

FEAR

THE fact that the man whom he feared had died ten years earlier did not in the least lessen Stuart McGregor's obsession of horror, of a certain grim expectancy, every time he recalled that final scene, just before Farragut Hutchison disappeared in the African jungle that stood, spectrally motionless as if forged out of some blackish-green metal, in the haggard moonlight.

As he reconstructed it, the whole scene seemed unreal, almost oppressively, ludicrously theatrical. The pall of sodden, stygian darkness all around; the night sounds of soft-winged, obscene things flapping lazily overhead or brushing against the furry trees that held the woolly heat of the tropical day; the slimy, swishy things that glided and crawled and wiggled underfoot; the vibrant growl of a hunting lioness that began in a deep basso and peaked to a shrill high-pitched, ridiculously inadequate treble; a spotted hyena's vicious, bluffing

bark; the chirp and whistle of innumerable monkeys; a warthog breaking through the undergrowth with clownish crash—and somewhere, very far away, the staccato thumping of a signal drum, and more faintly yet the answer from the next in line.

He had seen many such drums, made from fire-hollowed palm trees and covered with tightly stretched skin—often the skin of a human enemy.

Yes. He remembered it all. He remembered the night jungle creeping in on their camp like a sentient, malign being—and then that ghastly, ironic moon squinting down, just as Farragut Hutchison walked away between the six giant, plumed, ochre-smeared Bakoto negroes, and bringing into crass relief the tattoo mark on the man's back where the shirt had been torn to tatters by camel thorns and wait-a-bit spikes and saber-shaped palm leaves.

He recalled the occasion when Farragut Hutchison had had himself tattooed; after a crimson, drunken spree at Madam Celeste's place in Port Said, the other side of the Red Sea traders' bazaar, to please a half-caste Swahili dancing girl who looked like a golden madonna of evil, familiar with

all the seven sins. Doubtless the girl had gone shares with the Levantine craftsman who had done the work—an eagle, in bold red and blue, surmounted by a lopsided crown, and surrounded by a wavy design. The eagle was in profile, and its single eye had a disconcerting trick of winking sardonically whenever Farragut Hutchison moved his back muscles or twitched his shoulder blades.

Always, in his memory, Stuart McGregor saw that tattoo mark.

Always did he see the wicked, leering squint in the eagle's eye—and then he would scream, wherever he happened to be—in a theater, a Broadway restaurant, or across some good friend's mahogany and beef.

Thinking back, he remembered that, for all their bravado, for all their showing off to each other, both he and Farragut Hutchison had been afraid since that day up the hinterland when, drunk with fermented palm-wine, they had insulted the fetish of the Bakotos, while the men were away hunting and none left to guard the village except the women and children and a few feeble old men whose curses and high-pitched maledictions were picturesque, but hardly effectual enough to stop him and his partner

from doing a vulgar, intoxicated dance in front of the idol, from grinding burning cigar ends into its squat, repulsive features, and from generally polluting the juju hut—not to speak of the thorough and profitable looting of the place.

They had got away with the plunder, gold dust and a handful of splendid canary diamonds, before the Bakoto warriors had returned. But fear had followed them, stalked them, trailed them; a fear different from any they had ever experienced before. And be it mentioned that their path of life had been crimson and twisted and fantastic, that they had followed the little squinting swart-headed, hunchbacked djinni of adventure wherever man's primitive lawlessness rules, from Nome to Timbuktu, from Peru to the black felt tents of Outer Mongolia, from the Australian bush to the absinth-sodden apache haunts of Paris. Be it mentioned, furthermore, that thus, often, they had stared death in the face and, not being fools, had found the staring distasteful and shivery.

But what they had felt on that journey, back to the security of the coast and the ragged Union Jack flapping disconsolately above the British governor's official corrugated iron mansion, had been some-

thing worse than mere physical fear; it had been a nameless, brooding, sinister apprehension which had crept through their souls, a harshly discordant note that had pealed through the hidden recesses of their beings.

Everything had seemed to mock them—the crawling, sour-miasmatic jungle; the slippery roots and timber falls; the sun of the tropics, brown, decayed, like the sun on the Day of Judgment; the very flowers, spiky, odorous, waxen, unhealthy, lascivious.

At night, when they had rested in some clearing, they had even feared their own camp fire—flaring up, twinkling, flickering, then coiling into a ruby ball. It had seemed completely isolated in the purple night.

Isolated!

How they had longed for human companionship—white companionship!

White faces. White slang. White curses. White odors. White obscenities.

Why—they would have welcomed a decent, square, honest white murder; a knife flashing in some yellow-haired Norse sailor's brawny fist; a belying pin in the hand of some bullying Liverpool

tramp-ship skipper; some Nome gambler's six-gun splattering leaden death; some apache of the Rue de Venise garroting a passerby.

But here, in the African jungle—and how Stuart McGregor remembered it—the fear of death had seemed pregnant with unmentionable horror. There had been no sounds except the buzzing of the tsetse flies and a faint rubbing of drums, whispering through the desert and jungle like the voices of disembodied souls, astray on the outer rim of creation.

And, overhead, the stars. Always, at night, three stars, glittering, leering; and Stuart McGregor, who had gone through college and had once written his college measure of limping, anemic verse, had pointed at them.

“The three stars of Africa!” he had said. “The star of violence! The star of lust! And the little stinking star of greed!”

Then had McGregor broken into staccato laughter which had struck Farragut Hutchison as singularly out of place and had caused him to blurt forth with a wicked curse:

“Shut your trap, you——”

For already they had begun to quarrel, those two

pals of a dozen tight, riotous adventures. Already, imperceptibly, gradually, like the shadow of a leaf through summer dusk, a mutual hatred had grown up between them.

But they had controlled themselves. The diamonds were good, could be sold at a big figure; and, even split in two, would mean a comfortable stake.

Then, quite suddenly, had come the end—the end for one of them.

And the twisting, gliding skill of Stuart McGregor's fingers had made sure that Farragut Hutchison should be that one.

Years after, when Africa as a whole had faded to a memory of coiling, unclean shadows, Stuart McGregor used to say, with that rather plaintive, monotonous drawl of his, that the end of this phantasmal African adventure had been different from what he had expected it to be.

In a way, he had found it disappointing.

Not that it had lacked in purely dramatic thrills and blood-curdling trimmings. That wasn't it. On the contrary, it had had a plethora of thrills.

But, rather, he must have been keyed up to too high a pitch; must have expected too much, feared

too much during that journey from the Bakoto village back through the hinterland.

Thus when, one night, the Bakoto warriors had come from nowhere, out of the jungle, hundreds of them, silent, as if the wilderness had spewed them forth, it was all quite prosy.

Prosy, too, had been the expectation of death. It had even seemed a welcome relief from the straining fatigues of the jungle pull, the recurrent fits of fever, the flying and crawling pests, the gnawing moroseness which is so typically African.

"An explosion of life and hatred," Stuart McGregor used to say, "that's what I had expected, don't you see? Quick and merciless. And it wasn't. For the end came—slow and inevitable. Stolid. Greek in a way. And so courtly! So polite! That was the worst of it!"

For the leader of the Bakotos, a tall, broad, frizzy, odorous warrior, with a face like a black Nero with a dash of Manchu emperor, had bowed before them with a great clanking of barbarous ornaments. There had been no marring taint of hatred in his voice as he told them that they must pay for their insults to the fetish. He had not even mentioned the theft of the gold dust and diamonds.

“My heart is heavy at the thought, white chiefs,” he said. “But—you must pay!”

Stuart McGregor had stammered ineffectual, foolish apologies:

“We—we were drunk. We didn’t know what—or—what we——”

“What you were doing!” the Bakoto had finished the sentence for him, with a little melancholy sigh. “And there is forgiveness in my heart——”

“You—you mean to say——” Farragut Hutchison had jumped up, with extended hand, blurting out hectic thanks.

“Forgiveness in my heart, not in the juju’s,” gently continued the negro. “For the juju never forgives. On the other hand, the juju is fair. He wants his just measure of blood. Not an ounce more. Therefore,” the Bakoto had gone on, and his face had been as stony and as passionless as that of the Buddha who meditates in the shade of the cobra’s hood, “the choice will be yours.”

“Choice?” Farragut Hutchison had looked up, a gleam of hope in his eyes.

“Yes. Choice which one of you will die.” The Bakoto had smiled, with the same suave courtliness which had, somehow, increased the utter horror of

the scene. "Die—oh—a slow death, befitting the insult to the juju, befitting the juju's great holiness!"

Suddenly, Stuart McGregor had understood that there would be no arguing, no bargaining whatsoever; quickly, had come his hysterical question.

"Who? I—or——"

He had slurred and stopped, somehow ashamed, and the Bakoto had finished the interrupted question with gentle, gliding, inhuman laughter: "Your friend? White chief, that is for you two to decide. I only know that the juju has spoken to the priest, and that he is satisfied with the life of one of you two; the life—and the death. A slow death."

He had paused; then had continued gently, so very, very gently: "Yes. A slow death, depending entirely upon the vitality of the one of you two who will be sacrificed to the juju. There will be little knives. There will be the flying insects which follow the smell of blood and festering flesh. Too, there will be many, crimson-headed ants, many ants—and a thin river of honey to show them the trail."

He had yawned. Then he had gone on: "Con-

sider. The juju is just. He only wants the sacrifice of one of you, and you yourselves must decide which one shall go, and which one shall stay. And—remember the little, little knives. Be pleased to remember the many ants which follow the honey trail. I shall return shortly and hear your choice.”

He had bowed and, with his silent warriors, had stepped back into the jungle that had closed behind them like a curtain.

Even in that moment of stark, enormous horror, horror too great to be grasped, horror that swept over and beyond the barriers of fear—even in that moment Stuart McGregor had realized that, by leaving the choice to them, the Bakoto had committed a refined cruelty worthy of a more civilized race, and had added a psychic torture fully as dreadful as the physical torture of the little knives.

Too, in that moment of ghastly expectancy, he had known that it was Farragut Hutchison who would be sacrificed to the juju—Farragut Hutchison who sat there, staring into the camp fire, making queer little, funny noises in his throat.

Suddenly, Stuart McGregor had laughed—he remembered that laugh to his dying day—and had

thrown a greasy pack of playing cards into the circle of meager, indifferent light.

“Let the cards decide, old boy,” he had shouted. “One hand of poker—and no drawing to your hand. Show-down! That’s square, isn’t it?”

“Sure!” the other had replied, still staring straight ahead of him. “Go ahead and deal——”

His voice had drifted into a mumble while Stuart McGregor had picked up the deck, had shuffled, slowly, mechanically.

As he shuffled, it had seemed to him as if his brain was frantically telegraphing to his fingers, as if all those delicate little nerves that ran from the back of his skull down to his finger tips were throbbing a clicking little chorus:

“Do—it—Mac! Do—it—Mac! Do it—Mac!” with a maddening, syncopated rhythm.

He had kept on shuffling, had kept on watching the motions of his fingers—and had seen that his thumb and second finger had shuffled the ace of hearts to the bottom of the deck.

Had he done that on purpose? He did not know then. He never found out—though, in his memory, he lived through the scene a thousand times.

But there were the little knives. There were the

ants. There was the honey trail. There was his own, hard decision to live. And, years earlier, he had been a professional faro dealer at Silver City.

Another ace had joined the first at the bottom of the deck. The third. The fourth.

And then Farragut Hutchison's violent: "Deal, man, deal! You're driving me crazy. Get it over with."

The sweat had been pouring from Stuart McGregor's face. His blood had throbbed in his veins. Something like a sledge hammer had drummed at the base of his skull.

"Cut, won't you?" he had said, his voice coming as if from very far away.

The other had waved a trembling hand. "No, no! Deal 'em as they are. You won't cheat me."

Stuart McGregor had cleared a little space on the ground with the point of his shoe.

He remembered the motion. He remembered how the dead leaves had stirred with a dry, rasping, tragic sound, how something slimy and phosphorous-green had squirmed through the tufted jungle grass, how a little furry scorpion had scurried away with a clicking tchk-tchk-tchk.

He had dealt.

Mechanically, even as he was watching them, his fingers had given himself five cards from the bottom of the deck, four aces—and the queen of diamonds. And, the next second, in answer to Farragut Hutchison's choked: "Show-down! I have two pair—kings—and jacks!" his own well simulated shriek of joy and triumph:

"I win! I've four aces! Every ace in the pack!"

And then Farragut Hutchison's weak, ridiculous exclamation—ridiculous considering the dreadful fate that awaited him:

"Geewhittaker! You're some lucky guy, aren't you, Mac?"

At the same moment the Bakoto chief had stepped out of the jungle, followed by half a dozen warriors.

Then the final scene—that ghastly, ironic moon squinting down, just as Farragut Hutchison had walked away between the giant, plumed, ocher-smearred Bakoto negroes, bringing into stark relief the tattoo mark on his back where the shirt had been torn to tatters—and the leering, evil wink in the eagle's eye as Farragut Hutchison twitched his shoulder blades with absurd, nervous resignation.

Stuart McGregor remembered it every day of his life.

He spoke of it to many. But only to Father Aloysius O'Donnell, the priest who officiated in the little Gothic church around the corner, on Ninth Avenue, did he tell the whole truth—did he confess that he had cheated.

“Of course I cheated!” he said. “Of course!” And, with a sort of mocking bravado: “What would you have done, padre?”

The priest, who was old and wise and gentle, thus not at all sure of himself, shook his head.

“I don't know,” he replied. “I don't know.”

“Well—I do know. You would have done what I did. You wouldn't have been able to help yourself.” Then, in a low voice: “And you would have paid! As I pay—every day, every minute, every second of my life.”

“Regret, repentance,” murmured the priest, but the other cut him short.

“Repentance—nothing. I regret nothing! I repent nothing! I'd do the same to-morrow. It isn't that—oh—that—what d'ye call it—sting of conscience, that's driving me crazy. It's fear!”

“Fear of what?” asked Father O'Donnell.

“Fear of Farragut Hutchison—who is dead!”

Ten years ago!

And he knew that Farragut Hutchison had died. For not long afterward a British trader had come upon certain gruesome but unmistakable remains and had brought the tale to the coast. Yet was there fear in Stuart McGregor’s soul, fear worse than the fear of the little knives. Fear of Farragut Hutchison who was dead?

No. He did not believe that the man was dead. He did not believe it, could not believe it.

“And even suppose he’s dead,” he used to say to the priest, “he’ll get me. He’ll get me as sure as you’re born. I saw it in the eye of that eagle—the squinting eye of that infernal, tattooed eagle!”

Then he would turn a grayish yellow, his whole body would tremble with a terrible palsy and in a sort of whine, which was both ridiculous and pathetic, given his size and bulk, given the crimson, twisted adventures through which he had passed, he would exclaim:

“He’ll get me. He’ll get me. He’ll get me even from beyond the grave.”

And then Father O'Donnell would cross himself rapidly, just a little guiltily.

It is said that there is a morbid curiosity which forces the murderer to view the place of his crime.

Some psychic reason of the same kind may have caused Stuart McGregor to decorate the walls and corners of his sitting room with the memories of that Africa which he feared and hated, and which, daily, he was trying to forget—with a shimmering, cruel mass of jungle curios, sjamboks and assegais, signal drums and daggers, knobkerries and rhino shields and what not.

Steadily, he added to his collection, buying in auction rooms, in little shops on the water front, from sailors and ship pursers and collectors who had duplicates for sale.

He became a well-known figure in the row of antique stores in back of Madison Square Garden, and was so liberal when it came to payment that Morris Newman, who specialized in African curios, would send the pick of all the new stuff he bought to his house.

It was on a day in August—one of those tropical New York days when the very birds gasp for air,

when orange-flaming sun rays drop from the brazen sky like crackling spears and the melting asphalt picks them up again and tosses them high—that Stuart McGregor, returning from a short walk, found a large, round package in his sitting room.

“Mr. Newman sent it,” his servant explained. “He said it’s a rare curio, and he’s sure you’ll like it.”

“All right.”

The servant bowed, left, and closed the door, while Stuart McGregor cut the twine, unwrapped the paper, looked.

And then, suddenly, he screamed with fear; and, just as suddenly, the scream of fear turned into a scream of maniacal joy.

For the thing which Newman had sent him was an African signal drum, covered with tightly stretched skin—human skin—white skin! And square in the center there was a tattoo mark—an eagle in red and blue, surmounted by a lopsided crown, and surrounded by a wavy design.

Here was the final proof that Farragut Hutchison was dead, that, forever, he was rid of his fear. In a paroxysm of joy, he picked up the drum and clutched it to his heart.

He gave a cry of pain. His lips quivered, frothed. His hands dropped the drum and fanned the air, and he looked at the thing that had fastened itself to his right wrist.

It seemed like a short length of rope, grayish in color, spotted with dull red. Even as Stuart McGregor dropped to the floor, dying, he knew what had happened.

A little venomous snake, an African fer-de-lance, that had been curled up in the inside of the drum, numbed by the cold, had been revived by the splintering heat of New York.

Yes—even as he died he knew what had happened. Even as he died, he saw that malign, obscene squint in the eagle's eye. Even as he died, he knew that Farragut Hutchison had killed him—from beyond the grave!