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Jungle Breath

by Ben Lucien Burman

THIS HAS HAPPENED

Attempts have been made on the life of Elise Marberry, owner of a coffee plantation outside Porto Verde, Brazil. Vilak, her cousin, known as Attorney Davis, believes Gaylord Prentiss, an enemy of Elise's is involved. Elise, Vilak and Lincoln Nunnally, an old chemist and friend, travel to Villapa in response to a message. On the road they are ambushed and thrown in a dismal old hut in the jungle. Vilak frees himself and the others. At Villapa they find out that the message was but a decoy.

NOW BEGIN THE STORY

CHAPTER XXV.

He was sorry, terribly sorry the thing had happened, Wilson went on. He hoped Elise wouldn't hold it against him. Wouldn't she take his two pistols? Though they would leave the fazenda without a weapon, he'd be delighted to give them to her. And of course she needn't worry about Villapa now. He was perfectly able to take care of everything.

She refused a loan which would have seemingly left him helpless, expressed her delight that his condition had so improved, and made ready to return to Porto Verde.

Wilson ingratiatingly insisted on sending a bodyguard for at least a part of the journey in order to prevent a repetition of her misadventures during the afternoon. Accordingly he sent for twenty of his laborers, armed them with matchets, clubs, and axes, gave them horses and ordered them to accompany the travelers. "Sorry I can't go with you," he said obsequiously, his great drawn eyelids opening and shutting quickly as though they were too weak to bear the light of the torches flaming in the laborers' hands. "Terribly sorry. Feel I'm shirking. But you know how it is . . . you know how it is . . . after fever . . . after fever."

The cavalcade set off, the torches outlining men and horses in fantastic dancing red against the black and threatening sky. Uphill, downhill they rode, through the ravine where they had been ambushed, then through the swollen creek which formed the road to Porto Verde. The three travelers constantly searched the darkness for some evidence of renewed activity on the part of their attackers of the afternoon. But their efforts were wasted. They heard nothing, saw nothing. A short distance from the Porto Verde fazenda Elise, after conculting Vilak, sent their escort back to Villapa. The rain, which had ceased for a few hors, began to fall again in torrents. Elise tightened the raincoat about her slim neck. Suddenly she drew a sharp breath.

Vilak turned. "What's the matter?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing. Only I've just thought about Tinky." Nervously, unconsciously she quickened her horse. "A thousand things can have happened to him while we've been away. Anything can have happened."

"But nothing has happened. Be sensible. You've been a good soldier all day, a perfect soldier. I couldn't have asked for a better. Don't weaken and start being . . . feminine . . . at the last minute. Tinky'll be all right. Here. You'd better have a cigaret."

She took a light from his shielded hand and let her fingers linger gently upon his a moment. Then she put the cigaret to her lips.

She smoked pensively a moment. "I'm not a good soldier," she said at length. "You're only trying to keep up my spirits. I'm a bad soldier. So wretched that I'd be given a dishonorable discharge in any respectable army. This morning you told me not to go to Villapa. I went. You were right. I was wrong. Then, when we were captured, I did nothing but sit on a log and stare weakly into a fire. You, though bound hand and foot, first freed yourself and then freed me.

"Tomorrow I'm going to be a still worse soldier. I'm going to run away from the battle. And frankly, as far as Tinky is concerned, you were right when you said I'd be glad to get away before. I want to get him to some place where things can't happen with the ease they did today. If there were a boat out tonight, I'd take it. Yes, it seems to me, all in all, I'm a pretty poor sort of Amazon."

The rain had extinguished Vilak's cigaret. He struck a match to light it. By the flickering flame Elise saw that the bandage was no longer on the wound he had received in his wrist two days before. She snatched his hand and before he could prevent was binding it gently and effectively with a clean handkerchief. "I'm a grateful Amazon, at least," she murmured, brightening. "Even you can't keep me from being that."

They reached the fazenda. Elise hurried to find Tinky. He was in her bedroom, sleeping soundly. The jovial Hannah was sitting in a chair beside him. In the next room sat Schwartz, smoking a vast meerschaum pipe. He looked up and greeted Elise as she entered.

Assured that the child was safe, Elise hurried to have supper prepared for her two guests and herself. The three of them quickly changed their wet clothes for dressing gowns. They ate heartily, then played a single rubber of bridge, the wearied and sleepy old man making blunders that would have driven serious-minded bridge players into a passion. Vilak, with his monotonous regularity, won.

Elise shook her dainty head. She had completely recovered her usual sprightliness. "You're getting to be really unbearable," she said. In mock despair she threw her cards onto the table. "You're always right; you always win. No matter how good a hand I have, you always manage to make me play second fiddle somehow. I've half a mind to send you home. You're terribly hard on my self-esteem. I can't have such a clever person as you around."

She rose from the table. After all, perhaps it isn't that you are any cleverer for being a man. Perhaps it's that you've merely got a long tradition behind you which we women haven't—sort of fooling the public for hundreds of centuries, you know and that gives you confidence. Anyway, I'll comfort myself by saying it's that. Good night, Mr. Nunnally. Good night, manly and superior relative," she said. She moved toward the door.

"Just a minute, Elise," Vilak's bantering voice checked her.

She halted. "Yes?"

"Just wantd to ask you a question. Was that . . . kiss you gave me this afternoon a sign of homage, a tribute to your superior, was it cousinly, or was it . . . a proposal?"

She whipped the dressing gown tighter about her. "Pardon me if I tell you to go to the devil, my conceited friend," she flashed and whisked out of the room.

After bidding the old man good night, Vilak made his cstomary tour of the house, then retired. The pouring rain continued throughout the night, but ceased after a murky dawn.

Elise busied herself in completing preparations for her departure. Vilak wishing to go to town to make a few purchases, sought out the old man, in order that they might make the journey together, but finding him deep in a sleep of exhaustion, did not wake him but set off alone. He reached Porto Verde, to see the usual groups of natives clustred in the road along the windows of the flimsy dilapidated shops. Today they were gazing ominously at the puddles of water which lay everywhere, and predicting disaster.

One of the natives who worked on the fazenda recognized Vilak and raised his high conical hat.

"Eet is bad, ees it not all these rain, Meester Davis?" he murmured. "Eet will make for us a flood. Yes, a most bad flood. Never before have I rain like these see in Porto Verde. Never. Though I have live here twenty years. The dam at Avilos cannot but break. Any moment maybe will it break. Myself, Macedo, I am ready. To run fast, yes, ver' fast. And this morning I weel go see the priest an' make white my soul."

(To be continued.)

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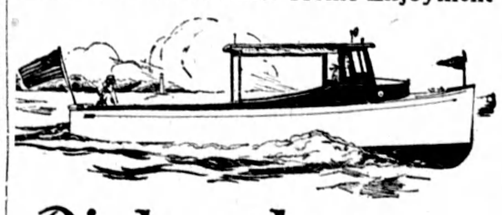

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