a too great affection for native women, was present at the Governor's Ball. How he had managed an invitation was a mystery. Still, he was there, and that was cause sufficient for apprehension.

There had been a time—months back—when Alice and Parker were friendly. In fact, Dr. Rawlins had gotten him out of more than one bad situation through influence at Washington. There was bad blood between them now simply because the mineralogist had washed his hands of Parker and refused absolutely to intercede in his last scrape with local authorities.

There was no telling what avenue of revenge Parker would take. The man was irresponsible.

Dirk stiffened and bowed before the governor's wife. "If you'll pardon me, Lady Merryweather," he murmured hastily. "I seem to have forgotten an important matter."

Agnes Merryweather sighed. "Yes, I suppose so. I rather suspected good fortune had smiled too bountifully upon me. I take it the 'important matter' is a much younger lady." She smiled, and the fat folds of her face became cheery wrinkles.

"I must say I don't blame you. Life is short and love is sweet. I'll search out Sir Guy and see whether I can't inculcate some of the same enthusiasm in *his* frozen heart."

DIRK sweated blood until she had finished. Then he was off, headed for the terrace. A gust of hot, sultry air hit him as he stepped into the open. Below the landscaped balcony, the lights of Freetown glittered like giant fireflies. The red beacon of the harbor buoy, riding on the soft swell of the inlet, rose and fell with monotonous rhythm.

"Alice," he called.

There was no reply, but his ears caught the unmistakable swish of silk, and the sounds of a struggle. He peered into the darkness. At one end of the terrace he saw a flash of white and the silhouette of a dark figure. He broke into a fast trot, clenched fists swinging at his side. As he neared, the figure drew away.

Dirk saw Alice's white face, the frightened pools of her dark eyes. One of her round breasts had been forced from the low-cut V of her gown bodice. Both rhinestone shoulder straps were dangling low on her alabaster arms.

Dirk needed no word of explanation. Even in the dark he knew the man was Alvin Parker. No other white man in Africa would dare lay a finger on Alice Rawlins. He leaped, pistoning his fist for the other's jaw. Alice's

involuntary gasp warned Parker. His head bobbed and the blow glanced off his cheek. In a flash he came up under Dirk's guard, landing a weak body blow.

Locked in a clinch. Dirk could smell the reeking odor of liquor on Parker's breath. He was drunk, or close to it. Too bad, Dirk thought. It would have been a pleasure to beat him to a pulp, but it seemed like a sneaky thing to do in view of his condition. Nauseated, Dirk held him away and tapped him lightly on the jaw.

When he released him, Parker slumped to the stone floor of the terrace. He sat there, dazed, spewing out a torrent of filth.

By this time, Alice had adjusted the straps of her gown and returned the white mound of her breast to its silken sheath. Dirk took her arm, cold with gooseflesh, and led her back along the balcony.

For long minutes after they had stepped off the terrace and into the ballroom, Alvin Parker sat in the same position on the floor. Finally, when the momentary stupor had passed, he got to his feet. He was drunk, but not drunk enough to know and realize what had happened. He touched his jaw tenderly. It ached.

"Stinkin' snake!" he hissed. He shook a knuckle-white fist in the direction Dirk and Alice had taken. "I'll fix your wagon, smart guy!" he mumbled. "You'll be damned sorry you ever poked me!"

He made his way uncertainly to the terrace exit, purposely giving the crowded ballroom a wide berth. At the cloak-room in the hotel lobby, he jerked his hat and coat from the attendant's hands, stumbled out into the street and beckoned to a carriage.

THE short drive to the mango-studded white section of the city braced Parker considerably. He was almost clear-eyed when he knocked at the door of a white adobe house. A native boy

answered the summons, ushering him into the foyer with a low, subservient bow.

"Your master home, Loona?" Parker questioned.

The boy shook his head negatively. "No, *bwana*."

Parker paused in the act of removing his coat. "Damn it!" he snapped.

"Not very nice language to use in the company of a lady. Mr. Parker," a throaty feminine voice said.

Parker turned. Framed in the arched doorway of a glass-enclosed solarium was a tall, voluptuously figured blonde. One nude arm was raised, the fingers spread fan-wise on the back of her head the smoothly molded sheen of her armpit dripping gracefully into the curve of a high, full-set breast.

Her gown, a daringly cut creation in deep orchid chiffon revealed the svelte outlines of her hips, narrowing down to brassiere-like strips over the vibrant fullness of her breasts.

"Hello, Olga."

She came forward, the muscles of her stomach rippling under the silk of her gown. "Hello yourself. Just because Bergy isn't home, you're all set to beat a hasty retreat. Haven't I any fascination?"

Parker's eyes danced hotly on the twin rise and fall of her breasts.

"Of course you have, Olga. Haven't I always said you're a knockout? Haven't I always envied Bergy?"

"Envied?" One hand dropped gracefully to a curving hip, fingered its curve meaningfully. "That's as far as it goes, isn't it?" Her dark lashes fluttered over the belladonna-bright limpidity of deep blue eyes.

"Could you be influenced into keeping a young lady company until your precious friend, Mr. Bergman, takes it into his head to stop playing with English music-hall dancers and comes home.

Parker slipped out of his coat and followed her into the solarium. Ever since Joe Bergman, the Grain Coast's biggest trader, had brought the exotic Polish-English siren from London, Parker had wondered what their relationship really was, and how risky it would be to horn in on Bergman's preserves.

HE SLUMPED into a chair, looking up at the curved rhythm of her body. God, she was gorgeous! The palms of his hands got damp.

"Drink?" she queried.

"Yes. Straight."

She poured the liquor from a flagon. Parker's fingers touched hers as she handed him the glass.

"You and Bergy on the outs?" he asked nonchalantly.

She mixed herself a Scotch and soda, dropped languorously on a gayly-colored couch. The tip of her tongue slid over the swollen carmine of her lower lip.

"No, but we should be. He's a fool from start to finish. Never satisfied. Doesn't know when he's got a good thing."

Parker studied the amber liquid in his glass with practiced detachment. "I suppose you mean he's cheating."

Her eyes flashed. "Yes! And with a cheap music hall dancer. One of the troupe at the *Colonial Theatre*. He had them all up to dinner last night." Her tone was bitingly scornful. "You should see her. Thin and pasty-faced. He'll think he's with a broomstick after—" She paused abruptly.

"Say it," Parker prompted. "'—after me.' That's what you meant, didn't you?"

She laughed huskily. "Yes, I suppose so." She sipped at her drink. "Men are like animals."

PARKER downed the whisky, grimaced. It burned his gullet and filled his stomach with a pleasant, growing warmth. That done,

he rose, placed the empty glass on a table, and crossed to the couch, standing over her and looking down at the sensuous repose of her figure. He could see the full roundness of her white breasts, blossoming out from her body like alabaster peonies. They were splendid and close together, forming a downy, shadowed valley between.

He sat down facing her, his left hand falling casually on her lap. "And what about women? Aren't they just as animal?"

She breathed deeply and the pupils of her lustrous eyes pin-pointed. "Are they?" she murmured. "You should know."

There was almost imperceptible movement under his hand. A blood-tingling creeping of her flesh beneath the material of her gown.

"You know the remedy for two-timing," Parker said softly. "'What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.'"

Again she wet her bee-stung lower lip. It looked damp and hot. Parker's hand slid up until the tips of his fingers touched the curve of her hip.

"Well?" Her query was a passionate invitation.

That was all he needed. Both hands came out and cupped the rapture of her breasts. A gasp escaped her lips.

"Kiss me!" she panted.

Parker was shaking as his mouth met the shivering flame of hers. His fingers, nervous and seeking, slipped beneath her flimsy bodice, cupped themselves about the heaving rapture of her breasts. When he drew his mouth away to fasten it on the velvet smoothness of her throat, she moaned plaintively, caught in the blinding surge of desire.

But it was all too short-lived. A key, grating in the front door lock, pulled them apart spasmodically. Olga adjusted her gown straps, patted her blonde hair into place. Parker stepped back to the chair he had

vacated. The next moment a squat, dark-haired individual came into the room. Parker shot to his feet.

“Hello, Bergy,” he greeted.

JOE BERGMAN’S beetle-brows arched over black, piggish eyes. “Oh, hello, Parker.” He glanced at Olga on the couch. “What brings you here?”

Parker rubbed his hands nervously. “A little business proposition. Thought you might be interested.”

The trader crossed to the table, poured himself a drink. “What is it?” He turned to Olga. “Almost caught you, didn’t I?”

The girl’s cheeks pinked. Parker went fiery red.

“Forget it,” Bergman grunted. His fat lips smacked easily. “I’ve had my share of fun. Now what’s the big business deal. Parker?”

Parker wiped his wet hands on his trouser knees. “I got a swell tip tonight and I thought it was worth enough to talk over with you. In a nutshell, here it is. Rawlins is leaving for Liberia tomorrow on a new platinum lead. The natives in Sassoh uncovered a big vein. Rawlins got the news from a runner.

“I thought maybe if we could beat them to it we might make ourselves a nice piece of change. After ail, it’s anybody’s metal in Liberia. First come, first served,”

Bergman’s eyes snaked excitedly. “Who gave you this information. How do you know it’s authentic?”

Parker leaned back smiling. “It’s authentic all right. I got it straight from the source. Right from the lips of Alice Rawlins! You see, she’s making the trip.” His voice dropped and a scowl darkened his face. “Of course, I’ve got another reason for crabbing the works for them—a personal reason. Dirk Crowder’s in the party, too. You’d like to get

a crack at him yourself, wouldn’t you, Bergy? Didn’t he put the crimp in a couple of your shady deals?”

“Shut up!” Bergman’s eyes went hard. “That’s the one trouble with you, Parker. You’re too damned personal. Learn to attend to business. If there’s platinum to be found in Liberia, okay. To hell with Crowder. What do you propose to do?”

Parker leaned forward eagerly. “It’s a cinch. I know that section like a book. It’ll take us a day or two to get things together, but there’s a short jungle cut across Sierra Leone that knocks three days off the trip. That way we’ll beat them to Sassoh by a day, maybe two.”

The workings of Bergman’s mind were mirrored in his ugly face. “And what happens when we get there? What makes you think the natives won’t kick?”

“They won’t. I know that angle of it. Ten dollars and a tin horn phonograph and you can get a hundred diggers working for you.”

“And what about the jaunt across the jungle? What about the danger?”

Parker weighed his reply carefully; Bergman was yellow; you could see it in his face. It would be mad even to mention the savage, man-eating Leopard Men of the Liberian border, a little known tribe of fanatic cannibals.

“No danger at all,” he replied. “We’ll get a good *safari* and it’ll be just like going out on a picnic.” He shuddered inwardly as he said it. Once he had seen the half-eaten bodies of a whole village—the remains of the Leopard Men’s human feast. “I figure we can make it in five days. It’ll take Rawlins eight. I can get an outfit together by the day after tomorrow. Of course—”

BERGMAN, shrewd and calculating, anticipated what was coming. “How

much?"

"Three hundred pounds. But you know what a platinum strike means. Maybe millions,"

Bergman knew. He rose and crossed to a framed picture hanging on the North wall of the room. He slid it back, twirling the dial of a safe behind it. A minute later he was back with a packet of bank-notes. He tossed them into Parker's lap.

"Here's four hundred. We start in twenty-four hours. I want to leave Freetown under cover of darkness. Get busy."

At the front door, the wealthy trader dropped his hand on Alvin Patter's arm. "Stay sober and keep your mouth shut."

Parker nodded. "Right"

Back in the solarium, Bergman took another drink. His eyes were beginning to show the effect of the two he already had: red-rimmed and glassy.

Olga slipped off the couch as he downed the liquor, but his hand shot out and shoved her back.

"Take it easy," he muttered. "I'd like words with you."

Terror crept into her eyes. She knew how vile he could be sober. Drunk, he was a vicious maniac.

"Had a swell time with Parker, didn't you?" he sneered. "Too bad I busted it up"

"I—I didn't! We were just—just—"

Again his hand flashed out. This time the back of it slapped her month. "Don't lie to me! I don't give a damn what happened, but don't lie to me!"

Blood trickled from a gash on her inner lip. Her face was chalk-white except where his knuckles had landed. Bergman reached out and ripped away the top of her dress. Her breasts, free of restraint, sprang out in all their rose-crested splendor.

"I'll give you plenty of chance to throw them in Parker's face, baby. Plenty! You're going along with us, see? I wouldn't

trust you here alone! You'd just as soon blab all you know."

"No!" she screamed. "I'm not going!"

Bergman edged over to the couch. "Oh, you're not? Is that so?" His right fist crashed into the sensitive mound of her left breast. When the blow landed, her eyes bulged from their sockets. She twisted in excruciating pain, moaning pitifully. Bergman's fat lips curled cruelly. He sauntered out into the foyer.

"Loona!" he called.

The black boy appeared out of nowhere. Bergman jerked a thumb towards the solarium.

"See that she gets upstairs. Lock the door of her room. Bring me the key."

He rubbed the bulb of his nose with a sense of gratification and mounted the steps slowly.

THE Rawlins *safari*, six days out of Freetown, wound its slow and tortuous way through the Nigerian jungle. The pack animals—hardy little burrow—led the procession, followed by a dozen sleek-torsoed blacks, and drawing up in the rear with the exception of Garmbia, a giant Filane tribesman who was last man, the white contingent—Dr. Rawlins, Alice and Dirk Crowder.

The mining expert had been bitten by a mangrove fly and his arm was the size of a balloon, the skin stretched to the point of bursting. Around the bite, the flesh was yellow and ulcerous. Alice walked beside him, pleading with him to stop and tend the infection.

When the sky above the matted jungle was twilight gray, Rawlins gave the halt order. Even before the tents were set up, Dirk went to work on the arm. Moments of painful probing with a needle burned white-hot, opened the festering sore.

Darkness descended quickly. The fires were lit and food prepared. Dr. Rawlins,

drugged against the drawing pain of his arm, rested in a tent. Alice and Dirk, tended by Gambia, dined on gembok steak. A strange, unearthly silence fell over the jungle, a silence that refused penetration. Even their voices hung in a peculiar vacuum of sound.

At intervals, Gambia sniffed the sultry air as though trying to catch a scent. Dirk questioned him, but the black shrugged his massive shoulder.

“Nothing, *bwana*, Nothing.”

But there was something. Even Alice could feel it as she emerged from her father’s tent after seeing that he rested comfortably. She linked her arm in Dirk’s, pressed her firm little body close to him.

“I feel funny,” she whispered, shuddering nervously.

Dirk turned so that he faced her. His arms circled her waist. He felt her breasts against him, then the full, yielding warmth of them as they softened to his chest. She was so sweet and young.

“You mean physically funny?” he queried. “Sick?”

She shook her head negatively. “No, not sick. It’s just something I can’t explain. I feel as though we’re just waiting for things to happen.”

“Nonsense!” He kissed her cheek. “Gambia says we’re only half a day from Sassoh, We’ll be there at noon tomorrow. You’re nervous and on edge because of your father, but he’s all right now.”

SHE came nearer to him and nearer to the comforting glow of the fire. Gambia’s great silent hulk moved about noiselessly, setting away the implements he had used for the preparation of the meal. A dagger with a cruel, curved blade and a wrought-iron hilt was ever-present in the waistband of his loin cloth.

Dirk spread a canvas tarpaulin on the

jungle floor. He sat down, cradling Alice in his arms, one hand covering the pulsating swell of a breast. She shifted with a moue of pleasure, pressing the hillock of flesh hard against his palm.

Under cover of the protective darkness, Dirk found the neckline vent of her blouse, delved into it with cupped fingers, burying them in the softness of her bosom.

Hours went by with only the myriad of peeping jungle noises as company. Little pink lizards scurried over the ground, drawn inexorably by the fire-glow, only to perish in the hot ashes circling the flame, their writhing sliminess leaping into the air as though shot with electric current.

The blacks had long since retired, and even Gambia was stretched out on his back at the front flap of Dr. Rawlins’s tent, when Dirk first heard the far-away ominous beating of drums.

It was a hollow, ephemeral sound, seeping through the black mass of the jungle, pounding away in a slow, sombre rhythm.

He held his breath, uncertain as to whether the macabre booming was real, or just a figment of his imagination, a chimeric spawn of the jungle darkness. But no! He could hear it plainly now, drawing closer and closer.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

He sat rigid, staring straight ahead into the abysmal darkness of things beyond the fire-glow. Something rustled behind him and he twisted his head in a nervous jerk. Gambia had come to his feet and was standing head erect, hands cupped behind his ears.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Never-changing never-ending. Seeming to mark out time on a death-like gourd. The giant black hesitated only a moment. Long, loping strides brought him to where the *safari* natives were asleep around an adjoining fire. He woke them, giving

instructions in a guttural voice. Instantly the whole camp was aroused. More resin-soaked wood was thrown on the fires. They leaped into bright flame.

Alice stirred in Dirk's arms, opened her eyes. A gasping scream escaped from her lips as she saw the dark shadows of the natives running about in the firelight flicker. Dirk lifted her to her feet.

"What happened?" she panted. "What is it, Dirk?"

His voice was low and tremulous. "I don't know. There seem to be drums beating in the distance. Gambia must know what it's all about. He's arming all the men. You'd better stay in your dad's tent. I'll let you know if anything happens."

Reluctant she consented. Back in the open, Dirk sought out Gambia. Beads of sweat stood out on the giant's naked torso as he heaped arm-loads of wood on the fires. "What is it, Gambia?" Dirk demanded.

The black's eyeballs rolled. "Leopard Men, *bwana!*"

Dirk blanched. The deadly, flesh-eating Leopard Men! The hideous creatures of the jungle whose heretic creed told them human meat gave supernatural powers! Cold perspiration broke out on Dirk's body. What of Alice and her father? A helpless girl and a man weak with pain.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The hollow drums mocked him eerily. Then, out of the pitch morass of the jungle came a hideous, blood-curdling shriek.

Gambia shouted out a command. The *safari* blacks, terror-stricken, massed behind the foremost fire. Four or five of them had rifles. The rest were armed with curved knives. Dirk plucked his Mauser from its hip holster. The seconds were interminably long. All eyes centered on the blackness that had become pregnant with sound.

BOOM! Like the crash of thunder, one

drum broke the very stillness about them. It seemed to be a signal. The jungle opened up and moving things came out of it. At first sight of them, stark terror curled the hair at the nape of Dirk's neck. Leering, grotesque masks covered their faces.

Hairy leopard skins seemed to be pasted to their writhing, swaying bodies. Their hands—weaving brutally in front of them—boasted the loathsome hideousness of iron fingertips, long and taloned.



DIRK picked one of them out. His gun spat and the Leopard Man dropped with a bullet in his neck. Hell broke loose in the jungle fastness. They poured out of the darkness, a tidal wave of screaming, maniacal creatures. The rifles in the hands of the horror-stricken safari blacks were pitifully silent. In desperation, they clubbed them, striking out at the horde of terror sweeping down on them.

Again Dirk dropped one of them, but his efforts were lost. They kept coming, each one more ghastly than the next. Gambia, wielding his curved knife, cut and slashed. Headless bodies crumpled to the jungle floor, spurting geysers of blood pulsating out of the quivering gore of severed necks.

A spatter of red life fluid splashed against Dirk's cheek. Still he kept pumping lead into the Leopard Men. His heart sank as a side glance told him that Gambia had dropped. The next moment the hammer of his gun clicked metallicly. It was empty!

He heard a scream—Alice's scream—before iron finger-tips raked his face. He tried to ward off the attack, if only to reach her tent, but his knees buckled under him and he went down. *Crash!* Something pounded against his head. A million whirring lights flashed before his glazed eyes. He struggled to hold on to consciousness, the scream ringing in his ears. *Crash!* Black, impenetrable darkness overwhelmed him.

JOE BERGMAN paced the lamp-lit interior of a khaki tent, his fat jowls quivering like gray jelly. He stopped at intervals to look silently at Alvin Parker leaning over the prostrate figure of Alice Rawlins. Finally he spoke.

"You know what this means if they ever hook us up with it?" he muttered. "It's murder!"

Parked looked up. His face was pale and drawn. "Keep quiet!" he snapped. "She's coming around." His nervous fingers loosened the neck of Alice's blouse, baring the cream-white hills of her breasts. "Nobody'll do any hooking up. Anyway, we couldn't help it. I figured it would take them eight days to make it. We had to do it that way since they got here in six."

Alice stirred on the cot. Her breasts trembled and Bergman's eyes flickered as

they ran the length of her half-naked figure.

"You better go in and see if you can quiet Olga," he whispered cunningly. "She's in the next tent, raising hell. The natives here are liable to get suspicious. I'll watch this kid."

"All right." Parker moved to the tent flap. "When she comes to, tell her we rescued her. She'll probably ask about her old man and Crowder. Break it easy."

The moment he was gone, Bergman moved to the cot. He licked his lips with lascivious anticipation as he looked down on the erect cones of Alice's breasts and the white perfection of her thighs. His hand came out and touched the flesh above one knee. She moved, but it was no deterrent. He dropped on his knees so that his free hand could fondle her breasts.

The contact of his wet, clammy hands brought her back into the world of reality. Her eyes fluttered and her parched lips moved in a wordless plaint.

"You're all right, baby." Bergman panted huskily, gluing his lips to the velvet hollow of her throat.

His hot breath against her caused her to quiver in revulsion. She tried to beat him off but there was no strength in her arms.

Still before her was the hideous nightmare of the Leopard Men, the mind-numbing agony of seeing her father stretched in a viscous pool of his own blood. *Dead!* He was *dead!* The reality of it brought a hysterical scream to her lips. Bergman's hand shot out to muffle it, but it rang through the night like a clarion call.

In an instant, the tent flap flew open and Parker hurtled in. Anger burned hot in his eyes. He flew at Bergman's throat, hurtling him to the ground and punching at his fat, florid face.

"You dirty, stinking skunk!" The words forked from his mouth.



BERGMAN squealed like a stuck pig. Blood poured from his battered nose.

“Stop it!” he shrieked. “Stop it or I’ll tell them you’re a kill—”

Parker released him. Bergman scrambled to his feet. His face was a pulpy, blood-streaked mess.

“I’ll fix you for this!” he gasped.

“Get out!” Parker shouted. The trader scurried from the tent Parker turned to the cot. Alice stared at him in stark amazement.

“Alvin!” she gasped.

He came down beside her. “Yes, Alice.” His voice was low and sympathetic, “When you told me you were making the trip, I decided to follow you because of the danger. My *safari* arrived just in time.”

She whimpered pitifully. “Alvin! Those creatures! They killed—killed my father!”

His hand gripped her shoulders tenderly. “Yes, I know. They got Crowder, too. But we saved you, darling.”

“Dirk—dead?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, God!” Her slender body stiffened and consciousness left her again.

A WHIRLING vortex of bleak algid darkness seemed to melt, lifting, Dirk Crowder up...up...up into the warm, living realm of consciousness. His eyes flickered open and the soundless devastation of the jungle clearing beat heavily on his ears. His head ached, but beyond the throb of physical pain were thoughts of Alice and her father.

He leaned on one elbow, surveying the slaughter-house of the jungle floor with a dull sense of horror. Mangled bodies lay one on the other. Already a horde of creeping, crawling things were feasting on the bloody, carrion flesh.

In the dying glow of the fires he picked out Gambia’s great frame, stretched supine and still. It seemed impossible that the giant black had been beaten down, and yet the taut strength of his Goliath’s body had no movement.

Dirk came to his knees and crawled shakily to where the ebony warrior lay. His hand reached out and touched the great chest. A quiver of excitement ran through him. The skin was warm! There was a heart-beat! Gambia was alive!

The knowledge seemed to bring vitality back into his own beaten body. He knew there was water in Dr. Rawlins tent. He stumbled towards it.

Revolted horror gripped him as he drew back the flap. The mining expert was stretched on a cot, his throat slashed from ear to ear, his head pooled in a welter of his own blood. Dirk paled. What hideous fate had befallen Alice?

He seemed to remember being told that the Leopard Men of Liberia made no female sacrifices. The thought brought added horror. What had been her fate? A living death

among these creatures of the jungle?

Terror lent haste to his movements. He found a gourd of water, carried it back to where Gambia lay. Anxious moments went by as he wet the black's face and rubbed frantically at his wrists. Reward for his efforts came at last. A shudder ran through the giant's body. His eyelids fluttered.

Five minutes later he was on his feet, examining the crawling carcass of a dead Leopard Man. Suddenly his face lit up. He stood erect, squaring his massive shoulders.

"No Leopard Men, *bwana*," he said. "Sassoh!"

Dirk did not understand. Painstakingly the black explained. They were not real Leopard Men—these natives in the skins of the spotted beast—but of the Sassoh tribe.

Gambia pointed to the North. "Sassoh three hours fast march, *bwana*. We go to seek white doctor?"

Dirk told him the white doctor—Rawlins—was dead in his tent. But Alice, his daughter, was missing. Gambia scowled.

"We go, *bwana*," he said. In the clearing he found two rifles the safari blacks had never fired. Lighting a pitch torch he led the way into the matted jungle.

IT was almost dawn when the thatched mud-huts of the Sassoh village loomed before them. Gambia dropped to his knees. Dirk followed suit. They approached silently, drawing up short when the khaki tents of the Bergman-Parker *safari* came into view through the hot mist of daybreak,

"Not Sassoh dwellings," Gambia whispered. "White man dwelling."

Dirk nodded. He was beginning to see light in this whole mad nightmare. Whites were behind it all, led on by the lust for precious metal. Hot, burning anger welled in his heart.

He motioned to Gambia to follow as

he crawled towards the first tent. The village was deathly quiet. Not a soul stirred. Even the sultry air hung motionless. Dirk's hand reached for the tent flap. His fingers touched the canvas. At that moment something hissed through the air and there was a dull, hollow crack—metal meeting bone!

Dirk spun as Gambia crumpled and fell, but too late. An ominous Luger in Alvin Parker's hand told the story.

"Drop the rifle, Crowder!"

The weapon slid from Dirk's numb fingers. His eyes bulged in stark wonderment. "Parker!" he gasped.

The younger man smiled cruelly. "Didn't expect to see me here, did you, pretty boy. Lucky your precious Alice kept me awake. Otherwise I wouldn't have seen you and the black crawling out of the jungle."

"Alice! She's here?" Dirk's voice quivered.

Parker motioned to an adjoining tent "Maybe you'd like to see her before—" His inflection had grisly meaning. "Go ahead, but don't forget my finger's on the trigger. One false move and I give it to you. Of course, you're as good as gone anyway, but I'd hate to rub you out this way." He laughed—a cold, cruel chuckle. "The natives around here have much more pleasant torture. Torture that takes a long, long time."

Dirk's hands clenched but he held himself in check. If he could only see Alice for a fleeting moment, at least know that she was alive—

HE walked towards the second tent, Parker following. The moment he stepped inside his heart leaped ecstatically and he dropped beside the cot, drawing the hysterical girl into his arms.

"Alice . . . Alice . . ." he murmured over and over again. The entreaty of his voice broke with emotion. A contemptuous smile

played about Parker's thin mouth.

"Get your share, Crowder," he muttered, "because she'll be mine for a long, long time."

Dirk wheeled, his face a gray mask of fury. "You dirty rat!" he screamed. "This is all your work!"

Parker hefted his gun. "Sure. You're a smart boy, Crowder, but not smart enough. Too bad Alice told me about this trip that night on the hotel terrace. Remember that night? You took a sock at me when I was potted. Now it's my turn. Yes, I engineered the whole thing. I knew the Leopard Men fake would put the fear of hell into you. There was only one mistake. I thought you were killed with the rest." He sneered. "But that's easily rectified. I'll fix that damn—"

He stopped suddenly, stiffened. Dirk's face drained of color. Above the hysteria of Alice's choking sobs came the faraway ominous beating of drums. There was no mistaking it. *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

Two terror-tinged words leaped from Parker's lips. "Leopard Men!"

Dirk's mouth twisted grimly. "Another one of your foul schemes. Is that it, Parker?"

Parker's eyes stared dazedly. He backed to the tent flap, lifted it. What he saw sent fright into the marrow of his bones. Scores of the masked, fur-bedecked savages were creeping out of the jungle and advancing on the village.

"No!" he screamed. "They're real! We're doomed—all of us!"

INSTANTLY the village was in an uproar. Bergman and Olga ran screaming into Parker's tent. He held them all at bay with his Luger. Something had snapped inside him. He was no longer pale and trembling. Bergman's fat face was horrified putty.

"There's no escape," Parker muttered. "We're dead ones, so make up your mind to it. But I for one don't relish the idea of serving as

food." He moved to a corner of the tent and dragged a box forward. "This is a better way. A shot into this load of dynamite will do the trick. Instead of blasting platinum it'll blast us into hell!"



They stared at him in wide-eyed amazement, but only Bergman, quaking and whimpering, made a move. He tried to reach a rifle hanging from the tent pole. As his fingers touched the weapon, Parker's Luger roared. The trader dropped with a bullet in his heart.

"Yellow!" Parker sneered. "God how I hate them yellow!" The pupils of his eyes shrank to pin-points. "I got you all into this, didn't I?" he shrieked. "It's my fault, isn't it?" He dropped to his knees and tore at the cover of the dynamite box. Froth bubbled at his lips. The boom of the drums came closer.

Finally the cover ripped off. Parker's fingers searched for a package of twelve-inch fuse lengths. He pulled one out, jammed it into the sawdust packed dynamite. A match flared in his fingers. The fuse sputtered. Parker lifted the box in his arms, stumbled to the tent flap. "I'll get you out!" he screamed.

Out in the open, Dirk watched him run like a madman toward the advancing savages. When he reached them, they swarmed over him, iron claws bared to strike. There was a momentary hush, then a terrific explosion. The earth seemed to open up as though all the

gases of its white-hot core were bursting into freedom. Nothing could live in the fierce rending, and nothing did. Bodies hurtled through the air, fragments of them dropping at Dirk's feet. When the rolling echo of the detonation had died the jungle edge was cleared of Leopard Men.

Dirk turned back into the tent. He felt a strange, choking sensation in his chest. He dropped beside Alice and cradled her head in his hands. For the first time in his life his eyes were damp.