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The Last Laugh

By C. FRANKLIN MILLER

ANTHONY BANE hung up the receiver and stared at the phone. His eyes were bulging, horror-struck; his cheeks were gray. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"God!" he whispered hoarsely. "That voice—Godfrey's!"

He climbed to his feet and a fit of trembling seized him as he made his way across the study. The beat of his heart felt strangely feeble. It hurt.

Of a sudden things went black; his knees sagged under him. With an agonized cry he clutched at the mantel atop the hearth and, missing, stumbled into the arms of a chair. In the light of the fire he looked like a corpse, but his eyes were open. A voice in his brain insisted steadily, "Godfrey is dead . . . Godfrey is dead. . . ."

Outside, a gale was blowing. The chatter of hail against the windowpanes came in sweeping gusts; the windows rattled in their sashes; the wind prowled and muttered along the eaves as though jealous of the flaming logs on the hearth inside.

Yet Anthony Bane heard none of it. With wildly distended eyes he stared through the fire, tense, unseeing, conscious only of a soul-racking fear—a fear of the kind that tortures and destroys. That voice on the phone had set it gnawing.

Slowly he raised his head. His nerves were shattered. A satanic patchwork of writhing tentacles seemed to have replaced them. He leaned heavily on the table at his

side and gulped some liquor from a pocket flask. He drained the flask, and his heart began to pound; an unnatural flush stole through the ashes in his cheeks. With an effort he dragged himself erect and started pacing back and forth before the hearth, fighting madly for control over mind and body.

What was it the voice had said?

"Don't leave the house, Tony. I want to see you—alone!"

That had been all. No name. But he had recognized the voice of Godfrey Allen, so softly commanding and confident.

And yet—he had to believe!—Godfrey Allen was dead. . . .

It was now four years—five almost—since he had last set eyes on Godfrey. They had been hunting big game together down in the wilds of Africa and had pushed far up along the Zambezi into the very heart of northern Rhodesia. Here they had come upon Tod Harrington—friend, hunter, explorer—and his well-known string of gun-bearers encamped along the stream.

"Boys," Tod had said in his eager manner, "my blacks have been spilling some wild tales about a tribe of fire-worshippers not so many moons ahead. They refuse to go a step farther. Superstitious as hell! What say you? Shall we three push along and have a look-see?"

Godfrey had been willing. Tony had not: but—

"You two go," he had begged. "I'm all in. This damnable heat has

got me. I'll wait for you here and rest up."

Next day Tony had helped his friends with their preparations; had even accompanied them some distance into the wilds of that little-known region ahead. Not far, to be sure; less than a half-mile upstream. There he had wished them luck, as any pal would; had left them, and returned to camp. This, in spite of the heat!

Both Godfrey and Tom had wondered, but had they witnessed Tony's return their amazement would have been unbounded. Panting, disheveled and bleeding from numerous cuts, he had stumbled into camp, carrying a horrible tale of cannibalism and death—their deaths, Godfrey's and Tod's—to the ears of the gullible blacks. Camp had been broken immediately—frantically, in fact, for the blacks had been eager to put that dreaded region far behind them.

Two months later, with his tale of death carefully matured, Tony had returned to the States, seeking the presence of a certain Joan, Godfrey's Joan by betrothal. To her in a low, sad voice he had recounted his tale, adding many words of comfort—some of praise for Godfrey's heroism. Joan had believed, and after the first heart-rending shock had spent itself she had pressed his hand, moved by the loyalty of this "best of friends."

"You did all that you could to save him, Tony. I shall never forget."

Tony had bowed his head.

"No more than any pal would, Joan," had been his answer. "Godfrey was much like a brother. I'd willingly give my life to bring him back."

A studied declaration, that! Joan had been impressed, and throughout the ensuing year her regard for Tony had grown apace. No word had ever seeped out of Africa, yet Tony had bided his time with cunning patience.

And in the end, cunning won. Joan, the desirable, had married him.

But now—

That voice on the phone—like a voice from beyond!

Godfrey?

Anthony Bane shivered; but his nerves had abated somewhat. With a sudden, furtive movement he sprang to the table and pulled out a drawer. His fingers closed on the cold steel of an automatic. A false sense of security, druglike in quality, pervaded his body as he transferred the weapon to a pocket in his coat. A cunning gleam entered his eyes. . . . If Godfrey Allen lived—

"A GENTLEMAN to see you, sir!"

Anthony Bane started.

Cheeves, the butler, was standing in the doorway.

"He would give no name, sir."

"A—stranger, Cheeves?"

"Yes, sir! I believe so, sir!"

And Cheeves had known Godfrey. The master of the house considered this for a moment, hoping against reason that Cheeves was right. His hand never left his pocket.

"Has Mrs. Bane returned yet, Cheeves?"

"No, sir! She left word with Suzanne not to expect her before 1."

Anthony Bane's heart was surprisingly steady now. His lips were still pale, but grim. . . . If Godfrey Allen lived—

He drew some bills from his vest pocket and handed them to Cheeves.

"I want you and Suzanne to take the night off. Ugly weather, but—you may use the sedan. Understand?"

"Yes, sir! Thank you, Mr. Bane! Shall I show the stranger up here?"

Anthony Bane nodded. When Cheeves had gone he planted himself in front of the hearth with his back to the fire and waited. One hand was clenched tightly at his side; the

other was still in his pocket. Both of them were cold.

Sounded a muffled footstep from the corridor without, and in spite of himself his heart gave a surge. He stiffened perceptibly as a dark form appeared in the doorway.

“Good evening, Tony!”
Anthony Bane stared, hesitated, then laughed; laughed hysterically, with the relief of a murderer who has been unjustly pardoned. He had to; his relaxing nerves commanded it.

Short, thin and uncommonly pale, the stranger framed in the doorway bore no resemblance to Godfrey Allen. His face was drawn, seamed, haggard; his eyes hollowed and ringed. He gave one the impression of having aged prematurely through some uncanny process of shrinkage. He displayed no emotion whatever over the unusual greeting accorded him; merely gazed, disinterestedly—waiting.

“Lord, man,” chuckled Anthony Bane, “you gave me a start. I thought for a moment——”

“Of Godfrey Allen?”

Anthony Bane’s eyes grew big and round. He noticed it now—that voice, Godfrey’s! Low, rich and well-modulated, it possessed that same touch of confidence which had always been so fascinating in his one-time friend.

Said the voice, “You don’t seem to know me, Tony. I am not surprized. One changes a lot in five years, especially when one has been through—hell!”

Anthony Bane stared at the shrunken stranger; stared at his haggard face and into his hollowed eyes where he caught a familiar glint of eagerness which had been characteristic of a man he had almost forgotten.

“Tod Harrington!” he whispered—and his hand crept back to his coat pocket.

Tod smiled—a cracking sort of a smile—and advanced farther into the room.

“At last!” said he, extending his arm. “It’s fine to be welcomed by a friend. Come—give me your hand, Tony!”

Slowly, Anthony Bane raised his hand—his free one—and Tod took it in both his own. But there was no warmth in the clasp; it was merely a contact—deliberate, studied.

Tod held the hand for a moment or two, pressed it mechanically, smiled again, and then let it go. This done, he turned his back on Anthony Bane and pulled a chair closer to the fire.

“Not any too warm in here, Tony,” said he, opening his hands to the blaze. “Hear that wind! Come, gather round, man, and act sociable. . . . Want a cigarette?”

Anthony Bane hesitated and slid slowly into the chair opposite. He accepted a cigarette and lit it at the flaring match which Tod held out. A certain indefinable terror had gripped his heart.

“We thought you were—dead,” he finally managed; his tongue felt thick and dry.

Tod blew a cloud of smoke into the fire.

“Some of us can stand a lot. Others can’t. I belong in the first group—fortunately. . . . Not so sure about that word!” He reflected. “Sometimes I think it’s the man who cracks and goes under who’s the fortunate one. He skips at least a part of hell!”

He flicked his ashes into the blazing logs and turned suddenly. His eyes bored straight into those of Anthony Bane.

“You know, Tony, there is such a thing as hell on earth!”

For a moment only their glances met and then Anthony Bane’s glance fell. He toyed nervously with his cigarette, scarcely able to conceal the panic that shook his body. Tod Harrington saw it and his eyes narrowed;

a queer smile barely curled the corners of his mouth.

"Would you care to hear about that hell of ours—Godfrey's and mine?"

Anthony Bane murmured some reply, he scarcely knew what. His brain was beset by a number of battling demons—indecision, fright, uncertainty. One finger was still crooked around the trigger of the weapon in his pocket. After a moment of silence he ventured a furtive glance at Tod, who had turned away and was staring thoughtfully into the fire.

Finally Tod spoke.

"Tony," said he without shifting his eyes, "you won't like this tale of mine. It's not a thing of beauty. Hell was never meant to be! But it will make you—think," softly. "It will help you to imagine—possibly feel—some of those awful agonies. . . . It will, Tony, if you still have a part of your God-given soul!"

ANTHONY BANE'S lips went white. He half rose in his chair, murder in his heart; but he sank back again, weak and trembling. A strange fascination filmed his eyes as he riveted them on Tod.

Tod never moved.

"It all started with Bmini," he declared after a moment's pause. "Strange, how often a woman's hand unwittingly opens the gate to hell! In the very beginning there was Eve. Bmini was our Eve—Godfrey's and mine! She wasn't a beauty—not according to a white man's standard. You wouldn't have cared for her, Tony. . . . Yet she was perfectly formed, far from repulsive, and young. Had you seen her come tearing out of the jungle like a frightened animal, you—well, you might have fallen, at that! She looked like anything but a heathen native, with her big, startled eyes and bronzed-colored body. It was that peculiar coloring of her skin, much like a

white man's tan, that made me wary. My blacks had warned me, and I reminded Godfrey of the fact. But Godfrey always did have a heart as big as a house. When he saw the girl collapse on the edge of the jungle, nothing could restrain him.

"He ran across to her and I followed—at a distance. I saw her try to crawl to her feet and fall back again as though from weakness. In her side was a long, gaping wound, still fresh and dripping. It looked like the rip of a tiger's claw. Godfrey picked her up and carried her down to the river. He bathed the wound—a horrible sight it was, Tony—and applied some iodine from the sack on his back. Most people would have fainted from the pain of it. Bmini never winced. In her eyes were only wonder and fear. I prayed for some sign of pain—prayed for Godfrey's sake—but she only stared, childlike. first at Godfrey, at his deeply tanned arms, then at me, then down at her own bronzed body. I knew what it meant. She herself had noted the similarity of the coloring. I called it to Godfrey's attention. The girl had no pain—no physical sensation whatever! My kaffirs were right.

"'Rot!' murmured Godfrey and never paused in his task. 'You've absorbed some of that kaffir superstition, Tod. She is simply scared stiff, maybe over us. We are different, you know.'

"Far from satisfied, I studied her narrowly, and my eyes settled on her fingers. My heart almost stopped. Those fingers were black, and shriveled, like jointed sticks of charcoal. Godfrey had called it 'rot,' and the word seemed horribly applicable. A sickening despair clutched my stomach.

"I wanted to turn and run, but I couldn't leave Godfrey. He, too, had noticed those unsightly fingers, for he gave vent to a sudden exclamation and swayed backward on his heels. . . . I can still see that

puzzled frown in his eyes. He seemed so utterly helpless, bewildered.

"Suddenly there came a voice from the near-by jungle. 'Bmini!' it called, quite clearly. The girl gave a startled cry and shrank close to Godfrey as though for protection. Instinctively I turned toward our camp. Too late! Too late to reach the rifles. Before I could move, we were surrounded by dozens of near-naked savages. Big, silent fellows they were, all armed with spears. And they were black, the natural black of the country, except for hideous daubs of red and yellow with which they had stained their bodies. In spite of their ferocious appearance, there was a certain amount of gravity and awe in their bearing as they looked us over from head to foot.

"Had my automatic been in working order, there might have been a different story to tell. But it was jammed—useless! So was Godfrey's." Tod's voice went harsh. "You know all about that, Tony!" he added bitterly.

Anthony Bane did know. His was the hand that had jammed those guns!

"But no matter!" exclaimed Tod with a dismissing wave of his hand. "The trick was done. We had to make the best of it. I tried to walk straight through that mob of savages, hoping to reach the rifles, but was stopped by a number of spear-points in my ribs. It wasn't pleasant.

"I fell back again, and our captors started jabbering among themselves, jabbering and gesticulating freely. Sounded like a war-time palaver. A number of times I caught the word '*Mbuitiramo!*' and recalled having heard my kaffirs use the phrase in their tales of the fire-worshippers. 'Chosen of the Fire-God!' That's what it meant. Apparently Godfrey and I were among the elect!" grimly.

At this point Tod paused and lit another cigarette. He seemed to have forgotten about Anthony Bane, who had been hanging feverishly on every word, waiting for the death of Godfrey Allen—waiting for that and something more, something that his frightened brain could scarcely fathom.

Tod took a puff or two on his cigarette and then continued.

"Things looked bad—horribly so. Godfrey realized this fact as well as I, for he whispered to me under cover of the general palaver. 'Tod,' said he, 'it isn't easy to believe those gruesome tales. But I want you to play safe. One of us must get back to Tony. Joan must know!'

"I understood, and something caught in my throat at the sight of Godfrey facing the unholy possibilities of the future with that big, firm heart of his.

"Suddenly the largest of our captors raised his spear on high and the palaver ended abruptly. He spat out some commands, and those nearest prodded us with their weapons and pointed upstream. We started marching.

"IT WASN'T far to that accursed village of theirs—only a half-hour trudge through the bush, and it was made in silence. I watched our captors closely, struck by the absence of all hostility. They were as solemn as so many owls and noticeably careful about keeping their distance from Bmini, Godfrey and me. Several of them ran on ahead, and as we neared the village we were greeted by the eery beating of tam-tams. Our captors broke into a wild sort of chant, and I knew what it meant. This was the beginning of some devilish religious rite.

"In the center of the village was a long, low structure which I knew for a mbuiti-hut—the African house of worship. They led us around to the rear of the hut where, before a

small door in the wall, two of the biggest blacks I have ever seen stood guard. The door was opened and Bmini entered. Godfrey and me they had to jam in with the ends of their spears. . . . Would to God I had let them kill me then and there! This was the entrance to hell itself!

"The door closed behind us. A nauseating stench assailed my nostrils—the putrid odor of decayed flesh. I thought of Bmini's blackened fingers and shuddered in the darkness. All about me I could feel the living presence of many beings and, as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I could see them. Humans, they were; some standing, motionless, some squatting on their haunches, others huddled on the ground. Ominous, brooding shadows—living corpses, all of them! What loathsome sights the light of the sun might have revealed in that unholy den of disease, I could only conjecture. But the smell of rotting flesh was pungently eloquent.

"Outside in the long auditorium of the hut, the sounding tam-tams maintained their steady cadence. The singsong chant of the natives was fairly deafening. Through a tiny crack in the wall I looked out upon the scene, and my blood almost froze at the ghastliness of it.

"The darkness of night had fallen, but the interior of the hut was illuminated by a huge bonfire blazing in the center and dozens of flaring torches stuck in the ground at regular intervals down both sides of the structure. Between these torches and the walls the shrieking savages were ranged, their bodies streaked and daubed with various colors. They looked like a troop of devils conjured from the lower regions to celebrate some diabolical rite. Around the blazing fire in the center a number of hideously appareled mbuitimen were dancing, twisting and distorting their bodies in the most fantastic manner. Suddenly one of them

paused and let out an ear-piercing scream. A dead silence ensued.

"*'Mbuitiramo!'* he shrieked, and the entire assemblage took up the cry, *'Mbuitiramo!'* The din was hideous. They were calling for us—the 'chosen' ones!

"A narrow slit of a door leading into the interior of the hut opened. Those brooding shadows all about me started moving, stealthily. I pressed my body against the wall and raised my hands above my head. The slightest contact with one of those ghostly forms would have been disastrous. Whatever the disease, I knew it was deadly.

"The door closed and that terrifying movement about me ceased. I lowered my hands and for the first time discovered my body wet with sweat. As the 'chosen' ones filed out, a weird sort of chant was set up outside. I glued my eyes to the crack in the wall, but only for a moment. That glimpse was awful, insufferable, Tony.

"About a dozen of those wretched creatures were moving slowly down through the center of the hut to where their Fire-God was sending out licking tongues of flame as though in greeting. I say they were moving, Tony, but the manner of their progress is indescribable. Only a few walked upright. Those few had great patches of scaly black on their otherwise bronze-colored bodies. The rest were crawling and sliding along the ground in the most hideous fashion, their limbs having rotted away to only short, blackened stumps. I saw the leader reach the fire. I saw the flames envelop him—and he made no outcry! Even as I turned from the loathsome sight, I could taste the burning odor of charred flesh on my tongue. . . . The Fire-God was claiming his own!

"How long I stood there staring, horrified, into the darkness, I do not know. I was only partly conscious of that eery chant and of that insup-

portable stench. Then suddenly I heard Godfrey's voice close to me. It was hoarse. 'Tod,' he whispered, 'I'm going to burn this God-forsaken hole. In the confusion you ought to make good your escape.'

'A terrible weakness assailed me. I could scarcely frame the question that trembled on my lips. Godfrey struck a match and I saw, with sinking heart, that which I had feared. The tips of his fingers were black! Black, Tony! Black as coals! He applied the tiny flame to his knuckles, burned them—and never winced. 'Tell Joan—there was no suffering, Tod!' he whispered. 'I am going to stay. I—must!'

TOD's voice fell away, ceased. The room was silent, except for the crackling logs on the hearth.

"Then—Godfrey is—dead?" came a straggling whisper from Anthony Bane.

Tod nodded, and something much like a sob escaped his lips. For a moment he gazed ahead with dull, unseeing eyes, and then his head fell forward on his chest; his hands dropped limply at his sides. He was motionless.

In the chair opposite, Anthony Bane sat and stared; stared with wildly dilated eyes at Tod Harrington's

dangling fingers, at the glowing stub of a cigarette held fast therein. He saw that creeping point of fire singe the skin, penetrate, and eat its way in to the bone.

Tod Harrington never winced!

A cry of mortal agony filled the room. It came from the lips of Anthony Bane. Huddled in one corner of his chair, he raised his hands and stared at the wide-spread fingers, a look of insane terror in his eyes.

"Damn you, Tod," he whispered hoarsely. "You—knew!"

Tod Harrington never moved. Between his black-scorched finger tips the cigarette still glowed.

"You—knew!" screamed Anthony Bane; but his voice trailed away to a moan.

And then that cowardly streak of his ran true to form. Slowly he drew his gun, pressed it to his temple—and fired!

Tod Harrington raised his head. His eyes were filmed, his face distorted under the self-inflicted torture he endured. With a hasty gesture he flung the cigarette far from him and nursed his pain-racked fingers.

"Thank God—for the pain of it," he murmured through clenched teeth. And then: "He's on his way, Godfrey. The last laugh is yours. Go to it!"

