

The Mystery of the Talking Idols

*Far within Africa's brooding
hinterland three men vanished with
the coming of a new medicine man.*

by
Achmed Abdullah



§ *"Thrice did I hear the gods call me by name," said the Arab.
"A lie!" shrieked the medicine man. "Kill him! Kill—"*

AFRICA was about them: a black, fetid hand giving riotously of gold and treasure, maiming and squeezing even while it gave.

They loathed and feared it. Yet they loved it with that love which is stronger than the love of woman, more grimly compelling than the love of gold. They loved it as the opium-smoker loves the sticky poppy-juice which soothes him—and kills him.

For it was Africa.

And also in this was it Africa that it had thrown these two men together: strange bedfellows; Gerald Donachie, whose dour Scots blood had been but imperfectly tempered by the fact that he had been born and bred in Chicago, and Mahmoud Ali Daud, the grave, dark Arab from Damascus.

Arab he was in everything. For he was greedy, and yet generous; well-mannered, and yet overbearing; sincere, and yet sneering; sympathetic, and yet coldly cruel; austere, and yet passionate; simple, and yet complex.

"Donachie & Daud"—the firm was well known from the Cape to the Congo, and up through the brooding hinterland, the length of the great, sluggish river, even as far as the black tents of the Touaregs. It had made history in African commerce. It was respected in Paris and London, feared in Brussels, envied in Berlin.

They traded in ivory and ostrich feathers, in rubber and gold, in beads, calico, gum-copral, orchilla roots, quinine, and—if the truth be told—in grinning West Coast idols made in Birmingham, cases of cheap Liverpool gin, and rifles guaranteed to explode at the third discharge.

All the way up the river their factories and wharves, their stations and warehouses proclaimed their insolent wealth. They ran their own line of paddle-steamers as far as the Falls; twice a year they chartered fast, expensive turbine boats to carry precious cargoes to Bremen and Liverpool. They had their fingers in every pie, to the South as far as Matabele-land, to the North as far as the newest

French-Moroccan concessions.

They could have sold out at practically their own figure to the big Continental Chartered company which they had fought for ten years, and which they had beaten in the end to a not inglorious standstill. They could have returned with bloated bank accounts: Donachie to a brick-and-stone realization of the Chicago palace about which his imagination wove nostalgic dreams when the river was high and the fever higher; and Mahmoud Ali Daud to his pleasant Damascan villa and the flaunting garden with the ten varieties of date trees, of which he talked so much.

"All the date trees of Arabistan are in that garden," he used to say to his partner, and make a smacking noise with his tongue. "Al-Shelebi dates, yellow and small-stoned and aromatic; Ajwah dates, especially blessed by the Prophet—on whom be Peace; also the date Al-Birni, of which it is said: 'It causeth sickness to depart from it, and there is no sickness in it'."

And they spoke of selling out, of going home.

They spoke of it in the hot season when the great, silent sun was brooding down like a hateful, implacable force and when all the wealth of Africa was but an accursed inheritance, to be gained at a cost of pain and anguish more than man could bear; and during the "wet," when from morning till night a steaming, drenching, thudding rain flooded the land as far as the foothills, when the fields were rotting into mud, when the water of the lake thickened into evil brown slime, and when the great river smelled like the carcass of some impossible, obscene animal.

They spoke of it with longing in their voices. They quarreled, they cursed each other—year after year. And they remained—year after year.

For it was Africa. The sweet poison of it had entered their souls, and they could not do without it.

Donachie sighed. He looked at his partner.

"Look here, Mahmoud," he said querulously. "Granger is the third who's disappeared up there in the last four months. The third, damn it all! And we can't afford to give up the station. Why, man, it's the best station in the whole confounded upland! The company would jump at it. They've been trying to get a foothold there for the longest time. We get as much ivory from there as from half the other river stations put together—fossil ivory, I grant you, but what difference does that make, once

it reaches the market? Ivory is ivory."

The Arab had been counting the carved wooden beads of his huge rosary. Now he looked up.

"We can send Watkins. Watkins is a good man. He did well at the coast station. He speaks the language. Or we can send Palmier—a shrewd Belgian. He knows the Congo."

Donachie hit the gangrened, heat-cracked table with his hairy fist.

"It would be murder, Mahmoud, rank murder! They'll disappear—they'll disappear like the others."

The Arab inclined his head.

"Fate is bound about our necks. Perhaps the bush will eat them up."

Donachie interrupted savagely.

"The bush? The bush? You mean the—"

The other raised a thin brown hand.

"Hush, my friend. There is no proof. Also is it bad luck to give a name to the thing which is not." And he snapped his fingers rapidly to ward off misfortune.

Donachie's voice came loud and angry.

"There's the proof that the three agents have disappeared, one after the other."

The Arab smiled.

"What is that to you and to me, my friend? We pay? We pay well. If fools make a bargain for their souls with the devil, then fools may make a bargain with us for their bodies. They know the evil name which the station bears. Yet it appears that they are willing to go. Many of them." He pointed at a heap of letters on the table. "Did you read what they write? They want to go. Let them go. There are even company men among the applicants. We can pick and choose. We can send whom we please."

Donachie glared at his partner.

"We'd be murderers none the less."

"How do you know the others have been murdered?"

"Good Lord! How do I *know*? Why, man, people don't walk into the bush and disappear without sound or word or trace just to amuse themselves, do they?"

The other smiled.

"*Allah kureem!*" he said piously. Then he counted his beads again and was silent.

DONACHIE rose. He moved his chair. But the sun found its way through the holes and cracks of the wattle-and-daub house, and there was

not a spot in the big, square room which was not barred and splashed by narrow strips of sunlight.

It was just like a dazzling sheet of light piercing the tin roof with a yellowness that pained the eye, puckered the face, and wearied and maddened the brain.

There was beauty in the landscape beyond the fly-specked windows. For under the tropical sun the sloping roofs of the warehouses, the steeple of the mission church, and the beehive huts of the natives burned like the plumage of a gigantic peacock in every mysterious blend of purple and green and blue. The sky was like an enameled cup, spotless but for a few clouds which were gnarled, fantastic, like arabesques written in vivid cerise ink on some page of forgotten Byzantine gold.

And in the distance, beyond the glitter and glimmer of the river, the forest stood forth in a somber black line.

But Gerald Donachie did not see the beauty of it. He only felt the squeezing, merciless hand which was Africa. He only smelled the fetid odor which was Africa.

And then, of course, his thoughts returned to the bush station at Grand L'Popo Basin, three hundred miles up the river.

It was by far the most important upland station of "Double-Dee," as the firm was familiarly called up and down the coast. Some fifty miles below the falls, snug at the head of a little river bay where the water was deep and the anchorage safe; fairly healthy all the year round, it had become the main center of the upland trade.

To the north of it were thick, black-green forests, and the truest ivory country in Africa. An incessant stream of the precious white stuff reached the post and was sent to the coast, and thence to Liverpool and Bremen. The natives, unconverted, unspoiled, were friendly. There had never been the slightest trouble with them.

Hendrick DuPlessis, a big hairy Natal Boer, had been the agent up there for a number of years, and had put the station on a splendidly paying basis. Once a year, as regular as clockwork, he had come down the river to the coast town, where for three weeks he rioted and debauched on a pompous, magnificent scale.

And on his last spree, a little over four months ago, an overdose of *dop* and brandy had killed him.

Then, one after the other, three agents had been sent up the river. They were Foote, Benzinger and

Granger; all Afrikanders born and bred, familiar with the country and the languages, and all trusted employees of Double-Dee, who had made good at other important stations before they had been sent to Grand L'Popo Basin.

And within the last four months, one after the other, the three had disappeared. It was as if Africa had swallowed them. They left no message. No trace of their bodies had been found.

They had simply vanished into nothingness.

They had not taken to the bush out of their own free will. There had been no reason for it: their books and accounts were in perfect order. Nor had they gone out hunting; for they were middle-aged men, surfeited with the killing of animals. They had no personal enemies, and they had had no trouble with the natives, who were friendly and prosperous.

They had disappeared.

Runners and native trackers had been sent out in every direction. Finally, after the third agent, Granger, had vanished, a first-class bush detective had been sent from the coast. But the detective, a clever Portuguese mulatto, had discovered nothing.

Then Gerald Donachie himself had gone up the river. He had investigated. He had offered bribes and rewards. He had searched the forest for miles around. He had gone into the *kraals* of the natives, and had threatened and accused and bullied.

But it was evident that the blacks had nothing to do with the disappearance of the three agents. He had not found a single trace.

This very morning, fever-worn, cross, he had returned with the tale of his failure. And failure was a hard thing to bear.

Again he hit the table with his fist.

"What are we going to do, Daud? Tell me that."

"There is one thing we can always do. We can sell out to the Chartered company."

Donachie laughed, a cracked, mirthless laugh.

"Sell out *now*? Under fire, as it were? With that mystery unsolved? . . . Not if I know it. I'm not going to let that cursed beast of a land get the best of me."

The other walked to the corner and poured himself out a glass of water.

"In the name of Allah the Compassionate, the Merciful," he said piously, ceremoniously, before he tossed down the drink. Then he turned to his partner.

"You are like all the other Christians," he said. "Forever fighting battles with your own obstinacy."

What is the good of it? What profit is there in it? And if not profit, then what glory? Why battle against Fate? Fate has decided that the man of great head becomes a Bey, honored and rich; while he of great feet becomes a shepherd. We have great herds, you and I. We are rich. Let's sell out to the company. Let us return; I to my country, and you to yours."

But Donachie did not reply. He sat there, brooding, unhappy, staring into space.



FOR the last hour, from the broad veranda which surrounded the house, had come the incessant, uncouth babble of native voices, high-pitched, half-articulate; the house boys talking to each other, and every once in a while breaking into shrill, meaningless laughter.

Donachie had hardly heard them. He had listened to that same noise for the last twenty years. It was part of his life to him, part of the day, part of Africa. He had accepted it as he had accepted the fever, the heat, the flying and crawling horrors, and the wooden drums which thumped at night, sending messages from village to village.

But suddenly he looked up, sharp-eyed, alert.

A native voice had pronounced the name of the station up the river—"Grand L'Popo Basin." And again, in a sort of awed whisper, "Grand L'Popo Basin!"

He addressed his partner.

"They also—"

"Yes," the Arab chimed in, completing both thought and sentence for him, "they also speak of the three men who have disappeared. The tale is all over this land. The drums have carried the message of it to all the villages. And yet," he laughed, and pointed at the heap of letters on the table, "and yet there are many men anxious to go."

Suddenly the babbling outside ceased. There was a sharply-defined pause. Then a single voice spoke, in the native dialect as the others, but with a different accent; intense, throbbing with a peculiar, significant meaning, but so low that the two men inside the house could not make out the words.

Again there was silence. The flies buzzed in a great peace.

Then the same voice spoke once more, low, intense.

"Can you hear, Mahmoud?" Donachie asked. "What's that cursed black babbling about?"

The Arab rose. He motioned to his friend to be quiet. He walked to the door on noiseless, slippered feet, and listened.

Again the voice on the outside boomed forth, dramatic, low; and this time one word stood out above the others: "*Umlino*," and again, "*Umlino*."

The Arab listened intently for a few minutes. Then he came up close to his partner.

"They are speaking of a new *umlino*, a new great medicine man—" then, as an afterthought, "cursed be all unbelievers!"

"Who's speaking?"

"That new boy—that flat-faced descendant of unmentionable pigs—Makupo, he calls himself."

"Oh, yes, the fellow from the bush who sports the brick-red blanket and the blue beads."

"The same."

"What's *he* got to do with a medicine man? And what the blazes has the *umlino* got to do with the disappearance of my three agents?"

Donachie burst suddenly into a great, throaty rage. "I'll teach that coon to put bees into my house boys' bonnets! Call him in, Mahmoud." He picked up the short, vicious rhinoceros-hide whip which lay on the table. "I'll teach that miserable black to babble about—"

Daud pressed him back into his chair. He addressed his partner with an air of calm assurance, superb self-satisfaction hooded under his sharply curved eyelids.

"I shall go north and solve the mystery. Be quiet, friend of my heart. Remember the saying that money is on the lips of the liar, and passion on the lips of the lost. Be quiet!"

Donachie looked up.

"But Mahmoud," he said wearily, "I've just come back from up there."

The Arab sat down near him.

"Yes," he replied. "But before you left there was not talk amongst our blacks of medicine men in the north, of great *umlinos* performing many miracles. I heard them talk," he pointed at the veranda, "out there—cursed be all unbelievers!"

Donachie laughed.

I honor and respect your orthodox Mohammedan prejudices, old man. But you know well enough that there's always some brand-new medicine man, some brand-new *ju-ju* popping up amongst these savages."

"I know," the other agreed. "But I also know Africa. I know that these house boys of ours are of

the Waranga tribe, eh? Tell me, my friend, what have they, being of the Waranga, to do with an *umlino* from the up-river tribes? Do totems mix with totems in this heathenish land? Also, what have our Warangas to do with a flat-faced pig from the north who wears a red blanket and blue beads? Can you answer these questions? And can you tell me finally what bond there can exist between blacks of one tribe and blacks of another who have been enemies for centuries?"

"There's only one bond, Mahmoud. A common enemy."

"There is no enemy. The land is peaceful and prosperous . . . But there is still another bond between tribe and tribe. That is a miracle, and he who performs the miracle is always an *umlino*, a great medicine man. I have heard tell that an *umlino* is often an ambitious man, dreaming dreams of conquest and blood and empire, like Khama, who called out the southern tribes; like Lobengula, of whom the Boers talk; like Chakka, who sacked the farms of the Colonial English before I was born."

Donachie was nervous, intent.

"A conspiracy, you think? A revolt?"

"No. Only the brewing of the miracle, and the telling of it—*so far*," he added with peculiar emphasis.

He continued after a short pause: "I shall go to Grand L'Popo Basin. I shall look into the disappearance of the three agents. I shall watch the brewing of the miracle. And, with the help of Allah, I shall succeed." He smiled.

Donachie knew the smile of old. In the past it had heralded many things: profit, adventure—often death. But always it had meant success. Thus it seemed suddenly to Donachie as if a cool rush of air had come to him after a long, leaden, unlifting day.

"When are you off?" he asked.

"Tonight."

Donachie gasped with surprise.

"Impossible! The steamer can't leave here before Saturday morning at the very earliest."

"I shall take the overland trail."

"But why—for heaven's sake, *Why*?"

The Arab smiled.

"Because there is talk on our veranda between the Warangas and a flat-faced pig from the north. Because drum is speaking to drum. Because there is brewing a miracle—up the river. Do not ask

questions, my friend. Time presses. I shall take Makupo with me."

Donachie looked at him incredulously.

"*Makupo*? The fellow from the north, of all men? But, good God, you don't trust him!"

"That's why." The Arab rose. "I have no time to explain. I must prepare for the journey. One thing you must do for me."

"Name it, Mahmoud."

"Let the house boys have talk with nobody of my going north. Let them not speak of my taking Makupo along. Let them send no message of any sort."

There was an impatient note in Donachie's answering voice.

"How the deuce can I do that? How can I keep these chattering magpies from talking?"

"The best way would be to kill them. But you are a Christian, an American." Mahmoud Daud laughed. "You shun sane, efficient methods. Therefore you must go to Latrobe, the commissioner of police. You must have these blacks arrested—tonight, within the hour, before I go. Tell the commissioner as much as you please, as much as you think right. But make sure that they are silent until I return. For I want no sending of messages while I am gone. I want no thumping of wooden drums from village to village."

"But why?"

The Arab made a great gesture. It was more than a gesture. It seemed an incident which cut through the still air like a dramatic shadow.

"Because I know Africa—and because I want to stop the brewing of the miracle."

He left the room with a stately, swinging step, singing softly to himself.

Donachie looked after him. He watched him move through the group of squatting Warangas on the veranda, and pick his way daintily through the refuse which littered the yard.

For a long time he could hear the words and the high-pitched melody of his song; it was a riotous Damascus bazaar couplet which he was in the habit of singing in moments of excitement and stress:

"I married two wives by excess of my folly.

What now will happen to thee, oh husband of two?

I have said: I will be among them a lamb,

Enjoying blessings between two ewes.

But now . . ."

The voice died in the distance. Donachie rose, left the house, and walked over to the house of the commissioner of police.

And so, within the hour, the Waranga boys of Double-Dee's living-bungalow found themselves in prison, strictly contrary to the law, to habeas corpus, trial by jury, and half-a-dozen similar assorted fetishes of the temperate zone; while Mahmoud Ali Daud, preceded by the chattering and frightened Makupo, was off on a three-hundred-mile tramp into the interior.

IT WOULD have surprised even Donachie, who knew Africa, who knew the Arabs, and who especially knew his partner, to see how, half-a-dozen rods into the jungle, the latter's thin veneer of Western civilization and Western sentimentalism took a sudden atavistic backward-jump of several centuries.

For, all at once, without provocation or apparent reason of any sort, the Arab brought his short, thick *sjambok* down on the head of the negro with the full strength of his lean, muscular arms.

Makupo dropped and howled, while Mahmoud Daud addressed him in a passionless, even voice:

"Dog, and son of many dogs! Woolly one! Calamity! Shame! Evil and odorous thing without name, or morals, or pedigree! Art thou listening?"

The negro did not answer. A pitiful gurgle came from his throat. The whites of his eyes rolled upward, and he kissed the Arab's leather slippers.

But the other paid no attention to the silent entreaty for mercy. Again, with full strength, scientifically, he brought the *sjambok* down on the writhing black body at his feet.

Then he spoke once more, in the same passionless voice.

"Art thou listening, O disreputable descendant of unbelieving and thrice-born pigs?"

This time the answer came prompt, articulate.

"Yes, master!"

"*Aywah! Aywah!*" ejaculated the Arab. Then he sat down comfortably on a fallen tree, gathering the folds of his brown traveling *burnoose*, and resting his feet on the body of the black. "*Aywah!* It is good. Thou hast come from the north, from up the river, flat-nosed and objectionable, and wearing a red blanket; and thou hast spoken poison-words of evil to the boys of my *kraal*."

He laughed.

"Thou didst leave thy home in the north, a cock,

and thou didst expect to return a peacock, strutting and colorful. *Wah!* Listen again, he-goat bereft of sense and modesty! Thou wilt return north indeed. But thou wilt not return as a peacock. Thou wilt return as a dog, nosing the ground for me, thy master. Thou wilt sniff well, and thou wilt show me the place of the *umlino* who sent thee to the coast to speak words of treason, the place where the medicine man makes mysteries. Is that understood?"

"Yes, master."

The Arab kicked the prostrate African three times, in the same place, with calm, deliberate aim.

"If thou shouldst turn traitor, if thou shouldst try to send messages as we pass through the villages on our way up to Grand L'Popo Basin, I shall kill thee. I shall kill thee very slowly. I shall make long cuts into thy unclean skin, and shall afterwards pour boiling oil into the wounds. Also other things; considerably more painful. I shall think them out as the days go by . . . then, later on, while there is still breath left in thy lungs and blood in thy heart, I shall bury thee . . . in a shallow grave . . . where the hyenas and the many little ants will find thee.

"Is it understood?"

Makupo looked up from the ground. He knew that the Arab was giving him true talk.

"Yes, master," he replied.

Mahmoud Daud arose. Once more he kicked the other.

"It is good. It is a compact between thee and me. Get up. Pick up thy pack, and lead the way."

Without another word the African did as he was bid.

Thus the two went on their long overland tramp. Daud's sharp eyes and an occasional thwack of his *sjambok* saw to it that Makupo stuck to the one-sided compact. There was no sneaking aside, no whispering and talking to other natives when they passed through an occasional village demanding food and drink, and, once in a while, a guide. And at night the Arab was careful to gag him securely and to tie him hand and foot, so that there could be no sending of bush messages.

It was a long, heartbreaking tramp; through a crazy network of jungle paths spreading over the land; through long grass and short grass; through grass burned to the roots, and through grass green and juicy, waiting for the stamping, long-horned cattle of the river tribes.

They left the river far to the south, walking in a

sweeping, half-circular direction so as to avoid the miasmic, fever-breeding steam of the lowlands. They tramped through thickets where elephant-thorns and "wait-a-bits" lacerated their skins, and through somber black forests, where evil, bat-like things flopped lazily overhead, and where slimy, spineless things crawled and squirmed underfoot. They tramped up and down chilly ravines, up and down stony hillsides ablaze with white heat.

They reached the higher table land. Everywhere about them stretched a level country which looked curiously like the sea; for the thick, blade-shaped grass, bleached to silvery whiteness and as high as a man's waist, swayed perpetually like choppy, pale waves. The heat was intense; and the Arab swung along silently, his head swathed in the heavy folds of his brown *burnoose*, while Makupo walked ahead, arms flopping loosely after the manner of his kind, and crooning to himself in a plaintive, half-articulate way which was like the piping of a lizard.

They struck the Equator on the twentieth day. The sky was cloudless, blazing with a terrible, vindictive heat, and steeped in primitive colors, red, blue and orange, like a futurist painting. So they rested during daytime and walked in the late afternoons and at nights, when it was a little cooler, when the merciless flare had died in the skies, when the far-off hills had turned a faint, pink color, and when the grimness of the bush which stood out in the distance was blurred as in a veil of purple chiffon.

Finally, late one evening, they reached the river again.

Makupo stopped.

"Grand L'Popo Basin!" he said, and pointed straight ahead.

Daud grunted a short, affirmative reply.

They walked down a steep hillside into the steaming valley. From behind the black curtain of trees which lined the banks of the river a great sheaf of yellow lights shot upwards; the campfires of the outer *kraals*. Then there was a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs.

It was late at night when they came within sight of the station itself. But they could still make out the contours of the agency house, the bulk of the warehouses, the sweep of the jetty, the squat huts of the natives.

The Arab stopped.

"Listen, dog," he said. "Thou wilt now tell me

the place of the *umlino*, the great medicine man who brews the many mysteries, and who sends flat-nosed pigs with red blankets to the Coast to whisper poisonous words to my Warangas. Where is this *umlino*? I want speech with him. Is he north, east, south, or west? Answer, son of a burned father!"

Makupo shivered with fear, but he did not reply. The Arab raised the *sjambok* significantly.

"Answer," he repeated, low-voiced.

The native fell down before him.

"Thus far have I brought thee, master. Have pity! I cannot tell more. The *umlino* can hear across distances. He can make the clay-gods talk. He—"

He doubled up as if in physical pain, embracing his knees with his hands, swaying from side to side like a chained elephant. He stared at the Arab in a horribly appealing, intolerable manner. Mahmoud Daud smiled.

"Remember our compact, Calamity! Remember the wounds, the boiling oil! Also the hyenas . . . and the little brown ants which find their way through a shallow grave to a man who is still alive. Do not forget the ants."

Suddenly Makupo rose. He tried to speak—could not. He pointed a shaking hand at a low, flat hut which was plainly visible next to the living-bungalow of the agency.

"There . . . there . . ." his words came thick, strangled. "There lives the *umlino* . . . there are the red clay-gods who talk, talk!"

Mahmoud Daud whistled through his teeth.

"Eh . . . in the station . . . *in the station itself*?" Then in a lower key, as if speaking to himself. "Merciful Allah! In the station itself . . . and next to the agency house. *Wah!*"

Suddenly he smiled, a thin, cruel smile.

"Thou hast well kept the compact, Makupo," he said. "Cometh now thy reward."

There was the flash of a dagger; a quick downward thrust; and Makupo rolled over, without a sound, lifeless. Mahmoud Daud wiped the dagger on a handful of grass and sheathed it again.

Then he walked up to the station.

He was deep in thought. The spark of suspicion which had flared up in his shrewd, grinding brain weeks ago, when he had heard Makupo and the Warangas whispering on the veranda about the *umlino* and the disappearance of the three agents, had been kindled into flame by the dead man's words.

But what was that tale about red clay-gods who talk? It puzzled him. Some cursed, heathen superstition, he said to himself. He would find out presently.

He smiled. So far he had done well. For he was confident that no bush messages had been sent up the river, warning the blacks of his coming; and thus the medicine man, whatever his name, whatever his savage ambitions, whatever his connection with the disappearance of the three agents, would be unprepared.

Also he had eliminated the chance of treachery on the part of Makupo by killing him as soon as he had served his ends; for, in Mahmoud Daud's own words, "A dead man does not talk of love, and a dead horse does not eat grass."

So he was pleased with himself; and, deeply religious, he droned a low-voiced prayer to Allah, the King of Men, as he swung noiselessly through the rush-fence of the station.



THE fence clearly showed that the place was abandoned to the tender mercies of the blacks and that the directing mind of the White Man was missing; for it was ill-kept, and with the speed of the tropics the few months since the death of the last agent had sufficed to change it into a great mass of vegetation; an entangled, exuberant mingling of leaves, creepers, and odorous flowers; a rolling wave of silent life.

The Arab paused for a moment and looked around. There were no sentinels at the fence gate, no watchmen near the jetty and the warehouses. It was more evident than ever that no bush messages had been sent, that his coming was unexpected, and that the black employees of Double-Dee, in the absence of a master, were devoting themselves to a lengthy and truly African siesta. One of the warehouses was gaping wide open.

The Arab frowned. A great rage rose in his throat. For, true son of Shem, he was a greedy man; a hard businessman who hated waste worse than he hated Shaitan himself.

He crossed the yard silently, noiselessly, and stopped in front of the agency bungalow.

A little shudder ran through him. Beyond the fence he could see the forest standing out spectrally in the dazzling moonlight, and through the stir of the leaves and the refuse, blown about by some

vagabond wind of the night, was the mystery, the mad, amazing stillness of the Dark Continent, touching his heart with clay-cold fingers.

Next to the bungalow the medicine-house loomed up, large, flat, low.

The Arab measured the distance between the two houses with his eye. Just a few yards . . . enough to carry a dead body across and inside. But what then? The bush-detective had investigated the place. He was a first-class man—he would have found some sort of trace if murder had been committed in that hut. And, after all, there were always medicine men in the north, he thought; there were always medicine-houses in the trading-stations.

Yet there was some sort of connection between this *umlino* and the murder—the disappearance—of the three agents. Of that he was positive. For there was that dead pig with the red blanket who had come down the river to whisper evil words to the peaceful Warangas. There was the memory of things he knew—of former risings, of massacres, revolts, of fire and flame sweeping through the land . . . and always preceded by the brewing of miracles, the heathenish craft of some ochre-smear *umlino*.

He stared at the medicine-hut. A faint light shone through its tightly-woven rush walls.

"O Allah, Lord of Daytime, protect me against the darkness of the night when it overtaketh me!" he whispered. Then, as was his wont, he snapped his fingers rapidly to ward against unspoken evil, and touched reverently the little blue necklace, protection against unclean spirits, which was strung around his neck.

But still the atmosphere oppressed him horribly—a commingling of hatred and contempt for these unbelieving savages, but also of despair and red terror. He had been a fool to come up here alone, he said to himself.

Then he got a hold on his nerves.

He walked up to the medicine-hut with firm steps, and pushed open the door unceremoniously.

With a swing of the door, a heavy rush of air poured from the interior of the building and hit him square in the chest, with almost physical force. Momentarily he felt sick, dazed. For the column of air which came from the building was thick, smoky, fetid—a mixture of oiled, perspiring bodies and burning torches.

He steadied himself and looked.

The interior of the medicine-hut, seen dimly through a reddish fuliginous haze which swirled up to the low ceiling with opalescent tongues, was a sea of naked bodies, black, shiny, supple. Hundreds of natives knelt there, close together, with curved backs, foreheads and outstretched hands touching the ground.

They had neither seen nor heard his entry.

They were swaying rhythmically from side to side with all the hysterical frenzy of the African in moments of supreme religious exaltation; mumbling an amazing, staccato hymn of guttural, clicking words which resembled no human language; with now and then a sharply-defined pause, followed by a deep, heaving murmur, like the response of some satanic litany.

At the farther end of the hut were five man-size idols, roughly shaped to resemble human figures, and covered with red clay: the usual *ju-jus* of the river tribes.

All this Mahmoud Daud perceived in the flash of a moment; and in the flash of the same moment something touched him. It touched none of his five senses; neither hearing, nor smell, nor vision, nor taste, nor touch itself; it touched a sixth sense, as it were, with a faint flavor of unspeakable death, an aroma of torture and agony.

But he had his wits about him. And when, the very next moment, from behind one of the *ju-jus*, the *umlino* appeared with a sharp jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments, the Arab was his old, suave self.

"Greetings, medicine man of the river tribes!" he said in a loud, sonorous voice.

HIS words seemed to galvanize the worshipers. They jumped up, turned, saw the intruder. There were savage, throaty shouts; an ominous rattling of spears and brandishing of broad-bladed daggers. Momentarily they surged forward, a solid black phalanx, with unthinking, elemental force.

Then they stopped. They hesitated. They turned and looked at the *umlino*, as if asking silently for advice.

And skillfully Mahmoud Daud used the short interval. He took a step forward, a smile on his grave, dark face.

"Greetings, my people!" he said, extending both his hands in a ceremonious *salaam*.

Then, with slow, stately step, he walked up to them. They gave way instinctively.

Here and there he recognized a man in the crowd, and addressed him by name:

"Ho, Lakaga! Ho, L'wana! Ho, son of Asafi!"

The men gave greetings in return.

A few seconds later he found himself face to face with the medicine man, half-a-dozen feet from the clay-covered *ju-jus*.

"Greetings, *umlino*!" he said once more.

The *umlino* looked at him. A savage glint was in his rolling eyes. But at once it gave way to an expression of deep cunning.

"Greetings, master!" he replied courteously, and bowed.

Mahmoud Daud looked at him. Fanatic, contemptuous of pagan faith, he had never paid much attention to the medicine men who lived near the *kraals* and sponged on the people of Double-Dee. But even so, he was positive that this was a new medicine man.

At once, with the sharp, quick perception of a photographic shutter, his mind received and registered the fact that this man did not belong to any of the tribes who had their *kraals* near the station of Grand L'Popo Basin. He came doubtless from farther inland. He looked different from the others.

His hair had been carefully trained in the shape of a helmet, and was ornamented with antelope horns, which stood out on both sides. He wore many-coiled brass-wire anklets which reached from his feet to his knees, and broad brass bracelets on both his forearms. His body was smeared with ochre, while his face was plastered with white and striped with crimson.

Innumerable necklaces of beads were strung around his massive throat, and from his girdle hung a large collection of witch-charms, which flittered and rattled with every gesture and movement. There was something ominous, something savagely superb in the poise of his huge, muscular body.

Mahmoud Daud said to himself that this medicine man was not the ordinary variety of sponger, feeding on the superstitions and fears of the blacks. This was a rich man, as wealth goes in Africa, wearing about his person the value of several elephant tusks.

In his right hand he carried an ebony staff, tipped with gold, from which swung a round something which looked at first like a dried gourd, and which Daud recognized with a little shiver as a human head, scientifically preserved and shriveled.

No, no; . . . this was not an ordinary medicine man who could be bullied or bribed. This was a man after the pattern of Chakka and Lobengula; a man of cunning and craft, to be met with cunning and craft.



WHEN Mahmoud Daud spoke, it was with hearty sincerity. "I have heard tell of thy great craft, *umlino*," he said, squatting down on his haunches with negligent grace and inviting the other to do likewise. "The fame of—"

Suddenly he stopped; it seemed to him that somewhere, quite near, a muffled voice was whispering his name—half-articulate, thick, strangled. At once he dismissed the idea as chimerical. The impression, his sudden silence had only lasted the merest fraction of a second, and so he continued practically in the same breath.

"The fame of thy wisdom has reached the coast. Behold: I have come to see."

The medicine man replied with the same hearty sincerity, parrying easily.

"Thy words are as the sweet winds of night moving gently through the dreadful hours. Thanks! Yet have I heard tell that thou art a Moslem, a follower of the One-God faith, despising the craft of our lodges, and proselytizing among the *kraals*."

The Arab smiled. For a moment he felt nonplused. He did not know how to reply. The other's thrust had gone home. For, true Arab, he was renowned no less for his business acumen as for his missionary zeal—which, if the truth be told, he helped along with fluent abuse and generous applications of the *sjambok*.

So he was silent for a few seconds, and looked into the room.

The negroes were massing around close. They were torn between their fear of Mahmoud Ali Daud and the superstitious awe they felt for the medicine man. Somehow, in the back-cells of their savage, atrophied brains, they realized that a decision would be demanded of them presently. Subconsciously they feared it.

So they spoke among themselves, with a confused utterance which came in bursts of uneven strength, with unexpected pauses and throaty yells; a short interval of palpable silence, then again shrill voices leaping into tumultuous shouts.

The Arab knew that he was on the brink of a

catastrophe. One wrong word, one wrong gesture, and the avalanche of black bodies would be about him, killing, crushing. So he sat absolutely still, watching beneath lowered eyelids without betraying that he was doing so by the slightest nervous twitching.

Then, very suddenly, he seemed to hear again his name being whispered somewhere close by—by the same thick, strangled voice.

At the same moment he felt that some definite intelligence was focused upon him, an intelligence which held both an entreaty and a demand. It did not come from the brain of the medicine man, nor from any one of the blacks in the crowd. It was some superior intelligence which was trying to communicate with him. It made him nervous, uneasy. He endeavored to force the belief on himself that it was a chimera of his imagination.

But still the impression remained.

The medicine man was talking to him. But he hardly heard the words. Obeying the prompting of the bodiless intelligence, he shifted the least little bit on his supple haunches, so that he was directly face-to-face with the clay covered *ju-jus*.

Immediately the sensation gained in strength and positiveness. He became aware of one who watched him, one who wanted to talk to him.

He looked narrowly at the *ju-jus* from underneath his lowered eyelids. They stood in a row. The farthest two were quite crude. Then he noticed, with a little shudder of revulsion, that the other three were startlingly lifelike. Their bodies and arms and legs, beneath the thick covering of red clay, were sculptured and fashioned with extreme skill. Never before had he seen such *ju-jus*, and he knew Africa from Coast to Coast.

Suddenly the fantastic words of the dead Makupo came back to his memory . . . "*clay-gods who talk, talk*." . . . Merciful Allah! was there then really such a thing as witchcraft in this stinking, accursed land?

He was about to dismiss the thought with a snapping of the fingers, a mumbled prayer to his favorite Moslem saint, when again he heard his name whispered . . . faint, muffled, eerie, uncanny. This time there was no doubt of it, and it brought him up rigid, tense, with fists clenched, with eyes glaring. But he controlled himself almost immediately, before the medicine man, who was narrowly watching him, could have noticed it.

He smiled at the *umlino*. He spoke with a calm,

even voice, while at the same time his brain was rapidly working in a different direction.

"Thou hast given true talk, *umlino*," he said. "My faith is indeed the One-God faith, a tree, whose root is firm, whose branches are spreading, whose shade is perpetual. A Syied am I, and a Moslem, a follower of the True Prophet, taking refuge with Allah from Shaitan the Stoned, the Father of Lies. *Subhan' Allah!* A learned man did I think myself when I studied Hadis and Tafsir in the university of Al-Azhar, observing closely the written precepts of the great teachers of the Abu Hanifah sect. *Wah!* The father and mother of learning and wisdom did I consider myself. Proudly did I enlarge my turban. *Ay wa'llahi!*"

The medicine man smiled thinly, arrogantly.

"Then, why come here, to the lodge of darkness?"

Again Mahmoud Daud's reply was suave and soft, while his brain was working feverishly. He stared intently at the clay-covered *ju-ju* which was directly in front of him.

"Because my mind has mirrored a faint glimmering of a new truth . . . a faint glimmering of the real truth," he repeated with peculiar emphasis, still staring beyond the squatting medicine man at the *ju-ju*, and imperceptibly nodding his head.

Even as he spoke he knew that he had solved the problem which had brought him here. Gradually his voice gathered volume and incisiveness.

"Because my groping feet have led me to the edge of mysteries, because, no longer blinded by the veil of my intolerance, I have come to thy feet, O *umlino*, humbly, as a searcher, a disciple."

He rose. Now or never, he said to himself. Once more he stared raptly at the foremost *ju-ju*; then he turned and addressed the negroes.

"Listen to me, men of the river tribes! For years have I been your master, averting calamity with the hand of kindness and generosity; giving fair prices for rubber and ivory; giving with open hands when your crops were parched; giving yet again when your broad-horned cattle died of the black fever. Who can deny this?"

"Yes," a clicking, high-pitched voice; gave answer. "It is true talk, indeed."

"True—true—" The black, swaying mass of humanity took up the words, like a Greek chorus.

The Arab continued:

"I have spoken to you of my faith, the faith of

Islam, when I believed that it was the true path to salvation. Then," he lowered his voice with dramatic intent, "then rumor came to me from the distance of the new mysteries. At first I doubted. I ridiculed. I did not believe. But the rumor grew. It echoed in the ears of my soul—stark, portentous, immutable. It spoke to me at night, sighing on the wings of the wind which came from the upland. It drew me, drew me! Thus I came here—to see—ay, to hear!"

He paused for a breathless moment. Then he shot out the next words.

"I, also, am a searcher in the lodges. I came here to do worship before the gods—the red gods who talk, talk!"

The crowd moaned and shivered. Again the medicine man jumped forward. He lifted his ebony stick with a threatening gesture. But the Arab continued without a tremor.

"Thrice tonight, as I was sitting here exchanging courteous greetings with the *umlino*, did I hear the gods talk—faintly, faintly—and they called me by name!"

"A lie! A lie!" shrieked the medicine man. "A blasphemous lie! Kill him! Kill—kill—"

There was an uneasy movement in the crowd. They surged forward in a solid body, with an ominous rattling of spears. But the Arab lifted his hands above his head and spoke rapidly.

"Not a lie, but the truth! Ask the gods—ask them!"

Sudden, brown silence fell over the temple. Then, very faint, half-articulate, strangled, a voice came from the first *ju-ju*.

"*Mahmoud Ali Daud!*" and again with a peculiar low sob. "*Mahmoud—*"

The crowd surged back, toward the door. Men were knocked down in the wild flight. They pushed each other. They trampled on each other. There were yells of entreaty and despair, and once a sharper yell as an assegai struck home.

But again the Arab spoke to them.

"Fear not, my people. The gods will not harm you. For I, also, am a searcher. The truth has been revealed to me. Listen, listen!"

Once more the crowd stopped and turned. Mahmoud Daud continued in a lower key.

"Do you remember the disappearance of my three servants, my three white servants, one after the other, within four months?"

"Yes—yes—" came the shivering chorus.

“Good! Leave the hut, and return in an hour. For the gods, being kind gods, have decided to send them back to life, to work once more for me, to rule once more in my name over the river tribes. Now go, go!”

There was a stampede toward the door, and a few seconds later the medicine man and the Arab stood facing each other. Daud smiled.

“Thou knowest, and I know, oh dog! Thou didst kidnap the three white men. Thou didst gag them and cover their bodies with clay, and once in a while give them a little food. And, when they moaned with the great pain, thou didst tell these blacks that the gods talked, talked—eh?”

The medicine man smiled in his turn.

“True, my master. And how didst thou discover the truth?”

“Because I have seen *ju-jus* a plenty—but never before have I seen a *ju-ju* with human eyes!”

There was a short silence. The Arab continued:

“Thou wilt help me to release these men from their clay prisons. Also wilt thou tell the people of Grand L’Popo Basin that in the future it is I,

Mahmoud Ali Daud, who is the beloved of the gods, the maker of many miracles.” Then, half to himself: “It should be worth the value of much rubber, of many ivory tusks.”

The medicine man smiled craftily.

“To listen is to obey, master! But my life—is it safe?”

“It is for thee to choose, dog and son of dogs! Either—this—” and he slipped his broad Arab dagger from the voluminous folds of his *burnoose*, “or thou wilt continue to make medicine. But thou wilt make it in the uplands, in the *kraals* of the hinterland.” He smiled. “And thou wilt make it as a hired servant, a paid servant, of my firm of Donachie & Daud, of Double-Dee! . . . Hast thou chosen?”

“Yes, master,” the medicine man replied. “I shall work for thee and thy partner.”

The Arab slipped the dagger back into the folds of his *burnoose*.

“*Mashallah!*” he said. “Thou wilt make a shrewd servant.”

And he walked up to the clay-covered *ju-jus*.