

# SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

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*With her only weapon, her beauty, his wife fought for him against the High Priestess of the African cult!*



# RAIN in DAHOMY

**R**AIN beat against the tin roof rhythmically, incessantly. Something inside Dutton seemed to respond to it, echo it. His blood throbbed in unison with the dripping downpour. He sat in the shadow on the screened porch, a glass of whiskey at his elbow. *Harmattan*, that three-month

period of intense drought on the Dahomey Guinea Coast was over. The big rains were here again.

Dutton tried to arouse himself from his lethargy. He knew Lieutenant St. Clair was in the living room, no doubt making love to Lorna, Dutton's wife. And he knew Lorna was doing her share,

## By **CARL MOORE**



"Oh, Takadonu, this is the man you promised me!" Egba intoned.

that she responded to the dapper little Frenchman who had come up the river from Whydah three days before with a

detachment of ten Senegalese soldiers. They had been headed originally for the Lama Swamp, where Guinea Coast rumor had placed the last survivors and newest converts of the Serpent Cult.

But St. Clair, after one look at Lorna Dutton, had decided the rains were too great to proceed at once. So he had lodged his Senegalese in a storage house outside Dutton's plantation and had stayed on to see more of Lorna.

Dutton didn't care. He was as sick of Lorna as he was of everything else! Even the thought of her white body in another man's arms didn't bother him. He felt no love for her, wanted nothing of her. Instead, stirring within him in a manner he could not fathom, was a yearning for Egba, the half-caste Portuguese girl from down the river, who worked about the plantation house.

He could close his eyes now and see the tawny liteness of her legs, the flaring enticement of full hips, tightly covered with her solitary garment whose top hardly obscured the pear-shaped beauty of breasts that trembled with her slightest movement.

But Dutton was afraid. If he let himself go—and from the way her slumbrous eyes had looked on him he knew the woman only waited on his first advance—if he let himself go, he was a lost man. Already Africa was stirring within him. He couldn't resist much longer.

He caught Egba's subtle, remembered fragrance before he heard the soft swish of her single garment about slim legs. Startled, he turned. Her teeth flashed whitely in the dusky oval of her face. He knew her mouth was a taunting red slash, knew her breasts were heaving beneath the thin material of her dress. And that every tempting line of her figure was a challenge.

He didn't speak. She refilled his glass, leaned closer to him, so that one soft breast curved its warm mould against his shoulder. For a moment he pulled away, but her low laughter made a beating red flame of the blood racing through him. His arm slid about her waist. The svelte curve of her flesh was silky and warm.

He was on his feet in a second, knocking over the table that held the whiskey bottle. It crashed to the floor in a shatter of broken glass. Then he was staring down into that triumphant smile, crushing her until that lissome, supple form was shaped against his own. Her lips parted to receive his kiss, when suddenly he pushed her aside, muttering, "No, damn it, I can't let myself go!" Then, coldly, "Clean up the mess, please."

As he walked away unsteadily, he heard her taunting laughter and flushed.

AT THE window he paused, looked inside the house. His flush deepened. Just as he had suspected, Lorna was in the Frenchman's arms. Dutton glared at the mad scene for a moment, his hands clinched into fists.

The two were seated on the rattan divan oblivious of all but each other. Round white arms pulled St. Clair's head down to Lorna's, a hot mouth was pressed passionately against the Lieutenant's. The straps of her gown had slipped down her shoulders, completely forgotten. The cleft between her crushed breasts was deep and shadowy. Her dress had crawled up about sleek thighs that gleamed whitely above her stocking tops.

Even as he watched, Lorna's hand shot out to turn the light completely off.

Dutton's anger faded to hopelessness. What did he care? To hell with her! He didn't care about Lorna now, damn it; it was that wench Egba!

Egba was walking demurely away with downcast eyes and her hips quivered a sinuous taunt. Once she looked over her shoulder. Dutton caught his breath as the light in the doorway illuminated the perfect contours of her body.

To hell with Lorna! Two could play at this game. Grimly, purposefully he set out after Egba. Straight down the hallway she went toward the wing of the house which sheltered her own room. Dutton stayed at her heels and his blood was a feverish flood.

Once Glegle, the Dahomeyan houseboy, stepped from a crossing corridor but he drew back quickly. Dutton didn't even see him; if Egba noticed him, she gave no sign. She raised the curtain that

covered the doorway of her room, entered. Dutton, breathing deeply, followed. The curtain fell behind him.

Steadily from black skies came the beat of the incessant rain on the tin roof. And steadily within Dutton the beat of his heart kept rhythm with that rain.

She lighted a lamp and turned to him. Her mouth was tremulous, her eyes half veiled. He groaned a little as he swept her against his chest, felt her breasts crush against him, felt the savage response in her indulgent form, in the arms wound tightly about his neck.

She whispered triumphantly, "Egba has waited long for this minute!"

**D**INNER was a silent meal, only the little Lieutenant talking with any persistence. Lorna watched her husband's burning face and fevered eyes in silence. As for Dutton, after all the indecision and pent-up emotion of the last few months, he was now happy. He watched his wife eat, remembered what he had seen through the porch window, and didn't care! He knew that beneath the table her knee was against that of the voluble little officer. And still he didn't care. He compared the half-revealed, milk-white breasts of the woman he had married with those of the bronze-skinned Egba.

Egba represented Africa, Lorna was the personification of England. And Dutton knew who had won.

His eyes kept following Egba about the room as she served the meal. Avidly, he watched the swinging of her hips, the quivering of partially exposed breasts. Let Lorna see the passion in his eyes! He had chosen! From now on it was Egba! If Africa was in his blood, so be it!

St. Clair said, "These damnable rains, this damnable jungle! Thank God, I am about through with them. Three more months and I go back to France."

Lorna said dreamily, "We have another year. It will seem good to see London again, to be among civilized people."

Dutton's eyes were feverish, bright. Again he heard the beat of the rain, thought of the baobab trees and the coconut palms, the rank undergrowth of the swamp country, the pungent smells! And Egba!

He said, "There's something about Dahomey and the jungle that gets into a man's blood. I think I will stay here the rest of my life."

Lorna gasped, the Lieutenant's mouth gaped open.

Behind Dutton's chair, he could sense Egba's presence. He could still smell her hair, could still feel the touch of bronze flesh. Africa! Of course he'd stay in Africa.

"Don't be absurd," gasped Lorna.

"I was never more serious in my life. You may return to your damned England any time you like. I shall stay here forever!" He gulped the liquor at his elbow.

**S**ILENCE, then the startled Lieutenant quickly changed the subject. "I wish my present mission were finished," he said. "These ancient cults that revive every few years are often bloody messes to handle. I have it on good information that the latest, led by a man who calls himself King Takudonu, is very strong in numbers. He has revived the old custom of the Amazon warriors and the Serpent is being worshiped—"

At first Dutton scarcely heard the droning voice of the French soldier. He lay back in his chair with his eyes closed,

conscious of only two things. The steady beat of the rain on the tin roof of the porch like a million tiny drums. That and the presence of Egba in the room. He heard the soft sound of her feet behind him, felt her nearness when she removed dishes, even trembled at the touch of her thinly covered breast against his shoulder when she poured his drink. Then he became aware again of the reedy droning voice of the Frenchman.

"—rites three times a year in worship of the Python Danh-ghi. Often, even now, there are human sacrifices and sometimes cannibalism is practised. The Fons believe the python to be a symbol of fecundity, in fact the father and symbol of all life. These cults must hold their orgies in the swamps and hidden places, of course, and we take every means to break them up once we know they are under way."

*The serpent, the symbol of life.*

Dutton stirred in his chair. The thought flashed through his mind that the serpent in the Garden had been the symbol of wisdom. Why, the serpent was Africa itself, ages old in knowledge! Egba was a serpent! He remembered the sinuous movement of her lush hips, the undulations of rounded arms, the sleekness of full thighs. Even her hair was serpentine, a million curling, crawling little snakes.

He opened his eyes, found himself staring directly into those of the half-caste girl. *Her eyes were so black as to seem almost without pupils—like those of a snake.* Little reflections of light from the lamp leaped and flickered in them. He said only one phrase, "The serpent!" and reached for Egba, who smilingly eluded his grip and left the room sinuously.

Across the room Lorna gasped, leaped

to her feet, upsetting the wine before her. Her face was livid with rage. She said, "Charles, are you drunk? Have you gone insane?"

"Not insane! I am merely getting sane again. I would like to go back to the root of all things, to the Serpent!"

Lieutenant St. Clair arose quickly. "Pardon me, please, madame. I must see about my men." His boot heels clicked across the floor.

Slowly Dutton arose, walked toward his wife, eyes like those of a sleep walker. She read madness there and tried to get away from him. But his hand gripped her shoulder.

"A long while ago I loved you, now I do not." His voice was almost mocking, except for the dreamy note. "It is not that I care about the other men. That does not matter. It is I who have changed. Watch!"

He swept her voluptuous body into his arms, held her so tightly that she gasped for breath. In spite of herself her blood grew hotter in the fierce embrace, her own white arms slid around his neck as he bent to kiss her. Her eyes flew wide open at once, for his kiss was cool and chaste. When he released her she drew back; he merely smiled.

"Do you see? That does not mean a thing to me! I am through with that part of my life!"

His hand seized the front of her gown, ripped it from her shoulders. "Once, seeing you like this would have driven me mad... mad with love for you...! Now—"

The dress was torn the rest of the way from her body with one great jerk, which pulled her stumbling to her knees. He gazed down at the soft white contours of her body, the generous breasts, the flaring hips, the flat abdomen.

Slowly he shook his head, his eyes hot, angry. "Bah! You are merely a white, fat pig! And once I loved you! The Serpent, the Serpent, that is the thing! Sinuous, twisting, undulating. The Serpent, the symbol of life!"

**H**E WALKED slowly down the hallway to his own room, threw himself down on the bed. The woman he had left cowered in a corner and wept for

the beast that had once been her husband.

Outside, the rain continued, millions of heavy fingers beating a tattoo on the tin roof. The whole world had a wet damp smell, the smell of decaying vegetation, the smell of the Guinea Coast jungles during the big rains.

Dutton peered straight upward at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. The rain was forgotten. It was merely the boom-



Throughout the mad dance he was conscious only of Egba in his arms—always Egba.

ing of a gigantic drum in his brain now. His blood was at fever heat, his heart pumped madly. Presently he slept.

Dutton dreamed.

He dreamed that the curtain of his room was slowly pulled aside, that a pair of slotted black eyes without pupils peered in at him. A beautiful red tongue flashed out from between black lips. A spade-shaped head seemed to weave rhythmically in greeting, while coil after coil of glistening snake undulated into the room.

It slithered close to the bed, but Dutton was not afraid. It was beautiful. The snake's unadorned body gleamed and glistened in the lamp light as if anointed with oil. It was a sleek, slender, rippling wave of loveliness. Even when it coiled intimately beside him, he found its flesh warm and pleasant. When a gleaming coil spanned his body he was comforted. His fingers patted the sleek skin, caressed smooth flesh.

When the serpent wound its way from his embrace and slithered noiselessly from the room, Dutton too staggered after it, followed it down the hallway, out the back door into the relentlessly beating rain.

It was the same cool fingers of rain that finally brought him back to his senses. He was flat on his back in something that rocked and swayed from side to side like a suspended hammock. Overhead great fronds of jungle ferns waved fantastic fingers. The interlaced branches of swamp trees at times made an arc that shut off the rain. Over all was the smell of mud and decayed vegetation, the miasmic odor of swamp. Then he was conscious of movement, as if his body were being propelled forward.

Where was he? Name of God, what was he doing?

He sat up with a suddenness that nearly overturned the native boat. The water was ink, the darkness of the atmosphere impenetrable, yet he knew someone was in the stern of the boat propelling the thing along. He heard the suck of the pole as the mud beneath the shallow water released it, heard the eerie cry of swamp animals off to either side. Why was he here? He remembered dreaming of the python, remembered dreaming he had followed it from the house.

But what then? What now?

A tender voice said, "Sleep, Dutton, sleep and rest. I read in your eyes that you would seek the Serpent so I am taking you to him. You, a white, are to see the Father of all Wisdom, the Symbol of all Life."

Egba! With a groan he held his throbbing head in his hands. What was wrong with him? How could he be in the middle of a swamp with Egba, in a boat headed toward an unknown place?

Something was thrust into his hands. Her voice said, "Drink, Dutton, it will ease your aching head. Soon we shall arrive."

He gulped greedily at the liquor in the bottle. It was like fire but it eased his aching head as she had said it would. Presently he lay back down in the bottom of the boat and let the rain beat down on his unprotected face. And again he dreamed of the Serpent.

**H**OW long afterward it was that Egba aroused him, he did not know. He was only conscious of her arms about his neck, her red lips close to his, as she whispered, "Come, Dutton, it is time. We go, you and I."

Somehow he got to his feet, stepped on solid ground and went with the girl,



hand in hand down a long roofed passageway. His eyes were burning, his tongue was thick, but he went willingly. He was remembering his dream.

A black curtain at the end of the passageway was pulled aside; together they entered. Overcome with amazement Dutton paused, though Egba tried to pull him forward. He tried to shake the cobwebs from his head, but the scene was too fantastic. Lined up directly before them, barring their progress, were eight women, each with a rifle leveled at the newcomers.

They were clad only in loin cloths of white that contrasted startlingly with the blackness of their skins. Eight pairs of black breasts were motionless mounds of ebony as the women stood like so many statues, guns ready for use.

To Dutton's addled mind came the droning words of the Frenchman at the dinner table. The Swamp King, the head of the Serpent Cult, who had revived the old Amazonian warriors for his body-guard! But Egba was speaking quickly in the Ewe dialect. A guttural voice answered from across the room. The rank of Amazons dropped their guns, moved quickly aside and Egba pulled Dutton forward.

The room was tremendous in size, lighted by flickering torches that cast weird reflections on the walls. Something was set in the walls at intervals, something white and grinning with great holes where eyes had been, great black slashes where once had been mouths.

Skulls! A palace room decorated with skulls! Fascinated, Dutton stared at them. It was only then that he became aware of a group against the opposite walls, a group of proudly defiant black men who held themselves apart from a similar group of black women. All

stared at the bedraggled white man with curious eyes but no other expression on their wooden faces. Then he heard Egba's voice.

"Oh, Takudonu, Friend of the Father of Wisdom, this is the man. I have done as you commanded in the past. This is the man I want, the man you promised me. Speak."

Dutton's bleary eyes stared directly into those of a towering Dahomeyan who sat cross-legged on a carved stone altar. Across his knees he held a gleaming knife. Now he peered from Dutton to the woman Egba and his eyes were those of an eagle. His voice rumbled in his thick black chest, seemed to come from far distances.

"Egba, Priestess of Python Danh-ghi, you have been promised the man you desire. If you have been worthy you shall have him—forever. You have done as I advised?"

"Yes, Father. I have given the potions."

"Then we shall see what Danh-ghi himself shall say." He clapped his hands, spoke in dialect to an attending Amazon, who promptly disappeared. When she returned, she bore a bowl of steaming liquid which she extended toward Dutton.

"Drink," commanded Takudonu, but Dutton drew back. Egba's soft arm was again about his shoulder, her satin skinned breast burned against his arm, her lips were close to his ear.

With a little moan he seized the bowl, drank deeply of the bitter-tasting stuff. Only Egba's rounded arm kept him from falling. For a moment he stood there limply, then it was as if he turned into a man of stone. He felt his muscles stiffen, grow rigid, felt his whole body harden. He saw Takudonu lay aside the

sword, saw two Amazons approach with a huge reed case.

The Dahomeyan leader opened the case, reached inside. The tremendous muscles of his back and shoulders rippled like black silk beneath his skin. Slowly, a little at a time, he lifted a tremendous python from the case. A sigh went up from the assemblage. Takudonu, wordlessly, lay the snake on the stone floor.

For a moment it lay inert, then slowly its great head lifted, it stared about for a single moment than began a slow undulation across the floor. Straight toward Dutton it came, and he was not afraid. Strangely enough he thought the glistening coils of its body were beautiful, wanted it to touch him. He was glad when a coil of the thick body shot out, the tail wound itself about Dutton's leg.

A roar went up from those against the far wall. Takudonu smiled, reached down and unwound the serpent with reverent hands. Slowly the rigidity passed from Dutton's legs and body. A wave of warmth took its place. He was conscious of the applauding crowd, conscious of the smiling King, and all too conscious of Egba in his arms, Egba, whose touch was an exotic flame devouring him.

**T**HE rest was a spot of madness in Dutton's mind. There was the soft beat of tom-toms that finally worked its way into his veins. There were many more drinks of potent brew that fired him. And always there was Egba.

He saw a mad dance of whirling figures of half covered men and women who twisted and gyrated in the center of the huge hall. He saw each dancer lean into a basket and produce a snake. The snake was twisted and twirled, tossed about while the mad dance went

on. Egba leaped into the circle, her hips swaying, her breasts quivering and presently he too convoluted and whirled beside the woman of his choice with a living snake in his hand. A snake whose body was warm to touch, smooth as satin, soft as putty.

There were Amazons who entered with great baskets. From the first was produced a cat that yowled fearfully when its throat was cut at the altar. From another was produced a baby alligator, whose tail continued to lash long after its life's blood dripped from its severed neck. Fascinated Dutton watched, and it came to him that the spurting blood was like twisting, undulating snakes.

After each sacrifice the crowd grew wilder. The tom-toms beat more quickly, the dance whirled faster. Men and women disappeared and at last Dutton picked Egba up in his arms and bore her into a dark corner. Her hair was a thousand writhing living serpents when he buried his face in it. Her kiss was the quick darting kiss of a serpent. Even her body was serpentine as it pressed against him and he remembered his dream, the languorous python that coiled its length about him.

Two Amazons appeared with a larger basket which was opened near the altar. A trembling negro boy stepped out, dressed in a white calico shirt with red bindings, a splotch of red over his left breast. He seemed unable to control his body and was carried to the altar. The King's long knife flicked out. Again those red snakes of blood.

Again Dutton buried his face in Egba's hair and shuddered. Her lips were hot on his, her breasts crushed to him, her body restless. The coiling python . . .

**I**T WAS the sudden silence that brought him from Egba's arms. He was suddenly aware that all sound had died in the room, that the tom-toms had ceased their monotonous pounding, that the dancers had paused in their evolu-



"Choose!" she cried. "Choose whom you shall kill, this woman of paste or me!"

tions. He raised on an elbow, gazed toward the altar where Takudonu sat with his great knife.

Before him on the floor whimpered the cowering figure of Glegle, Dutton's own house boy. And grasped firmly by a pair of the ebony Amazons, Lorna Dutton,

disheveled and disarrayed, glared defiantly at the black king.

Somehow Dutton staggered to his feet, regardless of Egba's restraining hands. Somehow he staggered toward his wife, and she recoiled from his mad figure.

"How did you get here?" he panted. Her lips curled with scorn.

"Glegle saw you steal away with that woman. Did you think I would give you up to a half-caste wench without a struggle?"

Egba leaped into the circle of light like an enraged tigress. Her hands were like claws as she snatched at the defiant Lorna, who barely stepped to safety.

"Give him up! You fool, you can never get him back! He belongs to the Python, the Father of Wisdom. Only I, Egba, the High Priestess of the cult, can ever have him again!"

She called wildly to the tom-tom players. The drums broke into a majestic measure, whose speed gradually increased.

With hanging head Dutton felt the music throbbing again in his blood, felt the pulse-beat of Africa pounding in his veins. The bronze body of Egba began to undulate sinuously.

"Choose," she screamed at Dutton, "choose between this woman of paste and Egba, High Priestess of the Serpent Cult."

She whirled toward the altar, snatched the knife from Takudonu's hand. Thrust the hilt into Dutton's grasp.

"See if you can kill me!" Her eyes were demented, her lips contorted. "See whose flesh receives the knife, mine or this woman's."

She jerked the single garment from her own breasts, swayed dramatically before Dutton. His eyes were heavy,

his breath came fast at sight of those palpitant mounds. He looked from the hypnotically weaving Egba to the agonized eyes of Lorna.

Slowly the knife came up, poised, the point between the swaying, quivering breasts of Egba. And suddenly it was as if the breasts were no longer there. Nothing but smooth flesh, sleek and oily black and spotted, gleaming in the light. She was the glistening snake with glittering beady eyes and a body that undulated in serpentine folds. The python of his dreams, whose glittering coils had encircled him, whose soft flesh he had caressed, whose warm body had held him close. Kill her? Give her up? Never!

With a hoarse cry he turned from her, advanced a step at a time toward the cowering figure of Lorna Dutton, the poised knife gleaming.

The sudden clatter of shots outside, an Amazon of ebony running breathlessly into the sacrificial hall. The clatter of a machine gun and the sudden surging and seething of many figures.

Something hit Dutton's shoulder, spun him about, toppled him over against the reed case that held the Python God. For a moment he lay there, then with a scream of horror saw a spade-shaped head peer over the top of the case, tongue lashing venomously, black beady eyes gleaming with hate. He slashed at it again and again, saw red blood spurt in rivulets, felt the lashing of tremendous coils as the wounded thing literally curled itself about him. He buried the knife again and again in yielding flesh. Then amidst gun shots, clatter and shouting his world went black.

IT WAS two months before Charles Dutton could even talk about the thing to his wife. They were safely in

England in sea-side cottage when he asked—and she explained.

"It was mad, utterly mad of both of us to do the things we did. It must have been Africa, the loneliness, the heat, the rains."

He nodded soberly.

She went on. "Egba wanted you. She joined the Serpent Cult to gain wisdom from the Serpent God. The King or High Priest was a master of poisons. She served you these cult poisons in your drinks until you lost your head. When you slipped away with her into the night, Glegle saw you and told me. I didn't want to tell Lieutenant St. Clair of our trouble; so I took Glegle and followed, hoping to catch up. We were captured. You know the rest, dear. The Lieutenant followed me, in turn, with his

soldiers, and it's well for us that he did. You would have killed me with that knife. You were mad, utterly mad."

He hid his face against the warm hollow of her shoulder while she put her arms about him. Paroxysms shook him, he trembled like a leaf.

"I'm afraid, I'm afraid," he shuddered. "There's something about those ancient cults that is binding. After all, I joined, I was initiated! Sometime in my life that woman Egba will leap up again to confront me!"

She held him a moment longer before answering gently, "I haven't told you before, dear, because you weren't strong enough to hear. But it wasn't a python you killed on the floor of that sacrificial chamber. It was . . . Egba!"

**Next month Carl Moore takes you far from Dahomey to Caleb's Reef where, at an abandoned lighthouse, you will learn the meaning of**

## **TERROR'S TATTOO!**

**T-5, H-4, G-3!!**

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Spicy Mystery Stories***