

# Bellowing Bamboo

By ANTHONY RUD



"Inarticulate horror, choked screams burst from his throat."

*The story of a weird revenge, and the unhuman bellow that came across the lake from an eery bamboo forest in the South American jungle*

FROM the moment Lieutenant Natheshire of the British Guiana Provincial Police heard of Selwyn Landrigan's coming, the officer frowned and became moody. Still, as guardian of the peace on the upper Mazaruni and Cuyuni Rivers, Natheshire could do no less than make a pretense of welcoming Landrigan—and then stick close to him.

Landrigan was hated, with sufficient reason. In spite of that fact he had become a personage in the affairs of the trading company. And this company, which handled most of the foreign trade of British Guiana and Venezuela, and also owned more than a hundred stations on the jungle rivers, could make or break men like Natheshire.

In his secret thoughts, Natheshire feared that the pompous and foppish Landrigan was returning to be murdered. Not that anyone would mourn; but Natheshire sincerely liked the man who had reason to do the murder.

Lake Maza-Cuyuni is formed by the junction of these two swift jungle rivers, with the addition of the Essequibo. From the lake to the sea at Demerara, the more sluggish stream is called the Essequibo. On the lake itself, the British maintain a large and well-guarded prison colony, similar to the French penal colony at the Isles du Salut.

Directly across the ten-mile lake from the prison is a *shando* [tropical inn], which serves as a half-way house for white men. Natheshire had quarters here; and the company agents came here from the rivers, whenever the rain and mildew of the jungle got too much for them. This day three men sat at a small table on the screened gallery of the *shando*. Selwyn Landrigan was speaking, arrogantly as usual.

"The Cuyuni River station is the most important and profitable in all this jungle!" he stated, smoothing the glistening white silk stock at his neck. He drained the last of his tinkling rum swizzel, then set down the glass and nodded profoundly across at the younger of his listeners, Bisbee Alden.

The latter had been a sub-agent on Trinidad, and was going upstream from Lake Maza-Cuyuni on the morrow.

At Landrigan's left sat Natheshire, a tall, stern man. He was scowling a little over his drink, which was made of Holland's mixed with quinine water.

"I rather expected we would never see you upstream again, Landrigan," drawled the policeman, a cutting edge of criticism underlying the dry statement. He looked as if willing to amplify it, too,

Landrigan stiffened instantly.

"I am company manager for British Guiana now," he answered with hauteur. "Naturally I came to help Mr. Alden take charge of my old station. Also I have a few other matters of business. I suppose you refer to that uprising of the Indios? To that most unfortunate killing of Smith's young brother?"

"Quite," agreed Natheshire dryly. "To that—and to Smith himself."

"I shall make a point to see Mr. Smith before I return. He has an explanation to make to the company. Though I can appreciate why he might not care to live any longer in that bungalow among the bamboos, moving the station from the mouth of the Mazaruni clear up to the foot of the rapids—twenty-five miles—was absolutely unauthorized! I wish to know why."

He pushed back his chair, preparatory to arising.

"I would advise against it," said Natheshire, deadly serious now. "It is my job to keep peace in the jungle."

"Wha-at?" gasped Landrigan. "You actually mean that Smith threatens me—through you?"

"Nothing so absurd!" retorted Natheshire brusquely. "No, sit down a moment!"—this as the manager moved as if to retire to his bedchamber in the rear of the *shando*.

This was the voice of authority, of the British law. Landrigan scowled, hesitated, but finally obeyed. He was furious at this insult to his self-importance, occurring as it did before his new subordinate.

"THERE never will be any love lost between you and me," continued Natheshire sternly then. "That is why I prefer to have you hear what I have to say to Mr. Alden. He is to have charge of the station which deals directly with

those Indios who slew Smith's crippled kid brother, whom he idolized—the Cuyuni Mundurucus.

"Alden will find that branch of the tribe somewhat diminished in numbers—and prone to stay closely within their stockaded village at night. And, Mr. Alden, this is why!

"I must digress a moment to make my point plain. This region, and all the Mud Coast from Demerara to Georgetown, was originally colonized by the Dutch from Java, back in the early Seventeenth Century. They cleared three hundred and more square miles of jungle right away, and planted cassava. In the course of fifty years they had two thousand miles in cultivation. That's all gone back to jungle, except right near the coast.

"They brought fruits and Asiatic bamboo with them from the East. All we have now are a few durians, and that forest of bamboo, over there where the Mazaruni empties into this lake. That is the only *Asiatic* bamboo forest in the Americas, though there are many indigenous varieties.

"The Dutch brought ten thousand or more East Indian coolies to use as laborers. Their descendants still work the cane and cassava plantations near the coast. The point is, they gave some of their queer Eastern beliefs to the Indios—especially one which had to do with decapitation with the parang, or with the Collins machete. The Mundurucus were head-hunters anyway. Still are: They bone and shrivel their enemies' heads for trophies. So they took to Malay superstitions of this sort with alacrity.

"For the last century or so, I understand, these Indios from the Cuyuni have brought their important captives down to this bamboo grove on the lake. They have had a pleasant custom of binding

the captive to the stalk of a giant bamboo, then beheading him.

"One stroke of the machete cuts through the victim's neck, and also through the thin, hard, hollow bamboo bole. Strangely enough, the bamboo utters a bellow or yowl, like a single blast of air through a shattered organ pipe. You can hear it quite plainly from the gallery of this *shando*."

"Ugh!" shivered Bisbee Alden, smiling uneasily. "Pleasant natives I'm going to handle!" But he was young enough not to seem really displeased.

Natheshire nodded grimly. "That bellow, or whatever you want to call it, is supposed to be the victim's soul, fleeing to Paradise," he continued. "In the bamboo grove you will find eight stumps, new in the course of the past year.

"There were exactly nine Indios concerned in the murder of Smith's young brother. Nine Indios—and one white man!"

His face was grimly stern as he spoke the two concluding sentences straight at Selwyn Landrigan.

"Good Lord!" began Bisbee Alden aghast. "You mean that Smith——?"

The sentence died on his lips. From diagonally across the mirror-quiet, moonlit lake came a sudden sound which widened the eyes of all three white men, and made them grasp involuntarily at the arms of their wicker chairs.

It was a single mournful bellow, indescribably suggestive and blood-chilling.

Natheshire took a deep inhalation, and his dark eyes narrowed.

"That's likely number nine!" he said, getting up and reaching for his holstered Browning, hung by a belt from the back of his chair. "I'll wager I find the body—but not the head!"

"You—you——" sputtered Landrigan, leaping to his feet. He was white of

face, more from fury than fear, however. Then his words spilled out fast.

"You mean to stand there and admit, Lieutenant Natheshire," he snapped, "that you have allowed nine murders in this district where you say you keep the peace? And also, you offer gratuitous insult to company officials who come here upon their legitimate business?"

"I shall go to my room, and write out a report of your insolence and inefficiency, tonight! Perhaps your superiors will have something to say about this!"

Natheshire finished buckling his belt. Then he grimaced as at something distasteful.

"Report and be damned!" he said in a level tone, and went forth into the night.

**T**wo hours later young Bisbee Alden still lay awake. He heard the policeman returning from his grim task, and stepped out into the dimness of the gallery.

"Find what you expected, Lieutenant?" he asked, wondering at the quiver of excitement in his voice.

"Yes, one of your Cuyunis," said Natheshire. "I expect he will be the last—*Indio!* There's no evidence I could discover by flashlight. I'll go out and make a thorough examination in the morning."

He stepped on past the new agent, entered his own quarters and speedily retired. He guessed well enough who had beheaded the native, a murderous rascal who had been one of the raiding nine of whom he had spoken. But in this particular case Lieutenant Natheshire was apt to be an obtuse Sherlock Holmes. This was the jungle, after all. And Natheshire sympathized deeply with the man named Smith.

Bisbee Alden had difficulty controlling the tingly chills which skittered across

his shoulder-blades. Good land alive, what a job he had undertaken! After peaceful Trinidad, it was like being plunged into another world. For a second he glanced down at the end of the *shando*, where bright light in cross-bars fell from the lattice of Landrigan's window. No doubt the manager was still scribbling his vitriolic report.

Alden shrugged, ashamed of a momentary impulse to chuck the job. He went to his room and determinedly lay down. This time he slept.

One hour later a man came noiselessly from the jungle. He showed only as a tall shadow, striding swiftly toward the stilted gallery. Without a sound he mounted the steps, let himself in the screen door, and then stopped outside the lattice of Landrigan's window.

There he crouched, peering in. The barred light gave him as a tall man, spare but sinewy. He was clad in cap, flannel shirt, khaki trousers and sneakers—the fatigue uniform of the jungle trader, used when at home, or when travelling in country not infested with fer-de-lances and bushmasters. A wide leather cartridge-belt holding a holstered Colt automatic encircled his waist.

Ten, twelve seconds ticked past. Inside the lighted room, Landrigan signed his name with a scratchy flourish. Then he got to his feet, stretching cramped muscles. He shook one fist in the general direction of Natheshire's room. The arrogant manager looked vindictively pleased with himself.

Five seconds later a slight sound made him turn. Then a shudder of surprize and apprehension convulsed Landrigan. A tall, bleak-featured man with levelled automatic stood in the open door to the gallery.

"S-smith!" the manager whispered, his eyes wide and apprehensively staring. He

had meant to call Smith on the carpet, but not in this manner. No, indeed!

"Not another sound if you wish to live, Landrigan!" warned Smith, in a ghost-voice which would not carry more than ten feet. "You are coming with me. Any noise, I warn you, will be your *last* noise on earth! Take off your shoes, and carry them."

"Wha-what does this mean?" stammered Landrigan.

"Not another word! Come!"

There was no sign of yielding or compromise in the stern, gaunt face behind the automatic. Landrigan thought irrelevantly to himself that Smith looked ten years older; that he still clung to his absurd habit of shaving daily. . . .

**A** MINUTE later, shoes in hand, and shivering despite the warmth of the night, Landrigan preceded his captor through the gallery doorway, down the steps, and out into the enshrouding, moon-checked jungle.

"Sit down and put on your shoes!"

Landrigan obeyed. But with the return of leather to cover his tender soles, something of self-possession came as well. He began to talk indignantly, though in a low tone. What did Smith think he was doing? Had the man gone mad?

"I ought to kill you," interrupted Smith coldly. "If ever a white man deserved death, you do—yellow dog!" The last two words grated. "I knew that sometime you would come back, so I waited. Now, either get up and go, and keep your mouth shut, or I'll blow your gizzard all over the ferns!"

Landrigan shivered. He knew only too well that Smith had never been a bluffer. So the terrified manager clutched at the one offered straw of hope. Smith hinted that he would not actually kill

his quarry. Landrigan, trying his best to regain some semblance of his usual jaunty demeanor, strode ahead through the jungle in the direction of the sinister bamboo forest. With all his heart he damned himself for venturing back into this accursed region. Natheshire had been right in respect to Smith.

Why had not he, Landrigan, discharged Smith long ago instead of letting him keep the Mazaruni River station?

Down in his heart the manager knew the answer to that. He had been afraid at first that, if discharged, Smith might come down and make a horrible scene in the offices at Georgetown. Later there had been the feeling that sooner or later Smith, like all jungle traders soon or late, would fall victim to a poisoned dart, or the cut of a keen machete. But Smith had survived!

On and on. Half an hour more, and they reached the first of the giant bamboos. Here the underbrush was scant. The great stalks, some of them a foot in diameter and more, thin of shell, hard as baked shellac, slanted upward like royal palms on an atoll in the zone of the trade winds.

The spot was eery, hushed like the vault of a cathedral. There was no moonlight at first, only a vague diffusion which let a man pick his way between the stalks.

Once Landrigan started back with a stifled shriek. A dark, low-hung shape had whisked from just in front of his feet. Instantly the muzzle of the automatic jammed into his spine.

"Only a black jaguar," reassured the caustic voice of Smith. "There are worse specters here—in this forest of fleeing souls!"

"What do you mean to do with m-me?" quavered Landrigan. The last vestiges of his nerve were deserting him now.

No answer. The grim, gaunt man be-

hind prodded him onward. Now they reached the first of the awesome bamboo stumps, beside which the trunk lay moldering on the ground. The stump itself was a clean-cut thumb of bamboo, projecting from its roots, just to the height of a man's neck. . . .

A whimper burst from Landrigan. On further now there was a regular clearing, into which the moonlight poured. Here were scores, hundreds of the stumps, it seemed. The sacrificial spot of the Indios—probably of this madman behind him!

"Stop here!" Smith's voice was hoarse.

Landrigan obeyed, his knees shaking.

"Right across this clearing, straight ahead, you can see my home, Landrigan. That was where I brought Dick, my brother, when he was learning to walk again, after infantile paralysis. There was no one else to care for him, and I—I loved him, Landrigan.

"And just as surely as if you had cut his throat, you murdered him!"

"Oh, my God!" broke in the manager, almost hysterically. "You don't believe——"

He got no further. Shifting the automatic to his left hand, clenching his right fist for a necessary part of the procedure, Smith took one step forward and struck Landrigan squarely upon the point of the chin. It was a merciful enough blow. The manager pitched forward, knocked cleanly into unconsciousness.

Not wasting so much as a glance on the fallen man, Smith strode across the moonlit glade to the bungalow. Though he never stopped here a single night any more, he kept certain supplies hidden handy in the little building—m<sup>a</sup>chetes, coir rope and the like. . . .

**M**INUTES later, when Landrigan returned to uneasy knowledge of his surroundings, he felt strangely, terribly

restrained. He was held erect, though slumping loosely. Something was pulling painfully at the long, waved chestnut hair on his head—hair which the prideful manager always had combed straight back.

He tried to lift his arms to investigate, and could not wrench them free. His legs too were immovable. He came staring awake then, screaming.

He was bound to a new one of the execution bamboos, his head held back by a loop fastened around a long lock of his hair, so that his throat was arched and tense, the Adam's apple fully exposed. His arms were lashed behind the bole of the bamboo. His legs were bound to the stalk near the ground.

Directly before him, arms folded, gaunt face saturninely grim, stood Smith. In the man's right hand, clutched so that the thirty-inch blade slanted upward, was a silvery-keen Collins machete.

The man from the Mazaruni answered none of Landrigan's frantic questions and pleading, through one long minute. He allowed full and ominous realization of his position to sink into the manager. He did not move even a muscle of his lined countenance, as Landrigan went from yells and frantic pleading, to a half-hysterical shrieking, his nerve completely gone.

"Yell all you want," advised Smith coldly. "All will be over for you, long before Natheshire or anyone else can get here from the *shando*."

"But you—you will *hang* for this!" screamed Landrigan.

"No," said Smith unemotionally. "I won't hang, if that is any consolation to you. And besides"—here his voice took on a sudden hoarseness of undiluted savagery—"do you think, you yellow-bellied, treacherous snake, that I care now what happens to me?"

"But what have I done to you? What have I——"

"Silence now!" commanded Smith. "I will explain a little more in detail why you are here—though deep in your cowardly heart you know, well enough. You never had the nerve for the jungle. I wanted to help you, naturally, so I took over those dangerous trips which were really your job. My kid brother could not travel with me, of course. I thought—as any white man would naturally think—that the very least you could do in return would be to take extra care that nothing happened to crippled little Dick, while I was chancing my life for you.

"Instead of that you left him here by himself——"

"My Indios were in revolt!" cried Landrigan wildly.

"In revolt—because you were too yellow to refuse them rum," gritted Smith. "Yes, that is the whole truth. All—except that when they ran amok, you fled for the protection of the penal colony, and did not even *try* to protect my brother.

"I only found out these details long afterward. And right then I swore that sometime you would be paid, in a coin you could understand. Now is the time of payment. Prepare yourself, coward!"

Up swung the bright machete in the moonlight. Up—and back. Ready for the swift, powerful beheading stroke!

Inarticulate horror, choked screams burst from the throat of the manager. No use now to scream! . . .

The stroke started. It came, swift as light.

Through the forest sounded the mournful bellow of the slashed bamboo, then the gathering crash as the top of the stalk fell away. Landrigan knew no more.

THREE minutes later he came to limp, sweating consciousness. Bonds severed, he lay at the foot of the bamboo stump. It took him one whole minute of staring, aimless incomprehension, before memory returned and brought him completely from his faint, and to his feet with a raucous shriek of realization.

The stroke had missed his throat!

He was free. He stared, stupid. There was the bamboo stump. He felt his own head, and gaped to know it was still on his shoulders.

Something had happened to his long, chestnut hair. The waved tuft which had been looped to the bamboo seemed to be missing. There was a tender spot of scalp, moist with blood, at the crown of his head. The keen blade had cut ~~that~~ close.

Yes, Smith had swung at him—and *missed!*

But where was Smith?

Flinching at a shadow among the bamboos, staring wildly at a sudden, unreasoning fear that the man might return to finish his job, Landrigan crouched back. Small, choked, animal-like noises of terror came from his throat. His shoulders touched the bamboo stump.

With a shriek he leapt away from the horrid thing. Then he turned and sped as fast as his legs would carry him, in the direction of the *shando*.

He was gibbering, out of his mind with sheer terror, when Natheshire and Bisbee Alden met him. They seized him by the arms, shook him, and made him return with them to the inn. There they poured French brandy down his throat, and tried to bring him to himself.

It was little use. Even with a half-pint of the strong liquor inside him, Landrigan still moaned, and shook from head to foot as though with a seizure of the dengue fever. He had said nothing un-

derstandable as yet. Every time they released hold of his arms he leapt erect, shrinking, starting to run one way or another.

Finally at dawn he started to scream demands that he be allowed to go downriver immediately. The grimly disgusted policeman nodded at this, and went forth to make preparations. The sooner Lake Maza-Cuyuni was rid of this specimen, the better Natheshire would be pleased.

No sooner was he out of sight, however, than Landrigan settled matters for himself. With the sudden strength of a maniac, he broke away from Bisbee Alden, and rushed down to the dock where was moored his power cruiser. After frantic work, and some ineffectual *shuff-shuffling* of the motor, there came a barrage of sudden explosions.

Then, despite Alden's half-hearted attempts to stop him, and Natheshire who came running and yelling angrily, Landrigan shoved off alone, and roared out in a sweep across the lake. He was bound for the Essequibo River, and Demerara far downstream.

"Good land alive!" breathed the half-exhausted Alden. "He didn't even wait for a river pilot or a crew!"

"He may not make it. You have to know your way through those marshes of the lower river," said Natheshire, grimacing. "Well, perhaps it would be just as well. The man is stark, raving crazy.

"Let's you and I, Alden, go back there to the bamboos. I'm a policeman, after all—though maybe I'll refuse to do any guessing in this particular case."

"It shouldn't be hard to imagine," said Alden soberly. "Poor Smith must have exacted revenge—of a sort."

In silence after that, just as a red sun was rising, they walked to the bungalow and the little glade in the bamboos near

the mouth of the Mazaruni. There Natheshire, once chuckling grimly to himself, pointed out the new stump and the fallen top of the great bamboo which had bellowed. Then, moving back of the stump a few steps, he bent down.

"Look at this, Alden!" he said.

Bound firmly to the base of the upper portion of the bamboo stalk, just where it had been sliced away from the stump, was a five-inch tuft of waved chestnut hair!

Bisbee Alden shook his head slowly, wordlessly. Then he suddenly tensed, reaching over and gripping Natheshire's wrist. They both turned their heads.

There, motionless behind them, stood a tall, gaunt-featured man. Without being told, Alden realized full well that this must indeed be the mysterious Smith.

"**H**OWDY, Lieutenant," said the man in a deep, melancholy voice. "I suppose this must be the Mr. Alden I've heard about, the new agent for the Cuyuni?"

He advanced one stride, proffering a handclasp.

"My name is Smith. I have had the Mazaruni station. I—I resigned today."

"Quite!" interjected Natheshire dryly.

After a moment's hesitation, Bisbee Alden accepted the handshake, and liked its firmness.

"I suppose I ought to arrest you, Smith, on suspicion," cogitated Natheshire aloud, scratching his stubbly chin. "But I'm damned if I think I will! Anyway, I'll wait until someone swears out a warrant."

"Thanks," said Smith, with a hint of a grim smile in his mouth corners. "No one will."

"Probably Landrigan even forgot his report," chuckled Alden with relief, sensing an end to the tension.

"This probably doesn't seem like ex-



actly a square deal to hand out to a new man, Alden," continued Smith. "But I'll tell you what. I have locked up the Mazaroni station, and made my Indios understand that there is a deadly taboo upon it. They will leave it alone till someone else comes to take charge.

"But meanwhile, you have the tough job of starting a station which has been closed down for five months—and I understand you are new to the Guiana jungle?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, then. I have all the time there is. If you'd like my help—without pay, of course—and Natheshire says it's all

right, I'll go up the Cuyuni with you for a while. I can manage any of those Indios with no trouble at all."

"I should think you might!" said Natheshire, under his breath. But he smiled then, and made no objection.

"Thanks a lot, Smith!" exclaimed Alden in relief. He had wondered what he was going to do; and now he had a feeling of delicious excitement in conquering that chill that skittered across his shoulder-blades.

"I'm damned glad to accept! To clinch it, let's all go back to the *shando* and have a spot. I admit that I—well, I could make mighty good use of one right now!"

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