Jungle Breath

by Ben Lucien Burman

THIS HAS HAPPENED

Posing at times as a barber, at others as Attorney Davis, Vilak helps his Cousin, Elise Marberry, try to solve a strange mystery at Porto Verde, Brazil, outside of which Elise owns a coffee plantation. Several mysterious deaths have occurred and Elise has been threatened. Vilak tells Lincoln Nunnally, aged chemist, that he believes Gaylord Prentiss is involved in the deaths. Elise's two-year-old nephew is kidnapped, Vilak tracks the kidnappers and finds the baby in the care of a band of Indian track laborers, who has found it in the jungle. Elise, Nunnally and Vilak are at breakfast when a messenger comes to see Elise from Wilson, her overseer at Villapa.

NOW BEGIN THE STORY

CHAPTER XX.

Elise put down the fork with which she had been nibbling at an omelet. "Send him in at once, please."

The maid hurried out. In a moment the door into the kitchen opened again. A brawny half-breed Brazilian, clad in thick heavy blue overalls and hip boots, stamped into the room, leaving great splotches of mud on the floor at every step. He strode up to Elise and, taking off his hat, stood awkwardly before her.

"You have news for me, amigos?" she asked politely, when he did not speak for a moment.

"Yes, senhorita." He rubbed his thick fingers along his muddy trousers. "I come from your fazenda at Villapa. Meester Wilson have sent me. Tell me ride fast as can. He say tell you flood getting very bad Villapa. Say too he very seeck and can do not much, afraid much will be washed away. Wants you come quick. He not say, but he very, very seeck. I, Miguel, all others, think he die."

Elise rose from the table. "You'll have to excuse me," she said to her guests. "I'll have to go out to Villapa at once. It's been criminal of me to have left poor Wilson there ill and alone. Criminal." She called to Maria to have her horse made ready.

"Just a minute, Elise," Vilak said coolly. He gazed sharply at the mud-spattered messenger. "Are you sure this chap works on your fazenda?"

Her forehead knitted into a frown. "What do you mean? Of course he works on the fazenda?"

"You've seen him?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "I'm sure I've seen him. Several times. Anyway, even if I haven't, what difference would it make? I can't know every one of the 500 laborers at Villapa, can I, when they change so often? What on earth are you driving at?"

"Nothing, if you're sure you know your man. Only, it's faintly possible that this message may not be what it appears to be, and that you'd better let me go to Villapa in your stead."

Her black eyes flashed, her breath came quickly. "Vilak, there is one thing I won't let you do, and that is try to relieve me of what I consider my duties and responsibilities on the fazenda. I've taken orders from you in other things, but not there, that's final. My sister's husband and I used to quarrel about the same subject and merely succeeded in making matters uncomfortable for everybody. Let's don't you and I do it. I must go to Villapa. Myself."

Vilak tranquilly munched his cereal. "Very well. I won't argue with you. But in that case I insist on going with you. Perhaps it's just as well that we do go, for possibly we can get rifles there."

She shrugged her shoulders resignedly. "All right. If you must. But I don't think it's at all necessary. You make me feel like a child."

"What will you do with Tinky?"

"I'll take him with me."

Vilak shook his head. "I wouldn't. Seems to me an unnecessary risk. I think for the time being he's safer in the house. Hannah can be depended on not to let him out of her sight. I've talked to her. She's more than an ordinary servant. She can be trusted. And if anything came up requiring physical strength, she could do far more than you. I say absolutely that it's safer to leave him here than to take him along."

"All right. I don't like to. But in a matter of this sort, I'll follow your advice. Because you know. If you say it's safe, I'll do it. And besides, I'll have Schwartz come over and stay here for the five or six hours I have to be away. If I could help it, I wouldn't leave him even for a minute. But I can't let Wilson die without lifting a finger to help him."

In a few moments, Elise, Vilak and the old man were once more on their horses, the chemist, to Vilak's surprise, having doggedly insisted on accompanying them, though his weariness was manifest in his withered face. The half-breed who had brought the message rode ahead. Vilak set the pace at a quick trot.

Elise nervously touched her horse, which was lingering to chew a choice bit of grass. "I'm glad I haven't a criminologist's mind. It would drive me crazy. You suspect everything you see, a house with its window-blinds drawn, a broken match, a rusty nail lying in the road. How you could put some hidden meaning into this message from Wilson is beyond me. If I weren't your cousin, and palite, I'd call it fantastic."

He put a pellet of betel on his tongue. "I sincerely hope you're right," he said laconically.

He withdrew a bar of chocolate from his pocket and distributed it among his companions as a substitute for their uneaten breakfast. He himself took none of it, contenting himself with a second pellet of betel. Suddenly at a point where a narrow trail crossed the road, he looked down at the ground and pulled up his horse. "Humph," he murmured. "There's that unusual hoofmark of Prentiss' horse again. And there are the prints of two other horses running along with it this time." He straightened up in his saddle once more.

They traveled on in silence. At times the chemist felt inclined to speak either to Elise or Vilak but was checked by their expressions, one nervous, impatient, worried, the other cool and grimly watchful.

Their course for a short distance became a creek which the violent rains had flooded into a small river. They plunged in and followed it with some difficulty, the water occasionally rising past their stirrups. Here and there where the red volcanic rocks of the region formed a pool of clear water they could see curious fish sporting; here and there a fat ponderous turtle plodded along the bank. Once a great alligator lifted its head a they passed, menacing them with its red jaws. Vilak stopped to kill it with a well-directed bullet, for the creek was part of a fairly frequented highway and any of the gigantic lizards which strayed there were a distinct danger.

At length they left the stream and came out onto a muddy road again. The noise of their horses frightened a family of armadillos that evidently had been quietly reposing somewhere behind the thick palms, for they darted across the road in such panic that it was only by suddenly checking his horse that Vilak was able to avoid crushing them.

The road rose gradually up a low hill, fell to a ravine, then went up a short but fairly steep slope of another hill. As the riders rounded a bend, seven mounted soldiers came into view on the hilltop. They came slowly riding toward the Americans. Vilak's bushy, blond eyebrows lifted.

As the soldiers approached, he saw that they were garbed in tattered blue and red uniforms of a design much like that of the gendarmes. They were distinguished from the latter, however, by the fact that they all seemed white men, tanned by the equatorial sun. Their faces were distinctly unpleasant, the eyes of this one puffy with dissipation, the face of that one scarred with knife cuts or the ravages of some skin disease. Nevertheless, despite their unprepossessing appearance, they saluted the travelers amiably.

"Good day, senhors, senhorita," said the leader of the troopers, a tall, sallow man, with a great bristling mustache who would have looked exactly like the typical Prussian officer had his haid been blond instead of black. "You go to Villapa?"

Vilak took out a cigaret and pretended to search in his pocket for a match in order that his hand be near his pistol. "Yes, amigos," he answered, smiling. 'They say at Villapa the water is very high. Do they tell the truth?"

The officer twisted one end of his mustache around his finger.

"Yes. The water is most high at Villapa. Take your hand away from your pistol, amigos. There are five soldiers in the bushes in back of you as well as the seven of us in front."

(To be continued.)

"Take your hand away from your pistol, amigos. There are five soldiers in the bushes in back of you as well as the seven of us in front."

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Bug for Bug

The French government is convinced that the present scourge of potato bugs which is ruining crops all over the southwest of France can be traced to the arrival of American troops in 1917. Until then France had never seen a potato bug, and since it is incapable of flying or swimming the Atlantic and is never carried on potatoes, it must have crashed the gate in the baggage or on the person of the American doughboy, or so the argument runs.

No doubt there are veterans of the A. E. F. who will grieve at this news, who, having thought they had paid their debt to Lafayette, will be chagrined to learn that, in French eyes at least, they are still in arrears. But there are others who will consider this gift of the potato bug a fair exchange for another and much chummier insect which they picked up on French soil; and some will even insist that the bargain is all in France's favor, since the potato bug, unlike the cootie, is herbivorous and flies. This makes it harder to catch, maybe, but easier to bear.

In any case, one hopes the French will look upon the trade as unintentional, if, indeed, it really took place. Our soldiers are not partial to bugs of any kind, even to the winged spud destroyer and friend of the kitchen fatigue.

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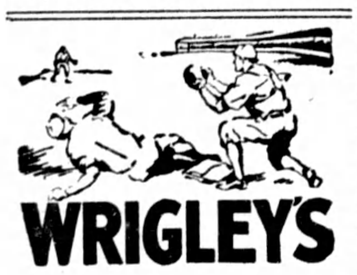

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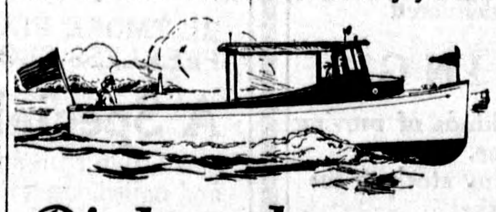

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