

# Jungle Breath

by Ben Lucien Burman

The man who said romance was dead must have died without leaving the bed in which he was born. The events which are described here happened to take place in South America; with a few variations allowing for local conditions, they might have occurred in Africa, the interior of Australia, Mongolia or any one of those numerous regions where civilization suddenly stops short and the primitive as suddenly begins. Where a half-clad native comes to a rattle-trap moving picture show, sees American pictures not more than a year old, listens to jazz made on a squeaky American phonograph, then goes off to his home in the jungle which marks the end of the main street and has to be very careful that a tiger does not spring upon him from the bushes or a dark shadow looking like a tree branch suddenly come to life as a huge anaconda searching for a pleasant supper.

I got my first hint of this tragic but fascinating case from a very casual conversation with the conductor of a train of the Brazil Central Railroad when I was going up to Manaus to get some background for a rubber story. It struck me as so vivid and so extraordinary that as soon as I had the opportunity I went to considerable trouble to get as many of the details as possible from anyone left in Porto Verde—of any where else for that matter—who could tell me anything.

As a one-time newspaper reporter and editor, specializing in the criminological, I have written or read probably more detective cases than falls to the lot of the average newspaper man, and I have come upon some which could properly be called bizarre. But I did not dream how bizarre and mysterious a case could be until I encountered this. I claim no credit for the narrative. I have merely visualized and tried to put down in as dramatic a fashion as possible what I saw and what I heard from the lips of persons whose authority was unquestioned.

Like so many of these tropical cities, the settlement seemed to exhaust its energies on one or two buildings, making these magnificent and letting the rest manage for themselves as best they might. There was a splendid municipal building that would have been a credit to a city ten times its size, built of a sort of red volcanic rock abundant in the region; a very creditable theatre which every man, woman and child in town must apparently visit every night to prevent a dreadful deficit; a fair hotel, and beyond that nothing but shacks of every description—shacks of wood, of battered pieces of tin, and even of thatched rushes, in whose every door fat negro women sat grinding corn or shouting affectionately at their naked children laying in the mud.

It was a city of contrasts. Here was a shop where for outrageous prices could be bought American soap, razors, watches, across the street from it was the unescapable American cinema where the latest exploits of the kings of Hollywood waited all who had the necessary number of reis. But between these two buildings walked a huge black savage whose only clothing was a breech-cloth and whose ears were pierced and lobes widened until they could hold heavy steel ornaments as big as saucers.

Around his neck he wore a string of human teeth which probably represented at least four victories over his jungle enemies; if spoken to he could only answer with a series of grunts. Next door to the shop which displayed the watch was a store where, if one had a little money and knew the proprietor, he could enter a back room and these he could buy if he felt so inclined, though the transaction must be a trifle surreptitious for the traffic is banned by the government in far-off Rio de Janeiro.

If the watcher stood for even an hour before the stately city building, the concrete for whose sidewalk had come from the state of Washington, the likelihood is that he would see at least one cascavel, the beautiful and deadly Brazilian rattlesnake, dash across the road for a frog or chameleon on the other side; if he chanced to be a native and left a pet goat out in his yard one night, he might wake up in the morning and find nothing but the bloody tracks of a great puma.

The contrast extended to the landscape. Here and there on the low hills surrounding the valley in which lay the town, showed a field plowed with an English plow, fenced with American fence; but everywhere else, behind, in front, in back, beside, wherever man's hand had stopped, was jungle, green, dark, poisonous, a monstrous minute-legged octopus, waiting only till the intruder's vigor had slackened for an instant, when it would dart out its swift green tentacles and claim its own once more.

As convenient a point as any at which to begin the story is with the arrival of one of the principal actors in the tragedy, not because his arrival in itself is important, but because it happened to coincide with events that began to mark the case's climax.

He was a little man of perhaps 65 or 70, with a sleepy, kindly look in his round brown eyes, one of the few features of his gentle face which could be seen, for the rest was much obscured by heavy nose glasses. The lower part of his head was bordered by a slight fringe of beard, very scanty, but whose well kept appearance showed his pride of ownership. His quick, rather jerky movements, as he got off the steamboat that chugged into Porto Verde, betrayed him at once as a man of nervous temperament, which, together with his appearance, marked him almost certainly as a scholar; a figure a bit unusual in Porto Verde, but quite common in Cambridge or any other university town.

He listened with apprehension to the grumbling of the black, shining Brazilian who took his bag and began dolefully trading off with it to the hotel. "Don't tell me . . . er . . . any more," he said after a moment, speaking in jerks much like the movements of his wispy beard. "You've told me . . . er . . . quite enough. . . Quite. . . It's absurd, really. . . absurd. I don't know whether you are trying to frighten me or not. But I certainly do not think you are a wise . . . er . . . choice to receive visitors here. Not wise. If I took all your gloomy . . . er . . . prophecies seriously, I would take the next steamer back to . . . er . . . Rio de Janeiro and the next steamer back from there to New York."

He wiped his wrinkled forehead with a tiny immaculate handkerchief. "Don't you . . . er . . . frighten me any more. You save your energies for carrying that . . . er . . . bag of mine. You're letting it drag the ground every other foot. Yes, every other foot."

The Brazilian shrugged his shoulders apathetically. "No fright you? No fright you? Tell truth. Frascito always tell truth. Anybody come here Porto Verde big fool. Bad people here. Murder. Things here. Evil things. Things which kill. One month, one peoples. Two months, two peoples. Three months, three peoples. And how? Knows nobody. Kill more peoples two,

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### Bogus Cheques

#### On Increase

An ebony gentleman wearing the uniform of a Pullman porter bought a purple sack suit from a Des Moines clothier. The price was \$35. The customer fumbled inside his coat and produced a cheque.

"Da's my pay cheque," said he. "Jes' cash it and take out 'fo' de suit."

The merchant looked from the honest countenance of the cheque. The name Pullman Company was printed convincingly at the top. The amount was \$95. It was payable to Robert Bartlett. Fingers again fumbled inside the uniform coat. They emerged with a Pullman badge and an ornate marriage certificate. The merchant accepted the cheque and forgot the transaction till he got a copious notice. The Pullman Company reported Robert Bartlett and his cheque. The paper was a fraud.

The clothier learned that he was one victim among many. Gangs using counterfeit Pullman cheques and negroes of a guileless expression have secured \$170,000.

Such fake cheques are counterfeited in modest print shops. An operator known as the "scratcher" forges the name of the paymaster on the proper spot. The "layer down" takes the paper and sells it (for so much per cheque) to the "passer." It is the last who cashes in with credulous merchants. Pay cheques of Bell Telephone companies and many other prominent concerns are counterfeited in this same manner.

Surety companies glass cheque frauds as the fastest growing crime in the country. Losses are estimated at \$220,000,000 every year. The increase is about 20 per cent annually. Many states are making it harder and harder for the criminal with a gun. Therefore smart crooks are turning to paper frauds.

You may pass 40 bad cheques, but as long as you hold down the amount to \$10 for each you can only be tried for a misdemeanor. Again, you cannot be extradited from one state to another unless the amount of a single fraudulent cheque is as much as \$100. You may pass 40 bad cheques for \$90 without that risk.

A popular variation is the counterfeit travelers' cheque. These imitations are excellently engraved, with imposing serial numbers and signatures, and are cashed after the manner of cheques issued by the American Express Company, the American Bankers' Association, or Cook's.

If anyone ever presents to you a cheque of the Canadian Pacific Tourist Association and asks you to cash it, grab the hard that holds it and yell for the police. Half a million dollars has been paid out to such grafters. The Canadian Pacific has no such tourist association. Use the same procedure if you ever encounter the cheques of the following: The American Travelers' Association; Oriental Tourist Association; United Bankers' Association. They all look good and all are frauds.

Filling stations suffer much from these deceptions. A man with a woman and perhaps a child will drive up and order ten gallons of gas. In payment he countersigns one of his travelers' cheques and receives the change. Many good travelers' cheques are used in this way; and fake ones often get by just as well.

Business runs on cheques. There is so much honest paper that it is easy for impostures to get into the commercial stream. What is more convincing than a certified cheque? Observe how easy it is for a clever crook to make use of such paper:

A Mr. Morrison opened an account in a Buffalo bank. An accomplice using the name Le Moyne opened accounts in five other banks. To create confidence, good cheques were drawn against each account over a period of several weeks. Morrison then issued a certified cheque to Le Moyne for \$2,700, almost his entire balance. The cheque was certified. Five exact copies were faked up—each bearing the forged signature of the issuing bank official. One of these was deposited in each of Le Moyne's five banks. Le Moyne then drew from each bank \$2,100. He was paid without question since he had deposited certified cheques bearing signatures with which the tellers were familiar. Not satisfied with the \$10,500 which they got from the five banks, Morrison took Le Moyne into the first bank and identified him so that he could also get money on the original cheque.

A similar racket was worked on ten institutions. The fake certification stamp and the forged signature were so cleverly executed that no one could determine which was the legitimate cheque.

To minimize the risk from fraudulent cheques observe this rule: Don't cash any cheque unless you know the holder or unless he is identified by a person you know.—Business Week.

OPINIONS

We receive great satisfaction from the opinion of some pre-eminence in ourselves, when we see the absurdities of another, or when we reflect on any past absurdities of our own.—Aristotle.

The general knowledge class had been discussing forms of government. The weary teacher at length propounded the question: "Well, Simpson, what is the difference between a King and a President?" "Please, sir, a King is the son of his father, but a President isn't."

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