

# Weird Tales

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## Contents for June, 1925

- Cover Design ..... Andrew Brosnatch
- Monsters of the Pit ..... Paul S. Powers 341  
*A Thrilling Tale of Gigantic Spiders*
- The Devil-God ..... Frank Belknap Long, Jr. 349  
*The King Read Poetry, so the State Took Measures to Protect Itself*
- Black Hill ..... Frank Owen 357  
*The Golden Buddha Brought Misery and Terror to Cass Ledyard*
- The Third Thumb-print ..... Mortimer Levitan 369  
*A Scientist Makes a Horrifying Discovery About Himself*
- Marble ..... Laurence D'Orsay 375  
*Evil Was the Brilliant and Inventive Mind of This Physician*

(Continued on Next Page)

# THE DEVIL-GOD

by  
Frank Belknap Long



Author of "The Ocean Leech," "Men Who Walk Upon the Air," etc.

**B**UT a man's head is such a little thing!"

Mpatanasi smiled and stroked his brittle yellow beard. His daughter sat in the corner and scowled. She was silent through sheer indignation.

"Mu-senyui, I did not ask for philosophy. A man's head is his own, and who am I to rob a man of his property? Still, were I certain—"

"But I assure you that the wretch abuses his head frightfully. He has little use for it. And when you consider that it is a king's head that he abuses!—Mpatanasi, who is a just man, may well consider!"

Mpatanasi blew circles of yellow smoke into the thin air, screwed up his lips and studied the disintegrating rafters above him. A squalid procession of bluish bat ticks wound in and out over a balcony of lianas. Mpatanasi was a tall, lean man, with the malachite sky in his eyes and the sun in his hair. His lips were monstrous and they seemed to overlap his face; and his ears were distended by wooden plugs. He was naked to the waist, but he wore a straw hat and a flaming red four-in-hand, which did not become him. He sat by the open

door, and puffed on a ridiculous pipe, and blinked at Mu-senyui.

"I shouldn't feel justified in asking for a king's head," he said, and made a grimace.

His daughter beat a horrified and irrelevant tattoo upon the soles of her burnished feet.

Mu-senyui was reprehensibly and gloriously drunk. He fell into a reverie, and later, upon the floor. The frown on his face grew in volume. It would never do, of course, to deliberately antagonize Mpatanasi. Mpatanasi entertained men with magnificent jests and well-turned figures of speech, and sent them away with their heads under their arms. Was not Mpatanasi emissary of the forest-god, and did he not hold in his shriveled black hands the key to a dozen enigmas? Even the king feared Mpatanasi, and it was because of a king's fear that Mu-senyui had dared to suggest—oh, the days and nights that poor, tired Mu-senyui had schemed under the shadow of blasphemy, with his soul knee-deep in sin, and with his eyes turned nervously toward the forest! For Mpatanasi was master of the forest; and as Mu-senyui was a man of taste he did not care to face what the forest concealed.

But Mu-senyui, because of the greatness of his love, comforted himself with a truism.

"It is better," he reflected, "to kiss the full, indescribable lips of Mpatanasi's daughter than to face the forest-devil! It is more comfortable—but, if necessary, I shall face the god! A woman is worth many monsters!"

It is difficult to forgive Mu-senyui for reasoning so platitudinously, but Mpatanasi's daughter had addled his wits.

Mpatanasi took the pipe out of his mouth and knocked out a thimbleful of bluish ashes.

"I should hardly feel justified in demanding a king's head—but, are you sure that he abuses his head?"

Mu-senyui was sure of it.

"Only this morning," drawled Mu-senyui, with an amazing note of triumph in his voice, "only this morning he made little poems out of his head, and sang them to the women. The poems were treasonous!"

Mpatanasi sat up very stiff and straight and asked Mu-senyui what sort of poems were not treasonous. "Do you think," he said, "that any man in his right mind would make silly little rimes on pieces of blank paper? I do not care who or what the man is, if he sits about and reads, his days and nights will be filled with wo. The torture of the sixty-seven stripes would be a most excellent remedy. I wonder—"

"But Mpatanasi would not torture a king!"

"That is true. Mpatanasi has not fallen so low. There is but one way to bring him to reason—we must have his head!"

"Mpatanasi has said it!"

"Not yet. But call in the chanters and I shall pronounce a doom."

Mu-senyui, smiling broadly, backed to the door and disappeared. The daughter of Mpatanasi concealed her face with her hands, and no one saw the hideous breadth of her grin.

M<sup>PATANASI</sup> walked out into the cool of the morning, and stretched his long, scraggy arms toward the summer sky. His face twitched convulsively and his knees trembled. He did not want to pronounce a doom. He was a man of peace, and he loved quiet and the soothing sounds of the forest; the tireless drone of millions of jade-green insects, the swish, swish, swish of the great aloe palms as they swayed in the wind against the white, agitated dawn, and the shrill screams of naked children baking and blistering in the sun. The turmoil of the forest was a sweet music to him, and he loved to watch the multicolored parakeets, and the rich red lips of orchids that seemed alive. He disliked the pronouncing of dooms, and he disliked his chorus of old women that put the seal of the forest-devil upon all dooms and made them irrevocable.

But he knew that he could not escape, for his words were necessary and would accompany men's souls on their last, long, tedious journey, and he was but the instrument of the forest-devil and the slave of his own words. The words that he pronounced were lethal words, and they carried weight, and wo to the man or woman who put them lightly aside.

As Mpatanasi stood in the clearing in front of his small, round dwelling, and watched the half-nude, swaying procession of black forest-women advance leeringly and mockingly from between the bifurcated boles of incredibly ancient trees, he lost all sense of immediate time and place. The universe existed for him no longer: he became a divine machine, a pronouncer of dooms, an emissary of the forest-god.

His eyes glazed, and his lean, black body grew rigid. He ran his hands rapidly through his hair and spat on the ground. The procession of women swayed hideously in the sunlight, and came dancing toward him over the

damp ground. They were the queen's own retinue, and they had been painted and bedecked for the occasion. Their arms and legs were tattooed; white and blue rings encircled their wrists and ankles; and their breasts were covered by monstrous smudges of bluish paint. Their eyebrows had been shaved; and their lips were cracked and swollen, and a few wore plugs through their lips. One played upon a cracked violin, and several of the blackest and most ghastly made music of cymbal and bassoon. They danced and shouted and screamed, and twisted themselves into devious shapes, and struck each other violently with long thongs made of rubber and flax. They were a jolly crew, but Mpatanasi was deep in religious contemplation and saw them only as instruments; or perhaps he did not see them at all.

They formed a circle about him, and began to gibber meaninglessly, and Mu-senyui, who stood at a distance, turned away with white lips.

"But supposing you are responsible!"

Mu-senyui saw the daughter of Mpatanasi standing before him, her thin lips writhing back gloriously from her white teeth. The lips of Mpatanasi's daughter were enticing, even when distorted by ecstatic cruelty, and Mu-senyui thought that a man must be lucky indeed to possess such lips.

"I have prayed that responsibility shall fall upon me as a cloak," he said, patting the daughter of Mpatanasi upon the shoulder. "And why should I reproach myself? You are mad to think that I should reproach myself!"

She drew close to him, and ran her long fingers through his beard. "You are a dear, Mu-senyui! It is horrible to have such a dreadful old man say to you: 'It is not proper to put paint upon your lips! It is not according to the law for a priest's daughter to

play upon the bassoon!' He is a terrible old man! But he doesn't suspect, does he?"

"Of course not! He has very little shrewdness. He does not even know that the king—"

The daughter of Mpatanasi laid the second and third fingers of her right hand across Mu-senyui's lips. "Look! Even now he pronounces a doom!"

MU-SENYUI looked out into the clearing, and his fingers tightened on the shoulders of Mpatanasi's daughter. "It is a hideous thing to witness, that doom. It comes straight from the forest-devil, and your father is but an agent—and yet it is your father who pronounces a doom!"

"It is silly of you, my dear, to believe in devils! The forest-god exists only in the imagination of Mu-senyui. My father is a man, and he makes dooms out of his silly old head. Mu-senyui, you have no idea how much I have to put up with!"

Out in the clearing Mpatanasi threw back his head, and bellowed out a terrible doom.

"Mu-senyui," asked Mpatanasi's daughter, with hot shame looking out of her eyes and flushing red over her cheeks and throat; "Mu-senyui, will you describe the forest-devil?"

Mu-senyui swallowed a lump in his throat and his cheeks blanched. "It is impossible to describe the unholy thing in detail. I should prefer simply to state that it is very tall, with one large eye in the center of its forehead, and its lips are swollen and cover the entire lower portion of its face. It is clad in white fur. It has a long neck, square shoulders, and elongated lower limbs."

"Mu-senyui, do you really believe such nonsense? And if you do, how—how can you explain it?"

"There has always been a forest-devil, as long as the forest has been there, and no one knows when the

forest came—even your grandmother could not tell you that!”

“But Mu-senyui, do you think that father believes?”

“Ah, I am depending upon that. He will never dare to disobey his doom. And, as you suggest, he is a terrible old man!”

Mpatanasi was nearly through. His lips were livid, and his eyes bulged. He swirled about on the tips of his toes, like a top, and droned and chanted, and the words that came from between his lips were ominous and in bad taste: “Let the king die. At night under the moon the king must prepare his bed of death. Let the king lie upon a mat of straw, and let him take his life with a sharp blade—a very sharp blade. Let the knife be sharp, for it must glisten in the moon, and the king must die! The forest-devil is kind; the forest-devil is generous, and he asks that the king die splendidly, in a manner befitting a king. Let the king offer no complaint, for it is good to die! The king has been a bright sun, and we have worshiped him as a god; but the time for our king’s death is at hand, and what is glory but a pinch of dust in the nostrils? What is reverence and what is tribute? The reverence that we pay to a king is but as a drop of water glistening on wet leaves under the sun. The sun takes away the moisture from the leaves, as we withdraw our reverence from the king. And tribute is less than reverence, for it springs from fear, and fear is unworthy of us, and it is unworthy of a king. Let the king die!”

The women who remained took up the chant, and danced wildly under the overhanging lianas, and the king was as good as doomed, as anyone with sense could see.

“He is a terrible old man!” said Mpatanasi’s daughter.

“I do not blame you a bit,” replied Mu-senyui, who stifled a titter of triumph with his hand. “It has turned

out precisely as I had arranged it. You will understand later on why I very nearly died of fright a few minutes ago. I was afraid that he would call the king by name, and that would have spoiled everything!”

“But now there is no danger?”

“There is very little danger. It is true that he may not really believe in the forest-devil at all, but—”

The daughter of Mpatanasi cut him short with a kiss. “Once,” she said, “I heard him say, ‘There are more things in—’”

Mu-senyui laid his hand across her mouth. “I see that you do not hate me! I am glad. I feared that you would not exactly take to my scheme. And yet there was no other way. He was too intolerant, and he would not even let me kiss you!”

“But I should not advise you to kiss me now! You do not seem to have any sense! Can’t you see that he has recovered from his doom and that he is watching us?”

**M**PATANASI had indeed recovered. The women had retreated into the forest, and the sun beat shockingly down upon his bare chest and arms. His eyes were bloodshot, and he kept passing his right hand back and forth before his eyes, as if brushing away cobwebs. He knew that he had pronounced an unusually dreadful doom; and he felt sick and weak.

He staggered across the clearing and held out his arms to his daughter. She came close to him and nestled against his hairy chest. “You are very tired,” she said, and winked at Mu-senyui.

Mu-senyui laid his hand softly upon the shoulders of Mpatanasi. “It must have been a great strain—but it was necessary. When a king sits about and does nothing but read poetry the state must protect itself! I hope that you remember your exact words: ‘Let the king lie upon a mat of straw, and let him take his life with

a sharp blade!' As you know, the doom is irrevocable—and remember that it refers to none but the king! It is *the king* who must prepare his bed of death at night under the moon!"

Mpatanasi's eyes flashed, and he struck Mu-senyui across the face. "If you are wise, Mu-senyui, you will say no more about it. You have made me pronounce a doom which I shall regret all my life."

Mu-senyui shook like a jellyfish on stilts. His eyes narrowed and a monstrous lump came into his throat. "One little word," he thought, "one little word! If—if! But no, he wouldn't dare!"

The daughter of Mpatanasi took her father by the hand and led him back into the hut. He was sobbing and gibbering and muttering threats against Mu-senyui, and Mu-senyui slunk away between the trees, with a blasphemous fear in his soul.

## 2

M<sup>P</sup>ATANASI awoke from a dream of parrakeets and moon-lipped orchids to a sense of physical peril. He got awkwardly to his feet and looked about him. The moon was gibbous, and it stood like a disheveled lemur in the center of the clearing, and glazed with its febrile white light the sardonic smile on the face of Mpatanasi's daughter. A strange music filled the air, and a dark, amorphous form stalked splendidly across the doorway, and made no sound under the stars.

Mpatanasi moved noiselessly back and forth before the opening which served as a door, and then he tripped hysterically across the hut on bare feet and sat down beside his daughter. He looked at her for a moment with startled eyes. Her hair ran in rusty torrents down to her knees, and Mpatanasi suddenly realized that he had not guarded her sufficiently and

that Mu-senyui could bear watching. He pinched his daughter's arm.

She sat up and looked at him. Then she gave a little scream, and started to get to her feet. But Mpatanasi told her to be quiet, and then he confessed to her that he was afraid—dreadfully afraid. "It is something which doesn't fear the moon," he said.

The daughter of Mpatanasi looked at her father for a moment without comprehending. Then she screamed again. But she didn't really believe in the forest-devil, in her heart of hearts.

But the night seemed to her so awesomely quiet and her father was unquestionably frightened! He got up again, and walked to the opening, and looked out into the night, and studied the gibbous moon. The moon was not a pleasant thing to reflect upon as it stood lonely and corpse-like above the twisted, gnarled boles of incredibly ancient trees, but Mpatanasi had lost all fear of the moon. It was the shadow before the doorway which frightened Mpatanasi.

Suddenly Mpatanasi perceived with his large, frightened eyes the form which had cast the shadow across the doorway by the light of the gibbous moon. It crouched on its hands and knees, and its face was turned hideously toward Mpatanasi.

"Oh, it isn't a devil at all!" Mpatanasi's daughter was looking over her father's shoulder and tittering in the moonlight. "It isn't even a monster! It is only stupid little Bamuti. How lovely he looks in the moonlight! Poor little Bamuti with his shaven head and yellow eyes! Bamuti is jaundiced, and he shaves his head so that the women will speak to him. Naughty, naughty Bamuti! He is a very precocious child. He is only twelve, but he has whispered impertinences into the ears of the oldest crone in the queen's retinue. Nothing that goes on in the court escapes Bamuti. Come, child, step inside, and

let us hear what you have to say! But beware of lies, or Mpatanasi will have your head with that of the king!"

**B**AMUTI stood up in the moonlight, threw back his head and stepped into the tent. He had traveled all night through the forest and his handsome thighs and chest glistened with perspiration. He was clothed in a turkey-red loincloth, and he wore on his shaven head a soft felt hat. His chest was tattooed, and his arms were encircled by rings of ivory, painted green and yellow and black. He held himself erect and looked straight into the impatient eyes of Mpatanasi.

"The queen's women are good to me, and love me. They often take me into their arms and fondle me and kiss me. They are very beautiful and at such times I am happy." He spoke simply, and never removed his eyes from the impatient face of Mpatanasi.

"Well?"

"The day before yesterday the queen called me to her. 'You are very good-looking,' she said. Then she ordered me to make up a pretty speech out of my head and recite it to her. The idea fascinated me and I sat down upon the floor and endeavored to think of something unusual to say to her. Then the king came in and found me there!"

"And of course you were punished!"

"I should have been, but, you see, I am very impulsive. The king seemed so utterly despicable. As you know, it is a really insignificant man, and ugly! He didn't even have the heart to be angry. And I pitied the queen. When a man does not even consider a woman worth fighting for! Well, I decided that the king was unworthy, and so I killed him. There was really very little choice in the matter. I pitied the queen, and when you catch the knife between the first and second ribs there is scarcely any pain. He died beautifully. I held the long

knife in my hand and fingered the blade, which was as smooth and fine and valiant a blade as any king could have decently hoped for. It was a splendid look which came into the king's eyes when he died, and I think that he was grateful. You do not know what a dreadful burden a king must bear. But you will—you will! For three days now you have been king. Everyone knew it but you! But we did not dare to tell you. Mu-senyui pitied you. He came to me tonight with tears in his eyes. 'He must be told,' he said. He didn't have the heart to tell you himself, so he sent me."

Mpatanasi was silent, for he was an old man and slow-witted. And he did not at first comprehend the monstrous villainy of Mu-senyui.

When Mpatanasi understood, he went out into the clearing, and pounded with his bare fists upon his chest and arms. Then he sat down upon the ground, and tittered idiotically.

His daughter came lazily through the door and comforted him with sneers. She stood above him, poised on her beautiful toes, and wrapped herself nonchalantly in shadows. Then she darted away between the boles of trees that seemed to mock and leer and writhe upward with volatile contortions. The trunks appeared to truncate each other, and dark, amorphous branches descended from above and swayed in the moonlight, and gradually assumed the appearance of arms and legs, the arms and legs of amazingly ancient men, and each arm and each leg seemed to terminate in a bulbous knot, and long streamers of reddish moss depended from them and flapped in the wind. The spaces between the trees were tapestried with shadowy thickets, and at the base of the trees bluish fungi bloated in the moonlight and filled the air with a noisome stench. Here and there an orchid extended its lurid red lips and

offered up a hideous libation to the spirit of the ancient forest. As Mpatanasi crouched in misery and sobbed and gibbered, a million million burning eyes watched him from behind gloomy thickets and envied him the protection of the moonlight and the quiet desolation of the clearing.

**M**PATANASI was a poet and easily impressed, albeit he pretended to despise poetry, and the sentiency of the forest filled him with an irrational fear. He had known moments of skepticism, when he had doubted the existence of the forest-devil, but now—he could no longer doubt. And then he thought of the treachery of his daughter and the diabolic machinations of Mu-senyui, and his torment and anguish grew into a fever, which flushed his face and darkened his eyes, and dried up his tongue.

But he was conscious that he had pronounced a doom—a miserable and disgraceful and maddening doom; and the forest-devil would expect, would require a victim. And he had pronounced the doom against the king, and he himself was king. He repeated it over and over again to himself, "I am king! I am king! I am king!" and the words seemed to echo and re-echo through every chamber of his brain, and he fancied that his blood took up the weird refrain and shouted it out through the tips of his fingers to the maimed and grotesque and revolting spirit-shapes that hovered mincingly about him and required and demanded the fulfilment of a doom.

"But I don't really believe in the forest-devil!" He spoke aloud and his voice sounded weak and strange and far away.

He went back to the hut and looked at his daughter sadly out of tired, bloodshot eyes. Then he made up a little bundle, and selected a tall, hard staff. He walked over and patted his daughter upon the head.

"I must go away," he said. "Per-

haps if I travel fast I can escape the doom. It has been done, you know, and the forest-devil isn't really my enemy, and I'm not sure that he exists. But it is safer to travel."

His daughter bit her lips and glared. Then she kissed him upon the cheek, and took his head between her hands and smiled into his tired eyes.

"I do not blame you at all for wishing to save your head!" she said.

But when Mpatanasi had turned his back upon her, and had gone out through the narrow way into the weird, early dawn, she stamped violently upon the floor and tore out her hair in handfuls

**A**LL next day Mpatanasi traveled. At night with nervous limbs and dim eyes he sat down under a huge, reddish palm. The darkness closed in upon him, and he could feel it passing over his head and streaming past his ears. He felt that the darkness was solid, substantial, and that he could reach out and seize great handfuls of it. He breathed with difficulty, and he fancied that the palm above his head was breathing in unison with him. Once he imagined that the plant had laughed.

He got together a few sticks and made an insignificant fire. He sat with bowed head in the wretched light, moving his fingers over the fire to warm them, and casting frightened glances into the dark forest recesses before him, and at the swaying palm above his head. He toppled on his side, and lay with one arm extended, the fingers of his right hand touching the glowing embers.

He awoke with a shriek, and sat up. The forest was moving. Everything was moving, the trees, the mosses beneath him, the gigantic spreading lianas, the interlacing creepers—moving to a dreadful, an unsuspecting rhythm. A drumming and a droning, remote, uncanny, titanic, struck upon his ears and unfathomable abysses seemed to open out before him.



He had a momentary sensation of falling through unreverberate space, and then he was lifted up, and left with legs dangling in mid-air. He was lifted up between the trees, which closed in upon him, and then retreated, and at one moment he expected to be crushed to death and at the next he found himself alone in the center of a great pit, made by the regrouping of the trees, yards and yards from him.

Then the trees and vegetation about him began to glow with a fierce and shocking red light. The trees seemed afire, and red light streamed in rivers from their branches. He found himself suspended in a flaming forest, and at his feet little forest streamlets ran with a soft, welcome murmur. He kicked out with his arms and legs, and then he began to feel the heat, and to suffer from the ascending spirals of smoke, and he longed for the soft touch of his daughter, and her cool, comforting words.

Then he saw it!

**T**ERRIBLY through the forest aisle it came, its huge batlike head thrust forward, and its small eyes glittering with unspeakable malice. Straight toward Mpatanasi it came, and its great, loathsome body swayed in the night wind and its fur turned crimson in the glare of the burning trees.

It was a caricature of evil such as Aubrey Beardsley could not have conceived. It would have been beyond the imagination of Rops, or of John Martin, or of Goya. It was a flaming, flying sadism, with tooth and talon to tear and to rend, and a hatred and blasphemy in its eyes such as none could look upon with cool vision and sane sense. It was Satan seen through the eyes of Baudelaire, or one of those terrible creatures described by Sir John Mandeville, which inhabit unexplored regions of Asia beyond the River Ganges.

For a moment it circled high up, above Mpatanasi's head, and then it began to flutter about him, reaching out with its hideous black beak. The top of its head was manlike, but black and hairless, and its small eyes were sunken, and it had the nose of a bat. A thin, chirping sound came from between its swollen lips. From the center of its furry breast two long appendages hung down, and they ended in black, lobster-shaped claws, which dragged ruthlessly across the forest floor.

To the unsophisticated eyes of Mpatanasi it represented the accumulated evil of generations upon generations of human beings who had lived and died and made no absolution. It was the malice of the ancient forest united to the sins of multitudes, and he knew intuitively that he had offended it, and called it forth, and that it demanded a victim.

When Mpatanasi fully apprehended his infinite peril he deliberately assumed an attitude of nervous defiance. He threw back his head, and stared into the grim, malevolent eyes of the thing his wilfulness had called forth.

For a moment the creature hesitated, and the flames from above and below enveloped it, and passed over it and through it. It opened its mouth, and emitted a thin stream of noisome yellow gas. Then it spat—deliberately spat at him. He could smell its acrid breath, and a mephitic odor of corruption, an offensive, filthy and indescribable smell assailed him and made him choke and cough.

The horrid nausea passed, and Mpatanasi felt a momentary exaltation. The creature had infused a queer assurance into him by its proximity. It was wrapped now in a ball of red and blue flame, and it chirped loudly as it backed away. It commenced circling about again. The trees were closing up, shutting it off. It descended suddenly to within three

*(Continued on page 479)*

## The Devil-God

*(Continued from page 356)*

yards of Mpatanasi, and its dragging talons stiffened and shot upward and seized Mpatanasi about the arm.

The flames expired. Mpatanasi's arm was twisted violently, and then literally torn off. A stream of blood gushed from a cavern of ragged en-erimoned walls, a cavern of mutilated tissue that flared horribly where Mpatanasi's elbow should have been, and spattered Mpatanasi's wet torso and perspiring thighs. Mpatanasi felt himself falling—falling through space. He closed his eyes, and endeavored to quell the unnatural fear in his poor, tired brain.

### 3

MU-SENYUI waited under the aloe palms. He squatted on his knees, and fumbled nervously with a covered object, which lay beside him on the ground. The object was the size of a large melon and it was concealed beneath several layers of yellow leaves. Mu-senyui seemed eminently proud to possess the object, and yet he displayed an admirable reticence and tact in his handling of it. Mu-senyui waited under the aloe palms for Mpatanasi's daughter.

She came to him over the cool, wet sward with gilded eyebrows and painted lips and ivory plugs in her nose and ears. She came singing, and she smiled gloriously when she beheld patient, tolerant Mu-senyui with the covered object beside him on the ground. She came up to him, and kissed him on the lips and ran her nimble fingers through his curly hair.

"Dear, dear Mu-senyui," she said.

Mu-senyui regarded her cynically. "It is very unfortunate," he observed. "Your father might have arranged a more convenient and less sensational demise. Why did he not stay and have it out with the forest-devil?"

The daughter of Mpatanasi knelt and took the covered object into her hands. Slowly she unwound the yellow leaves. She was exceedingly happy, and she beamed upon kind, tired Mu-senyui. The last wrapping fell away, and the face of Mpatanasi her father stared mildly up at her. His lips were parted, and the kindness and nobility of his spirit glittered in his eyes. His face was chastened, ascetic, at peace with man. He bestowed a generous benediction upon Mu-senyui and his painted daughter.