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An Utterly Strange Story Is

THE LITTLE HUSBANDS

By DAVID H. KELLER

ON THE decks of a small steamer which was slowly making its way along the upper stretches of the Amazon, a white man sat on the shaded side and longed for something to relieve the dull monotony of the journey. He had tried everything from learning Spanish to shooting at sleeping alligators, and yet every day became more unendurable. There seemed to be no end to the river, and each day's mileage was small, unappreciable, compared with what was yet to come. That day was hot—the flies worse than usual—nothing interested him—he was bored with life. Then he saw the bottle glinting in the sunlight. He sent for his rifle and was on the point of shooting it when something made him stop, think, and

ask one of the deckhands to jump over and get it—for a silver coin. Five minutes later he was trying to get the cork out. His inability to do so at once irritated him so that he smashed the bottle with a hammer. Inside he found a number of rolls of paper, leaves from a little note-book, and every page was numbered. The writing was fine, but legible. Smithson, the celebrated anthropologist, on his way to the unknown, read with interest the following:

I STARTED this after my capture and I am ending it on the day of my death. It will not make any difference to me personally whether it is ever found, but it may be of great interest to the world. I can think of a thousand things that will prevent a

bottle from reaching civilization and only one thing that will bring it through, and that is—God's desire.

My name is Johnson Jeremiah Jenkins, special oil investigator for the Empire Oil Production Company, headquarters, London. They have the names of my nearest relatives, also all of my personal belongings. I trust they will properly provide for my mother and see that she is cared for in her later years.

As this company knows, I was on a special investigation to locate new sources of oil on the upper Amazon. They have my last reports. After I wrote to them, I had trouble with my guides. They did not want to go on with the trip, but finally I bribed them to go with me one week's journey up the river. We would paddle in the early morning and late evening and rest in the heat of the day. While they rested I would walk around the jungle hunting for oil indications. On the fifth day of this week I came upon a series of tracks in the soft earth. They looked a little like those made by a human foot, but ten times larger, and their depth into the earth showed a considerable pressure, possible only by a tremendous weight. I called the head porter and showed him the tracks. He refused to explain them—at least he said he could not tell about them—but that night, after I refused to go with them, the entire party of natives took French leave while I was asleep and left me alone, some thousands of miles from nowhere.

They did leave me a canoe, and I was not frightened—not then—for I figured that a white man who acted peacefully was as safe there as he would be on Piccadilly in London. I have always thought this, and never went armed except against wild animals. Unfortunately the natives had taken the boat in which I had my firearms. All I had was a canoe with some food and bedding in it.

I had promised myself to go on for

one week, and I still had two days to go. The fact that I had to go alone made no difference, so on I went. The first day and night nothing happened. The second day nothing happened, so I felt rather cheered up as I made camp, ate a little supper, and started to sleep. While falling asleep I made plans for my return to civilization, starting the next morning.

Sometime during the night I was awakened by a sense of pressure and suffocation. Something had picked me up, wrapped as I was in my blankets, and was carrying me away. My struggles seemed useless, so I ceased to kick. It seemed futile to cry; nothing to be done but wait and see what happened.

I was carried on through the night and finally put down on the ground. As soon as I could I unwrapped myself from the twisted folds of my blanket and tried to find out where I was. I felt the walls of a hut which were woven out of reeds. The top was just high enough to touch with my head. In the darkness I thought it felt like a large beehive, such as I had seen so often at home, made out of rope. There being nothing else to do, I spread my blanket on the ground and tried to sleep. I was sure that morning would show me I had fallen into the hands of a tribe of savages.

Morning came at last and I could see streaks of sunlight through the cracks of the hut, I heard a voice sing, "It's a long way to Tipperary," and I knew then that I had found a friend. Later the door of my hut was untied and the same Irish voice asked me to come out.

IT WAS a new and peculiar world I found myself in. There was a collection of little huts such as I had spent the night in. Around these huts was a cleared space, and around that a circular fence, made of tree trunks bound together with thick ropes. It was a fence such as I had often seen in France, but this fence

was fifty feet high, and on the top was a crown of tangled cactus. As a prison it seemed perfect. I saw the huts; I saw the fence; and then I saw the men.

Later on I found there were eighteen of them, and I was one more. They were of all nationalities and all colors, and they all seemed to be trying the best they could to keep from showing that they were very unhappy. My Irish friend was singing and some of the Frenchmen were dancing the tango. Everything was nice and spotless, and the men all seemed clean and well fed. Several had on rather elaborate suits of skins and others very ornate head-dresses of multicolored feathers.

They saw me and at once ran to where the Irishman and I were standing. A dozen questions were asked me in almost as many different languages. Who was I? Where did I come from? Who really had won the war?

I tried to talk, but they made so much noise for a few minutes that they could not hear me. Finally they became quiet, and I told them all about myself that I thought worth while, and gave them the latest news of the world. Then I asked them what it all meant. At that they looked worried and said I would find out soon enough. When I urged them for decency's sake not to keep me waiting, they talked the matter over and delegated one of their number to do the talking for them. He was an Englishman, Sir Rollo Rowland of the Dorchestershire Rowlands, and seemed to be rather an expert on birds; at least that is what had brought him into the upper Amazon valley.

"This is going to be rather hard to tell you, Jenkins, old chappie, but the fact is that we are all the captives of a bally lot of women. They have a lobby of collecting men, just as I used to do with birds, and keeping them in these dinky little huts. Each

man belongs to one woman; rather a clever arrangement, what? They wash him and dress him and give him little gimcracks to eat and make little clothes for him, and every woman wants her man to look a little bit snappier than the other men. So long as the man behaves himself the woman is devilishly nice to him and shows him a bally good time, but when she gets on the outs with him she puts him under the sod and hunts around for another man. Part of the time they have to be content with niggers, but what they really like most is white men, and the snappier the men are the longer they last. The woman that caught you has had a Portuguese; he is in his hut now in a blue funk, and small wonder, my lad, small wonder! It is good-bye to him and how do you do to you.

"You understand that we are their husbands. How does that seem? Some fine ending for an Oxford man, what? I have lasted longer than most of them, on account of my education, and then I learned to speak their language. That made me the official interpreter and had a lot to do with keeping me alive.

"There are just eighteen of these women—that is, just that many old enough to have husbands. There are a lot of girls, and no boys and no men, except us. I guess they kill the boy babies—perhaps they only have girls born to them.

"This woman who was married to the Portuguese was not very well pleased with him: I guess he was rather surly when alone with her, and one has to please them, my lad, one has to please them. So he gets killed and you have his place. His wife was away for some days hunting for a man, and I guess he will suit her—young, English, good-looking.

"There is not much use of telling you more. You will find out about it in time. Just a word of caution. Forget the world and do not try to

escape. Death is not so bad, but it is unpleasant to be hung up on those cacti and just left there to die. If you look closely you will see some bones up there—I was here when the last man was put up there.”

That was about all he would say just then.

ALL day we were left alone. Night came, and I went to my hut and tried to sleep. The next morning the Irishman called me to come out and have breakfast with them. As we were eating, a shrill cry rang through the air and every man went and sat down, rather docile-like, in front of his hut. The Portuguese, shaking with fright, crawled inside his hut.

When I first saw it come over the fence I thought it was some odd kind of a snake, light brown, and then I saw that it was an arm, and the fingers reached down to the front of the Portuguese's hut, and, not finding him there, pushed the hut over, picked him up, screaming as he was with fright, and carried him over the fence. All the men kept very still and I noticed that they looked at me in a rather peculiar manner. I did not know what it all meant, but I knew enough to keep quiet. Then the arm came over again and the fingers picked me up.

There was not much use of protesting, so I just shut my eyes, only I had a sick feeling in the bottom of my stomach like a sea-sickness. In just a few minutes I felt that I was on the ground again and slowly opened my eyes and looked around. The women were evidently having some kind of a meeting.

If they had been smaller they would not have been so bad-looking, but any woman seventy feet high looks rather peculiar. They were all sitting in a circle, a ring of gigantic figures squatting on the ground. 'Alongside of me was the Portuguese, and he was not very happy. We were

right between the legs of one of the women. I tried not to look at her face but I just couldn't help it, and she saw that I was looking at her and smiled. I smiled back and waved my hand to her, sort of jolly-like, though I did not feel that way at all. The woman seemed pleased with me, because she started to laugh and even clapped her hands; it sounded like thunder. She even reached down and patted me with one of her fingers.

Then they had some kind of ceremony with singing. Their song was harmonious enough, but the sound was like exploding cannon, and I held my hands over my ears.

I wish that I had kept my eyes shut too. For after the singing the woman who seemed to own us took a sharp stick shaped like a lead-pencil, only it was about fifty feet long, and right there in front of us all she scraped a hole in the ground; and then she took the Portuguese and squeezed him between her thumb and finger, just as you would squeeze a bug. He gave one yell and that was the end of him; so she threw him into the hole and covered him up with loose dirt, and then with a wild yell that echoed through the jungles she jumped up and stamped on his grave with her feet till it was all nice and smooth. Reaching over, she picked me up and started to rub me against her face and mouth. Her lips were soft enough—but it was a devilish unpleasant sensation.

Months passed after that.

I was well treated, had lots to eat, and no mother could have kept her baby cleaner than the woman who was my wife kept me. She used to go on long trips through the jungle carrying me in a little fur bag on her back. She tried to talk to me and wanted me to teach her English. It seems that some of her husbands had been Americans and she had picked up some of the language.

I was well enough treated, but the life was hard in a way. It took a philosopher to stand it—a regular Stoic—lots of the men they caught couldn't stick it at all—tried to escape or committed suicide in some other way. I saw that it was helpless and hopeless—nothing to do till they caught some chap with firearms and dynamite or poison.

Two years later. Things are no better. I am heartsick and homesick. The woman had a child, but it was a boy, and without saying a word to me they killed it—like as if it were a dog. She tried to cheer me up but I was too heart-broken to respond. She said she hoped the next one would be a girl, and tried to speak softly to me, but her voice at best is like distant thunder—hoped the next one would be a girl.

One year later. Have lost track of the time, but think I have been here four years. Things change a lot. Only the three of us—the Englishman, the Irishman and I—are left of those who were here when I came. The rest are all new—most of them a surly lot. It is harder for the women to get new men, and the men they do get are not gentlemen and make poor companions to the rest of us. I have the fever a lot and am losing weight. Am going to try to put these papers in a bottle and watch my chance to drop it in the water the next time the woman takes me out.

The fever keeps up. I have been sick three weeks. Part of the time I was out of my head. The Englishman told me that when the woman picked me up I cursed her. Does she know enough to understand?

Later on. The women have been

out and gathered up a group of American explorers—all college men and young fellows. I believe that my woman got one of the men. Yesterday one of the old crowd was killed and one of the new men married to his widow.

Next day. Another marriage took place today.

Later. All the new men are married but one. I believe he belongs to my woman.

She has just told me that I am sick too much of the time and that she wants somebody that is younger. She said that if I wanted her to she would let me escape. Took her offer.

Next morning. Too weak to escape. Had a hard chill and am burning with fever. Have had a talk with the man who is going to take my place and asked him to dispose of this bottle the first time he had a chance. Told him I had no hard feeling. The Americans are arranging to escape but I know they will fail. Good-bye. I hear them singing.

JOHNSON JEREMIAH JENKINS.

POOR Jenkins was killed this morning and I am the new husband of his widow. I am glad to be able to say that he was so sick from the fever that he was unconscious at the time of his death. I am going to drop his message in the river as soon as I can. I have read it and talked to Sir Rollo Rowland and the thing looks rather dark, but we hope that our native American wit will find a way of escape. This is a rather serious business for grown-up men to be in.

JAMES JONES, Prof. Biology,
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