

# The River

by L. Major Reynolds

*In presenting an original short story by an unknown author, it will be apparent to fans that there must be something out of the ordinary to compel such a deviation. "The River" is such a story. We have every reason to believe that it was widely submitted to the standard fantasy markets without avail. This is understandable, for this is no pulp story, and fits no magazine's formula. It is "different." Just why it is so, the astute reader will probably guess for himself long before the end. The story piqued our imagination when we read it in manuscript on its submission to another Avon publication . . . we knew it to be something that would be appreciated in this Reader. Here it is.*



HE MAN looked uneasily at the jungle around him. It had changed until there was little that was familiar. Where had been great full-leaved trees, now was a riot of giant ferns and strange pulpy growths ran the gamut of colors.

The heat was overbearing. Beads of sweat ran down his face and trickled off his chin in a steady stream. But from somewhere he found the strength to keep up his seemingly hopeless battle against the ever present tangle of vegetation.

He fell often, and the blood mixed with the torrent of perspiration. He winced as the salty stuff stung his wounds.

It was a long time before he noticed the uncanny stillness that pervaded everything, and he tried to remember the last time he had heard the screech of a bird, or the chattering of the small monkeys that had pursued him through the leafy tangle. But it seemed uncounted ages since he had heard them.

Again he fell and this time there was no uncalled-on store of strength to help him to his feet. His body was a limp thing as it lay there, as quiet as the surrounding jungle.

A small liana, endowed with a life of its own, crept noiselessly over the crowded floor of the earth and fastened itself on one unprotected ankle. Imperceptibly it changed color from a muddy green to a ruddiness that told of its method of feeding.

The pain aroused the supine figure and the man struggled to his feet, tearing free from the plant as he rose. He looked around him seeking some way out of the nightmare that held him so tightly, but the jungle showed him nothing but closed doors.

And then in the midst of that awful silence a merry sound floated on the steamy air. The man raised his head and hope flashed in his eyes. He literally tore his way through the mass of foliage and stopped unbelieving before a crystal stream pouring from a rock; water cascading down into a basin below, and forming the headwaters of a small stream that led off through the primordial jungle.

The man clung to the rock for minutes allowing the water to cover him with its fall. For the first time he whimpered and the sound was like a sob.

Sanity returned and he pulled off his sweat-stained clothing, washing them clean in the pool beneath the spring.

All the rest of the day he soaked himself in the pool, and his hurts healed like magic. And when the sun went down he curled his naked body on the top of the rock and slept the dreamless sleep of the newborn.

The next morning he started down the stream's gravelled bed. He was sure it would, somehow, lead him to safety. It was easy walking for a long way, but finally the water rose to his hips and he could make no headway.

A log lying on the bank caught his eye, and he pulled it to the middle of the stream. It sank part way under his weight, but the travelling was easier. He floated now, with only an occasional push over the shallow spots. When night fell again, he strapped himself to his strange craft with his belt. And slept. The jungle came down to the very edge of the stream, leaving no open bank.

He lost track of time as he floated, and it was with something like awe that he saw the disintegration of the log. It literally fell apart and let him down in the now waist-deep water.

For almost a mile he alternately floated and swam. Suddenly on the bank he spied something that made him break the heavy silence with a yelp of joy.

A bark rope moored a raft to one of the giant ferns.

He was panting with eagerness as he climbed aboard and sprawled on the dryness. His water-soaked fingers tore cruelly as he pulled at the knotted rope, but they healed on the instant of tearing.

For the first time he was relaxed enough to notice the stillness that grew deeper each time he travelled. Nowhere was there a sign of animate life in the welter of growing things. He shivered in the hot steam-filled air.

The leafy tunnel now was a mass of vari-colored flowers that was almost overpowering in its perfume. The stream seemed to run slower as if time itself dragged.

The jungle still hugged the stream's edge, but as the miles floated by, the outrageous flowers dwindled and their place was taken by a mass of foliage and vines so dense that he could see no sign of the sun. Even the very air was dusky.

The man shifted uneasily on the rough bark of the logs and in spite of the heat donned the clothing he had carried since the first wonderful bath. He was all animal now. He watched down a long stretch of the shadowy tunnel and never wondered that he felt no need of sustenance. He didn't remember he had neither eaten nor drunk since the trek began.

His first warning came when he felt a subtle loosening beneath him. The bark ropes that held his craft together were splitting and pulling loose. He made a frantic grab for one of the logs, but it splintered to bits under his eager fingers.

Something bumped him between the shoulder blades, and his yell was one of pure delight as he climbed into the rough dugout.

The hollowed tree trunk was sheer luxury after the raft, and he soon managed the trick of handling it. Once more he removed all but a minimum of clothing, as the heat still remained high. The rivulets of perspiration which streamed from his body seemed an inexhaustible flow.

Imperceptibly the jungle changed. Only occasionally now was one of the giant ferns to be seen. Their place was taken by small trees, but still the mass of foliage and vines shut out the sun.

The man hung over the side of his rough craft and searched the water below. There was no sign of life in the crystal flow, and he wondered dimly at its lack.

The sight of the flowing stream against the shining gravelled bottom had almost the effect of hypnosis, and he lay back on the rough burned wood and slept.

He never saw the coracle moored to one bank, its newly tanned hides glinting in the dull light. A long spear rested across its gunwale, and the paddle showed signs of painstaking work. It faded out in the long back stretches of the stream and the man slept deeply.

He awoke and for a moment was unable to orient himself. The jungle had changed while he slept and now great trees reared their leafy heads and he could catch glimpses of clearings in what had been a solid mass of growth.

The dugout was no longer comfortable, and if he had known, he would have regretted the loss of the coracle. His craft was rotting at the edges, and the inside gave off the peculiar scent of decaying wood.

He was in the water again, watching the dugout sink slowly to the bottom of the stream, when he saw the canoe pulled up on the bank.

It was with a sense of relief that he seated himself in the craft and examined the paddle. This was no rough attempt at just something that would float. For the first time he felt confident he was nearing some sort of civilization. Something comparable to what he had known before the eternal jungle had dominated his existence.

The leafy covering over the tunnel was beginning to thin out now, and he looked eagerly for the first sight of the sun. But there was a strange thickening in the air, and a gray mist formed slowly, dropping below the tree level.

The man still searched everywhere for some form of animate life, but only the eternal green met his gaze. The heat shut down as if it were a tangible thing, and he couldn't make sense in his thoughts.

Dimly and far away he remembered another world of starlit nights and sunny days. Another world filled with the hurry and bustle of millions of his own kind. But here, the quiet of the oppressive jungle screamed its silence, and the smooth slipping of the water beneath him was unbroken by even a ripple.

He saw a rowboat moored in the center of the stream and paddled over to it, considering the advisability of changing to the newer craft. But the canoe won out, and he went on, still seeking with darting eyes some sign of the makers of the various craft.

It might have been hours, years or centuries that he stroked his way down the stream. What he could see of the jungle through the mists of fog looked strangely familiar, as if at last he had come to the tangle of great trees and vines that was the only jungle he knew.

He tried to approach the banks, but some vagary of the stream kept him from so doing, and he drifted down the watery way and wondered dimly why it should be so. The quiet tilting of the boat lulled him again to sleep, and the miles floated by unheedingly.

His watch had stopped when he awoke, and he strained his eyes for the spot of brightness that would denote the sun, but the gray mist of the fog gave no answer. It was then he realized he had seen no change in the light that surrounded him. It was all of a sameness.

For the next hour, or age, he went quietly mad. He crouched in the bottom of the canoe and babbled of clear skies and moonlit nights. Over and over he called the names of his friends, waiting each time for the answer that never came.

He buried his face in his hands and sobbed. Great tearing sobs that seemed to rend him to bits. Dry sobs, for no tears flowed in the weeping of madness. Merciful unconsciousness came.

There was no change when he finally pulled himself to a sane reality. The stream still slipped smoothly between the jungle laden banks, and the fog brooded mistily above his head. There was no sense of time, and no reality of life.

The gunwales of the canoe were raddled now, and small seepages of water came from the spot where his feet had rested for so long. He looked frantically for something else that would float, but only the empty stream met his gaze.

And he neither hungered nor thirsted.

He had been swimming for miles when he saw the boat moored to a piling in the center of the stream. His many efforts to reach the banks had been blocked by some insidious current that swept him back each time he had attempted it. It was as if the stream had declared him prisoner, and there was no escape. He regretted the ignoring of the rowboat, but knew it was gone beyond the possibility of recall.

The craft, when he reached it, made him almost sing with happiness. Now he could surely find someone, for it was a motor boat of the latest design. He climbed in and sank gratefully on the soft cushions before he realized he was untired. There was no sense of the agony of exhaustion which should have made him gasp for breath. It was as if he had merely stepped into the craft and seated himself.

The motor sang him a song of power as he twisted the wheel, and he looked back at the wake that creamed behind him. Now, his troubles were over. The men who owned this boat should be somewhere along the stream.

But the miles wheeled behind him and only the blank walls of the jungle met his eyes.

And then the jungle was altering strangely. Where there had been massive trees were now smaller growths and the vines no longer covered them. The violent green had faded to a russet brown and the clearings became more frequent. In places he could see the sandy bank of the stream, but the water resisted all his efforts to land.

And still, there was no sign of life.

Time paced by on leaden feet as the motor roared its song of power. Then, subtly, the rhythm changed and it sputtered and at times almost stopped. He raised the cover and peered anxiously at the engine and was shocked at the accumulation of green rot that covered it. Slower and slower the boat ran, until it was barely creeping.

He was looking ahead when he saw the long slim shape that seemingly appeared from nowhere.

It was a boat, but like nothing he had ever seen before. Long, slim, and needle-shaped, it seemed the personification of power.

He was glad to leave the motorboat for his new transportation. As he stepped aboard he heard a gurgling behind him and a hasty glance showed his late craft settling to the bottom of the stream, swiftly disintegrating as it went.

It was some time before he could puzzle out the motive power of his new craft. The long transparent tube that ran completely through it was an unknown factor to him. More by accident than design he pressed the proper switch and felt the boat surge under him. Looking down he saw the torrent of water shoot through the tube and emerge from the stern in a welter of white foam that sent the boat spinning down the stream.

•He grabbed frantically at the steering lever and soon had the madly whirling thing under control.

Again the miles flowed by and ever the jungle thinned. The fog blanket remained the same, only a little less bright than it had been.

A closed canopy over the boat was welcome, as the heat was going and the air held a breath of chill.

The stream was widening now to the size of a river, but its current kept on in its steady pace. The banks were clear and their sands were dazzling in their whiteness. Once more he tried to land but all efforts were unavailing.

The rushing of the jet of water through the tube reminded him of molten silver and once more the deep sleep descended upon him.

While he slept the stream gained a small voice. Deep within it came something that was almost audible. An indistinct babbling as if uncounted voices bewailed the doom that came too suddenly.

The man awoke, and in waking, wondered. For the first time he seemed to realize the seeming ages that had passed since he had first found the stream, and he felt of his throat and the thirst which should be there and was not.

He pulled back the sheltering canopy and shivered in the chill breeze. Wonderingly he looked where the once luxurious jungle had stretched its green tangle, but only occasional remnants of low plants met his searching gaze. The land was dry and sere, but the stream grew wider as he watched.

His craft jerked oddly, and he glanced down at the tube. No longer was it a smooth even flow. There were bubbles and at times it was empty, then the flow would start again and for a few moments it would again be the silver ribbon which had lulled him to sleep.

Far ahead he saw a lot on the surface of the river and as he strained forward to see better, his craft slid quietly beneath the surface.

Again he started swimming.

The new boat was long, broad of beam and completely covered with a transparent dome. He couldn't give a name to the material of which it was built, as it was something he had never imagined, not even as a plastic. Even as he noticed there did not seem to be any way of opening the dome, a panel opened in the glassy side and a long, flat tongue of metal licked out from somewhere and stopped within easy reach.

Doubtful at first, he tested the firmness of the strange gangplank before crawling out of the water. There was no bending, it remained rock steady to his weight. Straightening up he took a few steps toward the boat. He glanced back, and almost yelled his terror. The clear stuff was disappearing behind him as he went.

Two bounds took him to the cabin, and he was fully inside before he had time to notice the interior.

It was more like a home than a boat. Soft divans lined the sides and several small tables were scattered around the floor. A rug, inches deep, was as transparent as the rest of it.

There was no sign of a motor, or steering lever, and he wondered where the strange craft got its motive power. The thought was still unfinished in his mind, when he felt the sudden impulse of power beneath him. A glance out a rear window showed a smooth wake making a perfect V in the stream.

It was a long time before he realized that the boat ran by the power of his thoughts. He amused himself for a time, running from side to side and in circles, but the resultant strain took more energy than he had. He tried to force the craft near the bank, but the attempt was useless. It was like all the others.

The idea of food idly crossed his mind and he wondered why he felt no

need of it. He thought of his former craving for thick steaks and baked potatoes, and jumped from his seat with a howl of fright.

Lying on a table in front of him was exactly what he had thought of. He reached out a cautious finger and touched the browned meat. It was sizzling hot!

He made an attempt to eat it, but couldn't force his throat to swallow, so he thought it out of existence and it disappeared obediently.

For the next few hours, or years, a varied assortment of things presented themselves for his approval, and were banished back into the nothingness from which they had come. It was only a game to the lonely passenger.

There was nothing left of the jungle now, as far as he could see. Just at the limit of his vision was what looked like a patch of snow, but he shrugged at that notion. No snow could ever fall in the tropics.

He sent a thought to one of the transparent panels which opened to the mental thrust, and shivered in the blast of chill air that came in on him.

The stream had widened until at times the ever present fog concealed the farther bank. And, the silence was absolute.

It was in that silence that he first became aware of the voice of the stream, and he leaned far out into the cold blast listening intently. It was a muted clangor that almost made sense. Several times he caught himself trying to answer the medley of voices, but each try seemed to make them more incoherent. It was as if every being on Earth was making their protest against the shortness of their minute of life. As the stream continued to widen, the sound grew in volume, until all the air was filled with the half-heard screamings.

The man staggered back to one of the soft divans and buried his ears deep in the cushiony surface, trying madly to shut out the demented chorus of the doomed. Unconsciousness came, almost as deep as death itself.

When he awoke, nothing had changed, except the uncanny mouthings that had so nearly driven him insane. They had subsided to a low surly muttering that seemed one with the stream.

The land, as far as he could see, was white with snow. Far in the distance he spied mighty domes and towers which were gone in the instant of their seeing, and only the bare plain was left. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but nothing was there.

Dragging time started once more, and again the man found refuge in the powers of the wonderful boat. Many, varied, and weird were the productions of his fevered mind as his creations became more and more incredible.

The loneliness shut down like a trap, and he attempted the impossible.

The beings that came from the disordered brain showed no sign of the dignity of life; they were eerie, many-armed and legged creatures of nightmare. Each was sent back to the oblivion from whence they came, but still more were evoked.

And then, one of the forms refused to vanish at command, and swiftly putrefied.

The man sent frantic commands to the hitherto obedient panels, but they

remained closed, trapping the horrific stench. He tore at the openings, but they remained immovable.

He was babbling insanely when he finally forced the panel open, and the foul air gagged him as it swept past his head. He looked back at the table where the thing lay, but it was a mass of rotting something where gray froth formed and broke.

Thought after frantic thought he sent toward it, but only the tiny sound of a breaking bubble answered his command.

Then, for the first time he noticed the boat had stopped and was swinging idly in the slow current. His jumbled mind tried to form a clear command to the craft, but nothing happened.

He was weak and trembling when he managed to squirm from the opening he had made, and tumble in the stream. This time the water did not revive him as it had done before. Only the fact that the stream had shallowed kept his head above the surface. He gained a safe distance and looked back.

Again he saw the weird disintegration that had happened to all the craft he had found. He shook his head violently to cast out a thought which was burning his rapidly sobering brain, and turned once more to follow where ever the stream led. For deep in his mind he knew now that his fate was one with its waters.

And then, for the first time, he saw a curve in the straightness of the stream bed, and he swam as strongly as possible in his eagerness to discover what lay beyond his sight.

It was a graveyard of small craft that looked as if a band of children had been playing at the task of building boats. He went from one to the other trying to find something in which he could continue his journey, but it seemed hopeless to find one even capable of bearing his weight.

The cold wind bit through his sodden clothing and he shivered until his chattering teeth ached under the strain.

Finally he found what vaguely resembled a rowboat that seemed able to bear his weight, and climbed in, crouching low behind the scant gunwales to escape the wind. Too late he cursed himself for not attempting to wade to shore and make his way overland.

Again he slept, this time the deep sleep of exhaustion, and again the miles fled by.

The fog bank over the stream slowly darkened until everything was almost the same grayness. The current slowed until the boat barely crept.

The man awoke and strained his eyes to see, but the light was too dim for far vision. The banks now were covered with deep piled snow, and the air almost froze in his aching lungs.

And for the first time, he had the feeling of hunger and thirst. He scooped up handfuls of the water and sucked it noisily, but there was no taste of wetness about it.

He was half lying in his craft when far ahead down the now-straight stream bed he saw a rusty light that was just visible. He leaned forward,



squinting his eyes, and the motion was all that was needed to cause the collapse of the boat which spilled him back in the stream.

There was not enough left of the thing to make even an aid to floating, and he went forward, wading.

It was some time before he noticed the lessened resistance of the water. It was like walking through a thick fog, except that the stream was still as crystal clear as it had ever been.

Nearer and nearer the muddy red circle came, and he shouted with delight as he saw where the fog ended.

By the time he reached his goal, little remained of the stream, and just as he tottered from under the fog blanket, he saw all that was left of the waters sink slowly into the gray sands before him.

He was sobbing with relief when he raised his eyes, seeking for a sight of the sun which had been so long shut away from him.

Then screams tore his throat with steely fingers as he saw the dull red ball in the dusky heavens, and the burning thought he had so long denied, burst on his stunned brain.

The River Of Life had run its course.