

THE GREEN GROVE OF SHALTH

By JAMES FRANCIS DWYER

Illustrated by Frank Gillett

MAUROY, the hashish smoker at Saigon, made me write this story. He tormented me night and day with questions about Count Henri Flamant and Mademoiselle Gueldy. He wanted me to tell him of the Shan monk, the circular depths, and the grove of green.

"Why are you so curious about these things?" I asked him one day, when he had nearly driven me crazy.

"I might write a story about them," he said.

"Oh," I snarled, "you might, might you?"

I shut my mouth then—shut it tight. I was a fool, but I wasn't going to let a crazy dope fiend get away with me—not much—so I'm writing here the story that Mauroy wanted to write. He might have done it better. He was an educated man, a great naturalist before he took to smoking the hemp, but there are little things that I could never make him understand. I mean incidents like the trip across the polished strip of granite, and also the look of the grove of green when we entered it.

I am a fool. I was born in Chartres Street, in the old French quarter of New Orleans, and the first wish I had was a desire to change into the big monkey old Pete Rondepierre kept in his shop near the corner of Royal Street and St. Anthony's Alley. The monkey got as many nuts as he could eat, and he sat in the sun and made faces at everyone who passed by, so I envied him.

I guess I copied that monkey a lot. I took what was given me, and made faces at those who wouldn't give. Kept moving, too. Seen most of the world. Can write a hobo's Baedeker of most big towns from "Chi" to Melbourne, and from Paris to Penang.

I've made a ten spot a day with good emotional stuff in Market Street, 'Frisco, and I've made the same amount in gathering shillings from the big betters as the cabs rolled along Moore Park to Randwick Racecourse. I've played the stranded American to rich tourists who came to Kandy to look at the horse's tooth that old Buddha is supposed to have hacked his chupatties with, and I've played the same tale on the Bubbling Well Road when an American battleship struck Shanghai. I'm a two-handed, pull-it-out-of-'em fool, and I'm not denying it.

It was in Sydney that I met Count Henri Flamant, and Mademoiselle Gueldy, and Mademoiselle's aunt, Madame D'Herlys. I struck a financial sand-bar in Sydney, and I was sleeping regularly under the big Moreton Bay fig trees in the Outer Domain, and fighting the wolves at the soup kitchen for enough to give me the strength to talk.

Then came a lucky morning. I saw Count Henri steaming down Castlereagh Street, and, feeling certain that he was French, I dug for a wad of Creole lingo that I had learned from the Cajuns down on Bayou La Fourche, and I heaved it at him.

"French?" he asked.

"Creole," I answered, blessing old Pirate Jean Lafitte, whose buried treasure had sent me hunting down through the Louisiana swamps. "My great-great-grandfather came to New Orleans with Buck Grenelle." It was a lie, but an empty stomach has no respect for the truth.

Count Henri Flamant stood and chatted with me for fifteen minutes; then he offered me a job as his valet and courier, and I took it. Sydney was as unsympathetic as a bear with a boil on his nose, and Count Henri

Flamant looked to me like an ice-cold bottle of beer in the middle of the Desert of Gobi.

I met Mademoiselle Gueldy and Madame D'Herlys at the Oxford Hotel, where Count Henri was staying. Mademoiselle was the Count's *fiancée*, and Madame was the young lady's aunt, who chaperoned her.

All that day and the next I wondered what the Count was after; then I found out. He told me one morning before breakfast.

"Fenton, we're going northward," he said.

"Yes, sir," I murmured.

"Up into the Malay Archipelago," he went on. "We'll probably touch at a number of the islands—Borneo, Java, Sumatra, and the Celebes."

"Yes, sir," I said, wondering, as I listened, if Brisbane would be a good spot to unhook myself from the job and again put my trust in the greatest of all the virtues.

And just as I was trying to recall all I had ever heard about Brisbane, the Count opened up his secret chamber and took me into his confidence.

"Fenton," he said, "I'm searching for something."

"Yes, sir," I murmured.

"It's something strange, Fenton," he continued.

"I bet it is," I said.

He looked at me for a moment without speaking, then he turned his back and spoke hurriedly, as if he was a little ashamed of what he was saying.

"I'm hunting for a place that I have never seen—a dream place. Do you understand?"

"Not quite, sir," I said.

"Well, I have an obsession regarding a grove of green trees," explained Count Henri. "It's a grove on the top of a hill—a great bunch of trees with thick juicy leaves."

"And you never saw the trees?" I said.

"Never saw them except in a dream?"

"I seem to see them always," answered the Count. "Sleeping or waking, I can't shut them out of my vision."

"That's curious," I said.

"It's not an unusual case," Count Henri went on. "A number of people have vivid impressions about places that they have never seen, but the one that I've got makes life unbearable. I'm travelling to find it. It's somewhere in the Tropics, I'm certain. I—I don't suppose you ever came across a grove of trees like a great green cupola covering a high hill?"

"I don't think I did," I answered. "No, I don't believe I ever did."

"Well," said Count Henri, "we've got to find it, Fenton. I thought you'd be useful, because you've travelled such a lot. And now—well, you'll help, won't you, Fenton?"

"Sure," I cried, a bit surprised at the way he talked. "Sure, I'll help. If I can hunt up any dope about this place with the green trees, I'll pass it on to you."

I went out into Cook Park after that talk with Count Henri Flamant, and I sat down and thought about him and Mademoiselle Gueldy and Madame D'Herlys. I had only taken a job with Count Henri because I was down and out, and I didn't intend to stay with him after we struck Brisbane; but that story of his about the green grove sort of interested me. It was a little bit like a fairy tale, and I liked it. Mind you, there was nothing of the fool about Count Henri, and I had a notion that I didn't throw much dust in his eyes with my talk about French grandfathers who had to scoot away to save their Loyalist heads. Possibly I mixed up the dates and named a year when a Loyalist was safer in France than in Louisiana.

Well, we went from Sydney to Brisbane in a Huddart Parker boat that rolled like a barrel shooting Niagara. But I began to like the job of courier to Count Henri and the ladies. It was a cinch. I knew the Count would have given quite a lump of money to see that grove of green trees, but he didn't communicate his obsession in any great extent to me. I couldn't altogether see what he'd get out of the sight when he did locate the grove. But Count Henri thought different, and so did Mademoiselle Gueldy.

We butted up from Brisbane to Thursday Island, nosing along the Great Barrier Reef through nice hot seas, with the water looking like a million oily snakes wriggling away across the Coral Sea, Count Henri sitting on the deck with Mademoiselle Gueldy and her aunt, and thinking always of the grove of green trees.

"We'll find it somewhere up here in the Malay, Fenton," he would say; "I feel certain we will."

"I hope so, sir," I would answer. "But I really wasn't worrying much about it—not then. Afterwards the thing got me as bad as it did Count Henri, but on the early part of the trip I didn't get much excited."

This reads like a queer tale now that I put it down here—a young Frenchman with lots of money and a crazy desire to find a bit of scenery that he had dreamed of, his *fiancée*, her aunt, and I sailing along with him to help.

We went from Thursday Island up through the Banda Sea to spice-scented Aumboyna, and from there to Macassar. At Macassar we took a Dutch East India packet to Batavia, and it was at Batavia that Count Henri got the notion that he was "getting warm." The lay of the country made him think that he was close to the green hill of his dreams, and his excitement communicated itself to Mademoiselle Gueldy and Madame D'Herlys. It woke me up a little, too. Count Henri acted like a hound that's hot on the scent of a 'possum, and I began to wonder what would be in that green grove of trees, if we ever located it. It seemed a curious business, and all sorts of thoughts about treasure and pirate charts and things came into my mind. I asked Count Henri if he thought there would be treasure in the grove; but he shook his head. "I don't think so, Fenton," he said. "I don't want treasure. I've got more money than I can use now, so I hardly think I'd get such a curious obsession about a place where treasure was concealed."

But I thought different. I told myself every day that there was money in the grove, if we could ever locate it. I asked Count Henri to describe the leaves of the trees, and I questioned everybody I met about fat green leaves that were fully six inches long and as thick as sole-leather. And I'm going to confess something right here. I had a notion that, if I ever found that grove when I was doing a walk by myself, I'd investigate it a little before informing Count Henri. The Count was a good fellow, but I'd been looking out for Billy Fenton for such a long time that I'd got sort of attached to myself.

Up from Batavia to Sarawak we went, Count Henri getting more excited with every league we covered. It was the vegetation that upset him. Seemed as if he had a dim idea of the country that surrounded that dream grove of his, and the landscapes in the northern part of the quarry, the moment we entered the mouth of the river and steamed up toward the capital. He was half crazed with delight, although there wasn't anything that could be called a big hill in the rice swamps on each side of the river.

"But it's here, it's here!" he cried. And Mademoiselle Gueldy looked at him with her wonderful topaz eyes and clapped her little hands with joy. Mademoiselle Gueldy and her aunt knew no more about the grove than I knew, but the girl loved Count Henri, and she had travelled half round the world with

him to find the place the visions of which tormented him night and day.

"I'm so glad!" she cried, as Count Henri assured her that he was near the end of his search. "I'm so pleased that you are near your dream grove."

It looked as if Count Henri had picked the right spot, if one could judge by the Count's looks. On that first day in Saigon he walked round with his head in the air, sniffing the breezes as if he recognised them as old friends.

"It's here, Fenton," he cried—"some-where quite close to us!"

I was a bit puzzled on that first day in Saigon. There was a French warship there, but Count Henri had no time for the officers. One of them recognised him and spoke to him on the street, but Count Henri flushed and got away in a mighty big hurry.

"Huh!" I said to myself. "This boss of mine finds the Tropics not quite as warm as France." But if he was a slacker, it wasn't my business. The good old United States wasn't in the mess at that moment.

And on that very afternoon I made the great discovery. I went exploring on the river front, and there, in a sampan, I found a monk from the hills, a brown, greasy fellow, who sat in the sun with a chawat round his loins and a bunch of leaves covering the shaved crown of his head.

Those leaves held my eyes and dragged me toward the sampau. They were long green leaves, as thick as sole-leather, the leaves that Count Henri Flamant had described to me a score of times since I met him in Sydney.

I didn't stop running till I reached the hotel, and I stammered out the news to Count Henri. Back to the river we went at a run, and the moment Count Henri saw the leaves he unloosed a yell of joy that you could have heard down at Pulo Condor.

"We've found it!" he screamed. "They are leaves from the grove!"

I don't know everything that the Shan monk told Count Henri Flamant. The monk knew only a smattering of French, and Count Henri had to get a lot of the yarn through an interpreter; but it was such a wonderful yarn that my skin translated the parts of it that my ears couldn't understand. It made little shivers go up and down my spine in places where I couldn't get the meaning of a word he was saying; but he made all sorts of movements with his hands and his eyes and his mouth, and those movements helped.

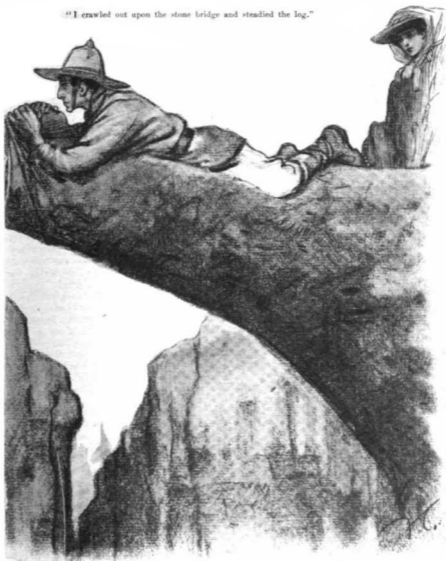


Afterwards, at the hotel, I listened while Count Henri told the monk's story to Mademoiselle Gueldy and her aunt, and I pieced in the parts that I had missed. It was a great story that the monk told—a grand, blood-chilling story. He said that way up in the western part of Cochin China, in the outliers of the Elephant Mountains of Cambodia, was the green grove of Sbalth, a grove of vlane trees, the leaves of which were the same as the leaves which he had

around his head. But he said no one could get to the grove because of the circular depths which surrounded it, and across which once went the devils of France in pursuit of a robber chief who made the grove his hiding-place. And, according to the monk, the path of granite over which the French followed the robbers was broken down by the evil spirits of the depths, so that none ever came back.

"It's the grove of my dreams!" cried

"I crawled out upon the stone bridge and steadied the log."



Count Henri, after he had finished telling the story to the two ladies. "I am going to start with Fenton to-morrow morning."

"What about us?" cried Mademoiselle Gueldy.

"You must wait here till I come back," said the Count. "The country is too wild for you to travel in."

"But, Henri, I must go!" cried his sweetheart. "I must! I must!"

I don't know how long the Count and

his *fiancée* debated that question. I know that the matter was unsettled at midnight, but when the dawn came I knew who had won. Mademoiselle Gueldy and her aunt were going to accompany the Count on his journey.

The monk came with us—the monk and his sampan—and four Annamese that he had rounded up at Count Henri's suggestion. I thought a lot about that trip before starting, but that dream grove pulled me

aboard the sampan. It was dreams of treasure that had made me, when a kid, run away from New Orleans and go hunting down through Barataria after Jean Lafitte's buried treasure, and I had great hopes about that dream grove, if the monk could locate it.

They don't keep any Pullman cars in Cochinchina, and they're taking no bookings for state-rooms, either. Travelling in that quarter might not be as bad as it was in the days of Marco Polo, but old Marco would have a job to see the improvements if he came back suddenly.

The rivers are the great travelling routes, and for days and days we paddled up the Mekong and its tributaries, twisting and turning, with flat stretches of paddy-fields on either side, broken here and there with patches of stunted trees. And all through those miserable days the monk sang an infernal song that pounded my brain to pieces. Sometimes—nearly always—I would wish that I had stayed in Saigon; then the monk's tale about the circular depths and the green grove would thrill me, and I would feel awfully pleased with the whole thing.

And then one morning, eleven days after leaving Saigon, we stepped from the sampan and tramped off toward the blue smear of the Elephant Mountains. Mademoiselle Gueldy and her aunt were brave in those days. Those two women had made up their minds to see that trip through to a finish, and they didn't whimper when the going was hard enough to tax the strength of a husky man.

We came toward the circular depths one hot day at noon. The monk was fearfully excited. He jabbered away to himself as he led us forward, and his fear of the devils of that place was so great that he made the porters make camp a full mile from the place where the great abyss, like a bottomless moat, encircled the grove of green.

We crept up a little velvety knoll, the grass as smooth as the lawn of a Montclair mansion, the green grove so close that we thought we could reach out our hands and pluck the fat leaves, and then, with a suddenness that nearly took our breaths, we found ourselves on the edge of the circular depths.

I remember how I snorted like a frightened mule and backed away, tearing up whole handfuls of grass in my terror. I heard Count Henri cry out something in French that brought a little shriek from Mademoiselle

Gueldy. And then, with the hands of fear pushing us, we turned and rolled down the grassy ridge to the spot where the monk waited.

"The devils of the depths pushed you," said the monk solemnly, as we sorted ourselves out. "They do not allow anyone to pass over into the grove."

But Count Henri Flamant was in no mood to take notice of the monk's words. He was annoyed with himself because the first glimpse of the chasm had brought a sudden rush of terror, but this fear went from him when he found his feet at the bottom of the little slope.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "We must find a place to cross over to the grove. Where is the bridge?"

"The bridge is broken, as I told you," said the monk. "The evil spirits of the depths broke it down after the French devils crossed over. You can see the ruins of it."

"Where?" cried Count Henri.

The monk rose and moved to the northward, and we followed him, feeling, as we walked along, that the terrific chasm was close to us—the chasm with its jet-black depths that defied the lances of the sun.

The monk paused at a spot marked by a lightning-riven tree, and he pointed up the knoll, which was just as smooth and attractive as it was at the point we had crept up to the rim.

"The bridge is there," said the monk—"at least, the part of it that remains."

Count Henri, on hands and knees, started to climb up the little rise, and I followed him. Mademoiselle Gueldy, with fear in her big eyes, waited a moment, then, with a whispered word to her aunt, she followed after us, moving so quickly that she reached the top of the rise at the same moment as I did.

We found Count Henri looking at the remnants of the bridge. It was a shaft of red granite that sprang out across the black depths, the end nearest to us being firmly embedded in the rocky wall of the chasm, the other and unsupported end being three feet away from the furthest bank. This broken end was a little higher than the far rim, and as I looked at it I thought that nothing could inspire such clammy fear as that broken stretch of granite that reached blindly for a support. It was a horrible nerve-racking sight—a sight that made me want to shriek aloud in terror and flee the spot.

Count Henri woke me out of the trance of terror. He was crawling toward the bridge of granite, and he spoke sharply to me as I lay and clawed at the short grass.

"We must get across, Fenton," he said.

"But we—we can't," I stammered. "No one can get across!"

Count Henri pointed to a log that rested upon the brink of the horrible abyss. "We must push that log out over the granite bridge," he said. "Come on! You and I will have to do the job. The monk is afraid."

I was afraid, too, but Mademoiselle Gueldy was looking at me, and with chattering teeth I crawled down to the edge of the great chasm and pulled at the log. It was a dangerous business, but the Count's desire immediately to cross the great trench made him forget everything.

We got the log out upon the smooth bridge of granite, Mademoiselle Gueldy helping us by passing down ropes, so that we could bind it to the shaft of stone. The Count was half crazy with curiosity to see what the grove held for him, and he took chances on that bridge that made me gurgle.

When we had pushed the log forward, so that one end rested on the far bank, Count Henri started across the shaft of granite, straddling it and pulling himself along with his hands. The monk had crawled to the top of the bank to watch, and when he saw the Count moving over the abyss, he began to unloose the most mournful howls I ever listened to. His cries went down into that great pit and stirred echoes that were hair-raising.

"Shut up!" I yelled; and when he wouldn't stop howling, I flung a rock at his head as he peeped over the ridge. The rock hit him on the ear, and he bolted toward the camp, howling as he ran. The noise that monk made terrified me more than the great cleft in the ground.

I had no intention of crossing that bridge—at least, I had none when I threw the stone at the monk—but things happened in the next few minutes. Count Henri had moved from the bridge of granite to the log, but the moment he straddled the log it began to teeter, as if it wanted to toss him into the depths.

Mademoiselle Gueldy cried out in alarm, and when I looked up at her, she pointed out across the bridge.

"Help him!" she screamed. "Quick! Steady the log!"

I guess I was mad. Mauroy, the hemp

smoker, reckoned I was mad. When she ordered me to help the Count, I obeyed her without thinking. I crawled out upon the stone bridge and steadied the log, and then, before I could recover my senses, Count Henri, on the bank of the chasm, put out his hand and gripped mine, and next minute I was in the grove, where the fat leaves of the vane trees hung down like great green pods. A red snake marked with circles of black slid away from us as we stepped into the shadows of the trees, and I shivered as if I had the ague.

I've wondered a lot about that place. I'd like to see it again, just to check up the impressions I've got. It was weird and silent—a place that made me feel as if we had stepped suddenly from the heat of the Tropics into the dry cold of the Arctic. I had a notion to turn and scramble back across the bridge, but that dream stuff of Count Henri's held me with a thousand chains. I wanted to see what had brought him to that place, so I stayed, shivering like a cat in a rainstorm as I walked alongside him.

We hadn't far to go. About thirty paces from the bridge we came to the mouth of a small cave, and we entered it cautiously. The air in that place smelt as if it hadn't gone out for a stroll for half a century, and the feel of the place scared me.

A slit in the roof made everything plain to us, and Count Henri and I stood for a minute inside the door and stared around in blind astonishment at what we saw. The place was littered with dead—men who had died over fifty years before, but whose bodies had been curiously preserved in the strange, dry air of that place. The floor of the cave was curiously slimy and moist, and most of the men lying on the floor had become part and parcel of it, the damp glazing them like a semi-transparent varnish.

There had been one beautiful fight in that place—a peach of a fight. Two bunches of men—French soldiers and Annamese robbers—had collided there, and the fight was so warm that none came out alive.

And in that cave Count Henri found the motive that had brought him half-way round the world. One white man in that bunch that had invaded the cave had died with his back to the wall, and had left a circle of dead around him. As a matter of fact, he had died under the men he killed, and his sword was thrust up through the half-petrified bodies of two Annamese, whom he had skewered the moment before he died.

I don't know whether Count Henri Flamant had any knowledge of the discovery he was going to make. Perhaps he had. I think he had some curious intuition about things.

He took hold of the rusted blade of the sword and tried to pull it out; but the grip of the dead—the killed and the killer—was upon it, and he gave up.

"Lend a hand, Fenton," he said. And I helped him pull the half-dried skeletons from the man whose uniform had turned into a fine grey dust, with rusted buttons and buckles strewn around him.

Count Henri Flamant took the big sword gently from the skeleton hand and held it up to the light. The hilt was of gold—dull gold—in which were a score or more of precious stones, and as I watched the Count he gave a little cry of surprise and pressed the gold hilt to his lips.

"Look!" he cried, holding the hilt out for me to look at. "See! It is the sword of my grandfather! Read! 'To Count Michel Henri Flamant, from his Emperor, Napoleon III.'"

There was another inscription on that big sword, and when Count Henri translated it to me, I guessed his secret. He read it stammeringly, his cheeks aflame. It ran—

*I live for France!
Kings, Emperors, and Queens may turn to dust,
But France lives on! And onward he
Who, when the foeman comes,
Allows my biting edge to rest!*

I suppose it's mighty hard on a man when his grandfather, fifty years dead, gives him a call down, but that's what Count Michel

Henri Flamant did to his grandson, and the words on that sword-hilt hit Count Henri in his emotional solar plexus. He forgot everything but the sword, and I reckon the thoughts of the grove went from him the moment he read that inscription.

He seemed stunned, and I led him back to the bridge, neither of us speaking. I wanted to hold the sword while he crawled across the log; but he wouldn't let me touch it, so I followed him back over the circular depths to where Mademoiselle Gueldy and Madame D'Herlys waited for us.

I'm getting near the end of my story now. We got down to Saigon, and Count Henri Flamant took a French packet to Bordeaux. And he was in an awful hurry to reach home, too.

"Do you want to come, Fenton?" he said. "I—I mean, do you want to fight?"

"Not yet, sir," I answered. "I'm going when my own crowd toes the line."

And I am, too. Old Ma Draft has got her left arm around my shoulder already, so I won't be a hobo much longer.

Yesterday, in a moving picture theatre on Fourteenth Street, I saw a bunch of French officers being decorated by a big general, who was kissing them just as a fellow would kiss his best girl. And right at the top of that line was Count Henri Flamant. I yelled out his name and nudged an old fellow next to me in the ribs.

"I know that guy," I said—"the tall fellow at the end."

But the old guy growled like a dog with a soup bone, and an usher came up and told me to be quiet.

