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The Tree-Men of M'bwa

By DONALD WANDREI

A startling story of unknown Africa, strange monstrosities, and the weird power of the Whirling Flux

"SO YOU'RE after big game," said the legless man. "What's your route?"

"Generally speaking," I answered, "up the Congo to its headwaters, then inland, across the Mountains of the Moon to Uganda, and——"

I paused in surprize. The legless man was glaring at me with a curious mixture of fear, hatred, and warning. The expression that fled across his face was so strange that I halted in the midst of my sentence.

"Change your route!" he abruptly broke in. "Don't cross the Mountains of the Moon—if you want to come back!"

"Nonsense! I've hunted tigers in India, black panthers in Indo-China, and rubies among the head-hunters of Papua. I'm not afraid of anything that walks."

"I am," said the legless man, and again that curious expression writhed across his features. "And you will be if you keep on. Look at me! Nothing but stumps left of my legs—that's all you'll have when you come back from the Mountains, providing you return at all."

I gingerly felt my leg as if to reassure myself that it was still sound. I was ready enough to scoff, but you never can tell how much to believe in Africa.

Why my boat had stopped in this filthy hell-hole on the Gold Coast, I don't know, but here we were overnight and I had gone ashore to break the monotony of scalding days at sea. It wasn't much improvement, even after sunset. Fierce, steamy heat that made you boil with sweat. An unpleasant smell, half native, half decaying vegetation, that every vil-

lage seemed to have. And overhead, a huge red moon that was almost as hot as the sun.

As usual, I wound up in the town's one general store, which meant saloon. Drink in the tropics doesn't make you any cooler, but it takes your mind off other things.

Heaven knows it was a squalid enough hut, full of vermin. The only other white man in the place was the legless man. We had sized each other up instantly. It wasn't long before we were taking our drinks together, and gradually unloosening, until I had started to tell him the purpose of my trip—which was to collect museum specimens and look for traces of early man through Central Africa.

That was what set him off. He had looked bothered ever since I mentioned my trip. But I've picked up a lot of valuable information from chance acquaintances, and if there was some unexpected danger beyond the Mountains of the Moon, I wanted to know what it was.

"You evidently think it isn't safe to follow my proposed route. Why? Tell me about it," I urged, and ordered another round.

The eyes of the legless man were turned upon me with an intent, searching gaze. Whatever he found appeared to satisfy him.

"Ever hear of the Angley-Richards expedition?" he began.

"Yes. They started out on pretty much the same route I'm following several years ago, didn't they? Angley died of malaria, and Richards disappeared after some terrible experience. Lost both his——"



"Angley whirled and swung the machete hissing through the air."

Abruptly I halted.

"Legs," finished my companion. "Your memory is good. I am Daniel Richards."

The name came as a shock to me, though I had been half prepared for it. No one had yet learned the whole story of that ill-fated expedition. All interest and attention now, I settled back to listen.

"Ours was really a dual expedition," he continued. "Angley like yourself was after all kinds of game for museums. I had government backing to chart the land formations and hunt for mineral deposits—a sort of geologist-pro prospector combined.

"We pooled resources for mutual protection. Most of the country we were going through was unexplored. Even today there's no telling what may turn up in some out-of-the-way spot. They haven't begun to exhaust the mysteries of Africa.

"We made our way up the Congo all right, and a devilish trip it was. I've always hated jungles—everything unhealthy seems to grow in them—snakes that strike without warning, flesh-eating plants, and more poisonous insects and deadly vegetation than science yet knows about.

"Well, we got our last supplies at Kola,

then struck out across the continent eastward. As we went farther in and higher up, we left the jungles behind and I felt better. We didn't make progress very fast. I had to map the country as we went, though there wasn't much in the way of rare animals for Angley to bag.

"It must have been over two months from our start before we reached our real base at the foot-hills of the Mountains of the Moon. We had already entered one of the great unexplored tracts. We pitched camp and decided to split our party for a couple of weeks. Angley wanted to go after specimens along the plains. In the meantime, I wished to chart rock formations ahead.

"So we decided to split. In two weeks we would meet again at the camp. If either had not returned by the end of four weeks, the other would follow his trail to find out what was wrong.

"Early one morning, in accordance with our plan, I and my six Neguchi boys started off for the Mountains. The last I saw of Angley was when he and his six boys were heading southward for better game country.

WE **C**R**O**S**S**E**D** the Mountains of the Moon in three days, but we were lucky in finding a pass or it might have taken us much longer to detour. I noted one great igneous intrusion that looked good for diamonds, and several quartzite deposits that yielded gold, silver and mercury. There's many a fortune back there in the heart of Africa for any man who thinks it's worth the risk.

"Beyond the Mountains of the Moon, I decided to keep on for a few days. The country was mostly grass land, with a twisted tree here and there and an occasional swamp. I saw a number of buzzards the first couple of days, and one small herd of antelope. But game was

surprisingly scarce. And we hadn't met a native since we broke camp.

"On our sixth day out, I didn't see a solitary living thing. Nothing but the tall grass and the everlasting sun. The Neguchi boys had become suddenly quiet. It's a bad sign when you don't hear them jabber.

"That afternoon I sighted a low hill to the northeast and immediately struck off toward it.

"The Neguchi began to lag.

"'Keep going, you lazy devils!' I swore.

"One of them spoke up in his dialect. 'No go on. This bad country. M'bwa there,' and he pointed toward the distant hill. 'See! Black men stay away. Birds, beasts, they no come. All 'fraid of M'bwa.'

"'M'bwa? What's that?'

"He shrugged his shoulders. I cursed, swore, offered him 'bait,' all but beat him. Not another word could I get. For that matter, it was all I could do to make the six Neguchi go on even with the offer of double pay.

"We camped that night at the foot of the hill. The Neguchi huddled close to a fire. The night was strangely silent for Africa. We might as well have been in a desert. I heard only the rustle of cane grass, nothing more. When you've become used to the big cats and roaring carnivores of Africa, silence hurts.

"I woke to a worse silence the next morning. A glance told me that the Neguchi had fled. My stuff was intact but I was wild for a few minutes.

"I could have turned back but didn't. I made a cache of the stuff and decided to push on across the hill, be back by night-fall, then, on the eighth day, begin my return trek. My curiosity was aroused by the obvious fear of the black boys of what lay ahead and their desertion. I

took with me only light rations, but stuffed my belt and pockets with cartridges.

"The stillness was getting on my nerves. I didn't like the looks of it at all. A cloudless sky—and not a bird anywhere. Rustling grass—and not the hum of an insect nor the sound of any animal. There simply wasn't a living thing except myself within sight or hearing.

"But I went on. The hill was not far off. I had reached and climbed it before noon. There was a grassy space on its top and I could see another hill off in the distance, so I knew that a valley must lie below me. I walked across the flat hill-top till I stood on the downward slope.

"Right there I got a shock. A low, circular valley stretched below me with the hill closing it all around like a ring. Perfectly flat it was, perhaps two miles across or less, and not a blade of grass in it. The soil was a dirty gray. And in the midst of it stood a queer structure glinting red in the sun. I'd never seen anything like it. At first I thought it was a pyramid, then I could have sworn it was an obelisk; next moment it looked like a sphere. I rubbed my eyes and looked away, thought of what I knew about mirages, then looked back, and there was the thing, shining a metallic red and never looking the same.

"It was a rum sight, but something else gave me the shock. All around it grew a row of trees, maybe twenty of them or more. The trees varied in height, the tallest one at my left graduating to the smallest at my right. And every last one of those trees looked like a man standing guard!

"The hair rose on my scalp. The tree farthest left stood like a clumsy giant a hundred feet high; the one on the right looked more like an ordinary man. Between them were the other trees in a

rising scale. No branches or leaves like trees I knew—just one limb hanging down on each side and a round lump in the middle where a head would be.

"A ripple of cold wind seemed to creep upon me, but I went down the slope until I reached the valley and kept on across the powdery gray soil. I don't know why. Curiosity maybe. Or just the damn fool courage that won't let you be scared out of anything. If you once give in, you're gone.

"I STOPPED about a hundred yards from the trees, where I had a good look at them. That was when I got panicky, for the smallest tree *was looking back at me with the eyes of a living man!* The arms hung limply down. The other trees grew bigger toward the end one, which hardly seemed human at all except for its huge limbs and five gnarled branches like fingers that trailed down from the end of each limb.

"And behind them was that strange reddish metal structure that shimmered dizzily, now like a pyramid, a cone, a ball—God knows what it was really like, I couldn't tell. I thought I saw writing on it but it wasn't the writing of any language I'd ever known.

"The impulse to flee came upon me, terror at some unknown evil gripped me, but somehow I went on, alert, wary.

"I didn't see him come. Maybe he was behind the trees or that wavering metallic structure. I don't know. But there he was all of a sudden, not fifty yards away, a horribly wrinkled old black, with a face as pasty as the gray ground, and a blank look in his eyes. What's more, he was coming straight at me, no mistake about it.

"'Halt!' I shouted and raised my rifle.

"There wasn't a pause in his stride. In complete, sheer terror I let him have it,

both barrels full in the chest. I saw the bullets crash clear through him, but he didn't even falter, and not a drop of blood came from the livid flesh around the holes.

"Then I turned to run and he was on me like the wind. He was cold, his eyes were dead like a corpse's, and I knew I was up against something beyond the most frightful dream. Never a sound did he make, never a light of life or intelligence shone in his dead eyes; he moved like living death, soulless, stiff, and his flesh was like ice but his strength was terrific.

"He jumped me from behind, but I doubled up and flung him forward over my back. I knew my gun was useless. I leaped clear over on top of him and sank my fingers in his throat. But it didn't make any difference. He paid no attention to my strangle-hold, but mechanically fumbled around with his hands and suddenly my wrists were bound.

"Sick with horror at this monster that nothing could destroy, I kicked, wrenched around, brought my arms down with a smash that raked his face, lunged head first into his stomach. He went down like a sack of flour, and immediately was on his feet coming stiffly back.

"In ten minutes it was all over. I was firmly tied. The inhuman thing rose without a sign of emotion on its pasty gray face or a sound of breathing, though my own lungs gulped for air. It walked jerkily toward and into the whirling red structure. In a minute it came out again and over to me. I saw gleaming knives in its hands, and other objects.

"'Well, it's the end,' I thought, and wondered foolishly if I would ever be found.

"But the knife didn't rip into me as I expected. The thing pried my teeth apart with its loathly fingers, at whose touch I nearly vomited. Then down my

throat trickled a sluggish liquor that seemed to burn and scald like fire and afterward freeze and congeal the blood in my veins. As in a dream, I saw the pasty thing cut long slits in my legs and busy itself with other objects. But I felt no pain, only a great nausea, and gradually the most merciful sleep I ever knew descended upon me. My last recollection was of being lifted.

"I AWOKE with a heavy, sluggish feeling of torpor. I appeared to be standing but somehow couldn't move, though I swayed a little. It required a herculean effort for me to open my weighted eyelids.

"Only a kind of dull inner shudder racked me at what I saw. My legs were rooted to the ground. I was one of that circle of Tree-men. How long I remained in a daze of horror I don't know. Something snapped finally and I waved arms that were ponderously stiff feebly around, screamed myself hoarse, wore myself out trying to move even an inch. I stopped only when the blackness of shock and exhaustion swept over me.

"I wakened again to an inarticulate whisper. Had my ears deceived me? I listened intently.

"'Stranger, can you hear me? My time is almost up and I have waited long.'

"Slowly, laboriously, I managed to open my eyes and twist around. The 'Tree-man nearest me was looking in my direction. Pity, despair, anguish all struggled in his eyes.

"'Yes,' I finally succeeded in answering, and my voice was thick, unnatural. 'Who or what are you? And in God's name, what nightmare is this?'

"He shook his head gravely, and whispered faintly, 'No nightmare, it is living death. We are the Tree-men of M'bwa.' And then, pleadingly, 'What year is this?'

"I told him—1931.

"He sighed. 'Twenty long years, and now the end approaches. Oh, what I would not give for one sight of my native land and one kiss from lips that have waited in vain if they waited at all!'

"He seemed to dream of something far away for a long while, before he said, 'I tried to warn you, but it was too late, and M'bwa was waiting.'

"That name again—it echoed in my brain. 'M'bwa!' I hoarsely cried. 'Who is he? What is he?'

"But his mind drifted off again and another long period elapsed before he spoke. I knew he was going fast, that consciousness would soon leave him for ever.

"'M'bwa,' he at last said thickly, 'is dead. He has been for centuries. But he moves at the bidding of the master in the Whirling Flux, and the dead walk when the master commands. So the Tree-man next me said, and he was told by the Tree-man beyond him, and thus the story has been passed on.'

"'Who is the master?'

"'I do not know,' came the slow response. 'No one has ever seen him. He came to earth in the days before Rome, before Egypt or Babylon. He is of a different universe, a different dimension, and he dwells in the Whirling Flux. I know not why he waits, or for what, he who has communion with entities older than earth and titans that strode across the stars before Mu had sunk or Atlantis risen.'

"I did not understand half of what he was saying. 'Who are the Tree-men? Has no one escaped from this valley?'

"'There is no escape,' he went on. 'The Tree-men are unfortunate adventurers like yourself and me who have stumbled on the valley. Those who trespass serve as warning to all others. Only at long inter-

vals have the foolhardy and the brave ventured to this place where no animal comes and which the black tribes avoid. I was told that the first Tree-man was an Atlantean, and the next an ancient Egyptian, and the third a Roman exile. But I do not know. The master rules M'bwa, who was the first ever to come and who has been dead for centuries beyond history but who comes forth as he will always come forth to protect the secret of the valley. It is M'bwa who gives the paralyzing drug and makes the incisions and bridges the gap between animal and vegetable kingdoms. But it is the master who directs, the Evil Old One who came down from the stars in years beyond reckoning.'

"His voice trailed off. I think the effort of speech after so long a silence cost him what was left of his mind. He never spoke again.

"No escape! The words burned in my memory. Then I thought of my agreement with Angley. I hoped he would come, yet hoped he would not. For neither he nor any other human being could combat an antagonist who was outside human laws or the known world. Was the story told by the Tree-man true or partly the result of brooding? I had no means of telling.

"SO THE days passed, heavy, monotonous. Only a dead gray expanse and a curving hill to look at. Only the silent Tree-men for companions. And behind, that Flux of unknown metal, acting by the laws of an unknown other dimension. And ever in my veins crept the sluggish flow, a flow that I knew would some day conquer me and drive out my awareness even as the other Tree-men had become inanimate, insensate things.

"Nothing lived in the valley. No bird flew overhead. Always silence, and the

dreary routine of thinking, remembering, plotting, in order to avoid madness. Complete inaction, hopeless inertia. And there was no escape. I lost track of the days. Would Anglely come? Would M'bwa capture him, too? Where was M'bwa? But from the time of my own capture I had not seen him again. Many an hour I wasted shouting myself hoarse at the Tree-man nearest me. He did not answer. He swayed dumbly, already on the way to that hideous transformation which would leave him only the travesty of human form.

"Unconsciously I found myself hoping as the days piled up. I wanted desperately to hear a voice. It would mean death to Anglely. Often I wore myself into a nervous exhaustion and stupor, writhing, squirming, struggling to free myself until sleep brought a short relief. And oh! the horror of years whose every day would be the same until madness or mindless oblivion descended!

"My thoughts became chaotic. I think I must have gone out of my head for long periods. The sight of what I was, the knowledge of what I was to become lay like a monstrous worm gnawing inside me.

"One day I had a delirium. I thought that Anglely, faithful Anglely, had come to save me. I wept with happiness, watched him with pathetic relief.

"And then fright paralyzed me. *This was no dream!* Anglely stood, as I had stood, not more than a hundred yards off, his face a mask of loathing and horror.

"'Anglely!' I shrieked. 'It's Richards! Watch out for the black M'bwa! He can't be killed! Run, for God's sake, run for your life!'

"I saw a horrified look whiten his face. My warning came too late.

"The dead monster M'bwa was stiffly pacing toward him. Even as I, Anglely

raised his rifle and sent both barrels crashing into the hideous thing, where gaping new holes appeared. But M'bwa went on without pause.

"I saw Anglely's hand swoop to his side and as the marching horror approached him, a blade flashed high in his arm and with a terrific side-sweep he decapitated M'bwa.

"Almost in the same moment Anglely had raced over to me and again the heavy machete flashed high and sang clear through my limbs. He caught me as I fell. I writhed in agony, shrieked, twisted, and thin trickles of blood and watery stuff oozed out of the stumps that remained of my legs.

"Anglely slung me over his shoulder and began stumbling back, white-faced, machete still clutched in one hand. There came a strange, high whine from behind, and even in my pain I turned to see. The Red Flux had come to rest, and out of it issued the titanic lich that haunts my dreams, with its tatters of vaporous flesh and the flapping black streamers that whipped from it as it towered to the skies above and yet sprawled over to M'bwa and set the dead head back on the dead shoulders. Then it was gone, all in a flash, the Evil Old One who came down from the stars in the days when the world was young, and the Red Flux was in its sickening dimensional whirl, and there was M'bwa stiffly striding after us.

"'Drop me! Save yourself!' I cried through the spate of blood and foam that was forming on my lips. But Anglely only ran faster in great leaping strides. Now we were on the hill's slope, panting up it, but the foul horror was closer, closer, racing like a fitful wind, tireless as a machine—

"Suddenly Anglely whirled and swung the machete around and shot it hissing through the air. M'bwa, severed from

neck to waist, rolled in two utterly abominable parts down the slope, and not a drop of clean blood appeared anywhere on the livid raw flesh of that frightful wound.

"With a terrific charge, Angley was over the hill and crashing down its far side, and then we were stumbling toward the distant Mountains of the Moon.

"I shall never know how we made it. I remember a fantasmagoria of endless pain and agony that racked my body, of thirst and hunger and raving delirium, and the endless ache of muscles that throbbed for rest in our almost incessant flight toward safety.

"Angley came down with malaria, somewhere on our trek to the coast. He was dead when I came to, weeks later, in a ship's sickroom. They had amputated my legs almost to the thigh. But I wouldn't go back to civilization looking like that. I debarked at Bordeaux and

shipped back here on the first boat I could get."

A great silence fell. Somewhere afar a jackal barked.

"So you see," Richards ended, "why I said, 'Don't go to the Mountains of the Moon.' "

I'll admit his story shook me pretty badly, but I was still game. After all—a wild yarn in a saloon on the Gold Coast—I couldn't let that interfere with all my plans.

"Well, we'll see," I hedged.

With a sudden nervous jerk, he ripped away the pad on his stumps.

"Now do you believe?" he almost screamed. "That's what I got—and every month they have to be cut off!"

Sick, shuddering, I went into the night. From the stumps of his legs, pale, thin feelers like young shoots of a tree hung limply down.
