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THE LAND OF CREEPING DEATH

By EDNA BELL SEWARD

SAXON ROSS and I had been building bridges in Burma for the English government. When the task was finished we decided to spend a three months' vacation exploring the upper reaches of the Salween River. Its source was in the mountains of eastern Tibet but the region was an unexplored wilderness above the Burma line. It was a deep turbulent stream that flowed down through the eastern part of Burma and eventually emptied its waters into the Bay of Bengal. We started on our trip with perfect confidence in our ability to chart the Salween's source.

Naja, our native servant, cooked our simple meals and took care of the domestic end of our camp. His one great fear was that we would all become meat for the man-eating tigers which prowled in the forests.

Late in the afternoon of the third day of our journey Saxon called my attention to the wonderful parklike forest on the opposite bank of the river. At that particular point the Salween flowed sluggishly between gradually sloping hills and was only fifty yards wide.

"Let's make a raft and cross over for camp, Bryson—it's beautiful over there—hardly any undergrowth; that's surprising, too, in this part of the country."

"I'm not surprized at anything in this part of the country," I said peevishly, as I fought the swarm of

mosquitoes circling around my head—and then disproved my own words almost instantly, for Naja pointed to a small object floating in the sluggish current and called, "*Sahib*, what is that?"

I looked at the thing as it slowly drifted toward us. "It seems to be a sun-helmet," I said hesitatingly, as I watched it bobbing up and down in the water. I broke a long branch from a tree beside me, crawled out on the end of a half-submerged log, and reached for the thing as it floated by. It was a sun-helmet—the kind white men wear to protect themselves against the sun of India.

"Who the deuce does it belong to?" asked Saxon. "What is an Englishman doing in this wild country? The owner must be English, for this has a London trademark in it."

"Ask me something easy," I said, as I examined the wet piece of canvas. "One thing is certain—it hasn't been in the water very long. Somebody else must be exploring the Salween—what's that?"

Again it came—a faint shout—and it sounded from the opposite side of the river. "There's the owner," I laughed; "he wants his hat." Then the smile left my face, for the cry came again. It was closer and the tones clearer.

Saxon turned to me, an incredulous stare in his eyes. "By God! Bryson, if I didn't know such a thing was im-

possible, I'd say that was a woman's voice."

Again it came, still nearer than before—and there was no mistaking its accents. "Father! Father! Answer me!"

It *was* a woman—even as she wailed out her appeal she burst into view on the opposite bank from a thicket of trees. "Father!" she called again, then, catching sight of us, she stopped and clasped her hands over her heart.

"Don't be afraid!" I called. "We're Englishmen—may we help you in any way?"

"Oh, if you would! I'm so afraid!" She slumped down on the bank and covered her face with her hands.

"We'll be right over—soon as we can fix up a raft," I said, and joined Saxon and Naja, who were already prying out a couple of logs from the mud of the bank and rolling them into the water. She took her hands from her face and watched us.

When we stepped from the raft on her side of the river she stood up and gave us a long, appraising glance. We also studied her with undisguised curiosity—wondering what a well-bred English girl was doing in that wilderness. Her skin was browned by the sun; her gray eyes were large but they were full of tears. I noticed she was trying to keep her lips from quivering while she twisted them into a smile of welcome.

"What is troubling you?" I asked. "My friend and I are exploring the river—but may I know what you are doing in this wilderness?"

"I came with Father." Her steady voice broke on the word, but she bravely swallowed a sob and continued: "I am Naomi Harcourt; my father is Professor Harcourt of Lancaster University. There's a species of lizard Father has been studying that makes its home along the banks of this river. We have been up here

a month. The other day our native guide slipped from a rock into the Salween and was drowned; since then Father and I have been entirely alone. Last night we camped in that ravine back there," pointing behind her to the thin woods. "This morning I was tired, so Father went out for his daily specimen hunt by himself. He always comes back to rest at noon—I am afraid something dreadful has happened to him."

She was frankly crying by the time she finished, and Saxon's eyes met mine significantly. I knew he was thinking of the sun-helmet we had found floating in the Salween—and I breathed a prayer of thankfulness that it had been left on the opposite bank, along with the bulk of our luggage. Saxon tried to reassure her—but to one who knew him well his voice did not ring true. "Probably, Miss Harcourt, your father has simply lost his way and will come walking into camp any minute now. If you like, we will keep you company until he turns up."

His words comforted her and she dried her eyes as she sighed, "Oh, if you would!"

Then I broke in: "It's the most fortunate thing in the world that we ran across you."

"Isn't it?" she said in a relieved tone. "Father insisted this country was no place for me and didn't want me to come—but I have always traveled with him since Mother died."

I encouraged her to talk—it relieved the nervous tension under which she was laboring. While she chatted we walked toward the ravine where their camp was pitched, and soon we saw the gleam of the two small tents beneath the trees. It was an ideal camping spot; a winding stream made a sharp-pointed peninsula out of a small cool glade; but despite its seeming security I recalled the tales I had been told of the tigers

that infested the forest-covered hills in that district.

I wondered at her dreamy imbecile father—for he *must* be an imbecile to bring a woman into such a country and then leave her unprotected for even an hour. But I remembered the sun-helmet we had taken from the water and my heart softened. Poor devil! I knew he was at the bottom of the Salween; no human being, unaided, could struggle out of the stream's swift current—its undertow was relentless.

But we did not dare tell Naomi Harcourt that. We decided it would be a kindness to wait until morning—she looked so worried and tired. Besides, her trustful eyes had made a strong appeal to my rather phlegmatic emotions. She seemed so confident of our ability to take care of her, I registered a vow in my heart that she should not find her confidence misplaced. But it was no light task to keep her mind free from worry over her missing father; however, we did our best while Naja cooked the evening meal.

Afterward we sat around the camp-fire chatting and discovering mutual acquaintances back in London. She laughed often at our jokes—delicious peals of laughter that showed the dimple in her left cheek and the perfect whiteness of her teeth. Before it was time to retire we were all her willing slaves—even Naja respectfully worshipping the “white *Memsahib*” at a distance. She was singularly free from all feminine affectation, and it hurt deep in the better part of our souls, when she accepted so trustingly our theory that her father had simply lost his way and would come back into camp in the morning.

Her faith in us sent her smilingly to her small sleeping tent, and I was glad when Saxon allowed me to take the first watch without protest. He took himself, and his shamed,

troubled eyes, away to the professor's small tent, where Naja was already curled up on the ground before its entrance.

I WAS glad to be alone—I wanted to smoke and think of Naomi's eyes and wish I had the right to take her in my arms and comfort her when the first wave of grief over her father's death should flood her soul. She was the type of woman men instinctively wish to protect, and I sat for a long time over the dying fire thinking of her gray eyes.

I refilled my pipe and then leaned back against a tall tree trunk, my repeating rifle across my knees. Saxon and I always took turns watching throughout the night in that wild country. It had grown very still—the moon came up and flooded the open space around the camp with silver. The only sound that reached my ears was the murmur of the stream as it crept through the low undergrowth in the ravine, on its way to the river.

As I leaned against the tree my back was toward the stream that circled the land behind me. Suddenly I heard a soft splash in the water. I turned quickly and caught a vague glimpse of a naked human form creeping toward me. I aimed my rifle and fired. Instantly blood-curdling yells came from all sides of the glade and a horde of black gleaming bodies swarmed into view.

I emptied my gun among them—the chance to protect Naomi Harcourt had come! The black oiled bodies of the advancing men did not look like Shan natives; their gleaming eyeballs and flashing teeth, as they yelled their war-cry, gave them the appearance of demons spawned in the darkness of the forest.

My gun had done such execution among them that only two had crossed the stream when Saxon leaped from the tent and his rifle caused

another halt. During that pause Naomi flew across the open space toward me. She looked like a dryad in her long white night-robe, with her thick hair loose over her shoulders.

At the sight of her a hoarse shout went up from the blacks and they surged forward again. I swung her behind me and lifted my rifle, which I had loaded while Saxon held them at bay; when I finished the task my cartridge belt was empty—and our extra ammunition was with our camp supplies on the farther bank of the Salween.

Naja was kneeling beside Saxon wailing, "Shoot, Sahib Ross! Shoot to kill!—they are the Wa people on a head-hunting raid!"

I noted then, for the first time, that the black men had no firearms. They took our deadly rifle fire coolly, closing their depleted ranks with the seemingly endless swarm of men behind. They carried long, wicked-looking machetes in their hands, but they seemed determined to overpower us by the weight of their numbers.

At Naja's wailing words, Saxon stepped closer to my side—speech was not necessary between us. We formed a wall with our bodies between the slender, helpless white girl and the horde of blacks that had glimpsed her beauty in the moonlight. We had heard of the Wa people and knew of their impregnable villages in the highlands on the eastern side of the Salween. For years they had defied all efforts of the British government to civilize them.

They were a tribe that believed the ghost of a dead man lingered in his skull and would keep away the invisible demons of the air from their villages and lands. Every year they sent out a head-hunting expedition to obtain fresh skulls—as they believed at seeding time the demons were most active and would bewitch the seed and the soil. Their cultivated lands were surrounded by rows of posts

hung with human skulls; their village streets were ornamented the same way. The peaceful Shan natives called the Wa territory "the land of creeping death." So I understood Saxon's meaning when he said grimly, "Save a bullet for Naomi."

Even in the stress of that moment I noticed that he also thought of her by her first name. As I drew a bead on a swarthy brute I caught a glimpse of swaying underbrush at the right—some of them had managed to cross the stream, very deep at that point, and were trying to attack us in the rear. I left the ugly beast in front of me to Saxon and swung around in time to fire at two oily bodies breaking through the underbrush almost behind us.

Naomi saw them at the same time. She rose from her crouching posture and I felt her slender hands at my holster. The next instant she was clutching my revolver. Her body swayed against me, making my heart jump. I dared not take my eyes from that swaying mass of shrubbery where the blacks were concealed, but I sensed her glorious womanhood—her appealing helplessness; and I shivered as I pictured the inevitable end of the conflict. No three men could long withstand that writhing, screaming, yet steadily advancing horde; we must soon be swept into oblivion by the very weight of their numbers.

Saxon's repeating rifle was spitting sullenly beside me; his cartridge belt was half full, so I reloaded my gun while he cursed the cringing front ranks of blacks. "Damn you, take that!" he snarled—his rifle barked and a black body bounded into the air and fell forward to be trampled by the advancing lines behind.

Then Naomi screamed. I took my eyes from the swaying bushes at my right in time to see a score of the demons closing in from the left. I fired desperately among them, but a

close whiff of rancid grease made me turn to the right again. A naked oily native was standing beside me with gleaming machete raised to strike. A revolver shot sent him sprawling—it was Naomi. She had saved me from butchery for the moment. But my rifle was empty—so was Saxon's. I used mine as a club on a screaming brute who reached for the girl. As he went down I dodged a shining blade and brought the butt of my gun down on the arm holding the machete.

Again Naomi fired. I yelled, "Save a bullet for yourself!" but she did not hear me. I caught a glimpse of her set white face as she stood with her back to the tree, firing telling shots. Naja was trying to protect her with the small dagger he carried. I saw him sink it into the throat of a squat beast who grabbed at her hair. I yelled encouragement and he screamed back a prayer to the heathenish god he worshiped.

I heard Saxon cursing his Maker as he struggled fruitlessly to reach Naomi's side. I swung my clubbed gun in a vicious circle but the stock snapped on a thick skull; hands reached for me—I saw black fingers tearing the white robe from Naomi's shoulders. The sight made me frantic—her eyes were set in dull horror as she fought the big beast who was tearing her clothing.

My bellow of rage was answered by Saxon's—he had glimpsed the same scene. Then I smashed the arm of a howling fiend, snatched his machete and swung around to the girl's defense. I saw Saxon go down beneath a wave of screaming savages—I saw Naja sobbing with anger as he fought against the firm grip of two naked blacks—and all the time the machete in my hands rose and fell in the midst of that pressing circle. Step by step I advanced through a veritable river of blood to the spot where the girl had fallen senseless at the

foot of the tree. I was glad she was unconscious; it would be harder to run that reddened blade through her heart while her terrified eyes were on my face.

A glancing blow on the back of my head staggered me—hands pulled at my legs and arms. But I threw them off. I knew I had to die and there was one earthly task I must finish first. I must run that machete through Naomi's heart—she must not be left to that horde of savages.

I reached her side—she lay white and still at my feet—for a fleeting instant I allowed myself to think how lovely she was—then I sternly put the thought away. I gritted my teeth—forcing my cringing hands to direct the blade toward her heart—then a crashing blow on my head sent me reeling headlong and blackness enveloped the world.

THE weird persistent beating of a drum was the first impression my brain registered when I returned to consciousness. I opened my eyes and found myself staring at a row of grinning skulls suspended from the ceiling of a high thatched roof. There was a movement beside me—I blinked and stared wonderingly; Naomi was bending over me and the light in her gray eyes sent a thrill through my veins. Then I heard Saxon's voice, "Bryson, old chap, how do you feel?"

His face came within my range of vision and I saw a bandage was around his temples—I recognized it as part of the shirt he had been wearing on the day we met Naomi. Suddenly the fight in the glade came back to me. I raised up and immediately clutched my aching head with both hands and discovered it also was bandaged.

After my vision cleared I looked about me. We were in a large bare hut with rush-woven walls and a

high thatched roof. Rows of grinning skulls hung from the ceiling and the air was heavy with the fetid odor of decaying flesh. I brought my gaze back to Saxon's face and he nodded to the question he saw in my eyes.

"Yes, we are prisoners in a Wa village. I don't know why we were not killed at once—Naja said there is something in their religious belief that makes it necessary for them to take their victims alive." He stopped, and my eyes followed his to the distant spot where Naomi had withdrawn. She was trying to fasten her torn gown on the shoulder.

"Where is Naja?" I asked.

"I don't know. They took him away a while ago—he understands their lingo and has already learned that the fight we put up places us high in their estimation. God knows how many devils we killed—you did fine work with that machete, Bryson. They pulled me down and then fell over me so fast I was not seriously hurt—but we thought you were dead—one of the brutes hit you with a heavy club."

"And Naomi?" I asked.

"Is uninjured—so far." He added the last in a low voice. "I saw you trying to reach her with the machete," he went on in a whisper; "God knows it would have been better—now we are weaponless, and when we entered the village I saw their king looking at her——"

He stopped and gritted his teeth. I glanced over at Naomi. She had turned away until only her profile showed in the dark room. It looked pure, high-bred, delicate. A wave of physical nausea went over me as I mentally pictured that brute of a Wa king feasting his eyes on her. "I'll kill her with my bare hands first!" I whispered fiercely, and he nodded approval—which showed that his thoughts had been following my own.

AS THE day drew to a close, food was placed before us by silent curious-eyed women. The guards laughed and joked while they lounged on the hard earth before the open door. Occasionally they peered in at us and we saw the murderous-looking machetes at their belts. Eventually darkness fell; as the room grew black Naomi crept closer to my side. When loud voices sounded near she groped for my hand. I heard her sigh contentedly when my fingers closed over hers. She did not know how madly the blood was coursing in my veins at the touch of her soft palm—how the fragrant nearness of her made me forget for moments at a time that we all must die—for there was no escape.

Saxon had explained that the walls of the village were constructed like a fort; it was situated on a high hill surrounded by a deep ditch over which a drawbridge was built. The only approach was over that drawbridge and through a winding tunnel that led upward to the inner ramparts. This tunnel was heavily guarded and the houses of the tribe were built inside the fort around the huge sun-burnt square I had glimpsed through the doorway.

Naomi broke a long silence by saying, "Mr. Ross has told me that you found Father's helmet in the Salween. I know he is dead—but it is much better for him than this." Her voice broke and the next moment I pulled her gently into my arms and she was sobbing on my breast. The room was utterly black but I knew Saxon realized Naomi was in my arms—that it was I to whom she had turned for comfort.

Hours passed; Naomi cried herself to sleep on my shoulder—then, suddenly, I heard heavy breathing behind me! Its quality chilled my heart—it sounded like a wounded animal fighting the death-rattle. I suffered agony as I listened—even while some instinct kept me motion-

less, holding my breath. Saxon must have been dozing, for he did not move until a faint whisper came, "*Sahibs, Sahibs, are you there?*"

It was Naja—I heard the slight rustling of the leaves on the floor as he dragged himself through the loose rushes of the hut's side and crept toward us—guided by our low whispers. Occasionally a moan escaped him and I knew by his fearful breathing that he was mortally hurt. At his first low words I was thankful the girl in my arms was sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion and could not hear. "*Sahibs, there is no hope—you die tomorrow when the noon sun shines down over the new rice-field. It has just been cleared of the jungle vines, ready to be flooded for the planting. Your blood is to be sprinkled over the ground and your heads go on the posts.*"

"But the *Memsahib*," I broke in; "what are their plans for her?"

The rattle in his throat grew louder. "She goes to the king—when I heard, I tried to steal a dagger to bring to her—they caught me, I was beaten and left for dead. They threw my body aside for the head man's knife, but I regained my senses and dragged myself here—to—warn—I choke—*Sahibs—I—*"

There was a long struggling breath, then silence.

I heard Saxon moving in the darkness and I knew he was feeling for Naja's pulse. After a while I heard him sobbing. "He's dead, Bryson; I've been feeling his body—one leg is broken and he's been hacked fearfully with machetes; yet he dragged himself here to warn us——" His voice broke and there was silence.

My own eyes were wet as I recalled that Naja was a heathen who worshiped idols of stone—but I did not fear for the soul that had just taken flight from his tortured body.

DAYLIGHT found us wan-eyed and despairing. The precious burden on my breast grew doubly dear as the hour approached when I must send her soul to her Maker undefiled. Saxon and I could face death with stoicism—but we could not leave Naomi for the Wa king. Yet my heart recoiled from the task I had set myself to perform—cowardlike I put off the moment as long as possible.

She opened her eyes as I gazed longingly into her face. The guards outside the open door were being changed and the sound of their voices awakened her. Saxon had drawn Naja's body into the hut's darkest corner and covered it with leaves, with which the floor was plentifully sprinkled. Then he sat with his back turned so that I could have those precious last moments alone with the girl I loved. Time passed—we heard shouting and laughter outside in the square—yet still Naomi lived—the longer I gazed into her sweet gray eyes the weaker grew my will. "Just a little more time," I would whisper to my fainting spirit, "just a little more time—then I will take this bandage from my head, fasten it around her white throat and twist it until she is dead. I *must* do it—there is no other way!"

But when I looked at her white neck and pulsing throat I turned craven. If only I had a gun or a knife it would be easier—but to *torture* her!

Suddenly the guards came through the door and ordered us, by gestures, out into the street. Then it was too late, for they bound my hands behind me. At the last moment, cursing myself for a coward, I tried to snatch one of their machetes and run it through her heart—but they beat me down and took the weapon from my frenzied hands.

Saxon spoke on the way out. "You couldn't do it, Bryson—neither could

I. We are cowards—may God forgive us!”

Naomi walked between two black brutes who held her arms in a viselike grip. We crossed a square between rows of gaping natives, passed through a wide gate in the ramparts, descended a hill and found ourselves in a large cultivated valley. At one side of this valley was a tract of newly cleared land, some ten acres wide, and we reached it by a street lined with high posts, each holding a grinning skull.

We found the king and his attendants beneath a large tree on the edge of the newly cleared land—he was seated in a bamboo litter held by four slaves. I did not feel as a man ought to feel who is going to die—I was not thinking of myself at all, but of Naomi, and when I saw the salacious light in the Wa king's eyes, I cursed the weakness that kept me from strangling her to death. He was a fat ugly brute, and when Naomi was brought before him she screamed and shrank away, as he reached out a paw and touched her arm.

Saxon went white at that scream and strained frantically at his bonds. I went mad—a bestial madness, that sent me charging head-first, like an angry bull, at that bundle of reeking flesh in the bamboo litter. I reached him just as he rose to pull Naomi forcibly toward him, and my head landed forcibly in his greasy paunch; he grunted and fell over backward in the litter.

Then I was grabbed by my angry guards and hurried out into the center of the huge sun-baked field and bound securely to a post. Saxon was fastened to a similar one a few feet away. The blazing sun beat fiercely in my eyes; my head ached from the force with which I had driven it into the king's greasy paunch. I could see Naomi lying, a crumpled heap of white, beneath the tree beside the king's litter. She had fainted, and

I prayed desperately that she would never open her eyes again.

I saw two natives coming toward us with gleaming machetes in their hands. I knew I had but a few seconds to live; at such tense moments it is surprising what small things attract one's attention. I could not think of my coming death, for my mind was obsessed with the humming of an insect—a bee evidently—that I could hear buzzing behind me.

It droned again and I turned my head to see how close it was to my ear. The sun was pouring into my eyes and for a moment I thought I had gone mad. Then the droning began again, and after another glance at the heavens I gave a shout. “Saxon! look!—an airplane!”

The Wa king saw it at the same time—he gave one shriek of fear as he leaped from the litter and ran for the safety of his fortification on the hill. His people followed, screaming frantically with terror.

AFTER the big military machine landed and Saxon and I were being freed from our bonds by the lieutenant in charge, he said, “I knew something was wrong when I spied that bunch of natives through my field-glasses. Luckily for you my pilot was flying low, hunting for a landing place so he could tighten up our steering gear.”

As soon as my arms were free I hurried across the field to Naomi—still a quiet huddled heap beneath the tree. She opened her eyes as I lifted her into the cockpit of the flying machine; then she shrank closer into my arms as she realized her scant attire. The lieutenant handed me his coat, and once wrapped in its protecting folds, she sat up and listened with interest to his explanation of his presence in that territory at such an opportune time. It seemed that he was on an experimental trip from Calcutta to Canton, China. To

avoid the air currents around the high mountains on the dividing line between Burma and China he turned to the northeast, which brought him directly over the Wa country.

“Now I’ll take you people back to Mandalay,” he finished, “and when I return I think I’ll drop a bomb or two on that stronghold of devils; it may make them hesitate another time when they are tempted to capture

white people on their head-hunting raids.”

The big machine roared over the ground and took the air like a great bird. The others peered curiously down as we passed over the village on the hill. I peered down, too—but not at the Wa people; I was gazing into the eyes of the girl I loved, while she smiled up at me from the shelter of my breast.