

THE BLAZON OF ETERNITY

BY LLOYD MORRIS

FOR many days we had paddled up the higher reaches of the Congo river: sometimes with placid ease in the middle of the stream stretching broadly on each side to its dark forest fringed banks; sometimes winding a slow way along thread-like alleys of clear water that wound through the tall reeds fringing the low shores; and on occasion straining against the saffron colored water coursing strongly through narrow channels between the many islands.

The monotonous song of the paddlers, and the rhythmic sway of their naked bodies with runlets of perspiration trickling down over their black skins, grew to an irritating weariness that craved for the respite of night: when the blood-colored sun plunged behind the black belt of the equatorial forest, and the moon like a great copper shield slid up from the water into the velvety sky: as we hauled ashore and camped near a village.

From palaaver and feasting one fell to a slumber intruded by the pulsing throb of signal drums tapping out some message that would be repeated from village to village till, like ripples from a stone thrown into the water, it would in a few hours be received by a drummer of a distant people to whom its import would be of no concern.

From the main stream we turned aside into a tributary system ascending towards the Cameroons. Here were no villages; but the forest which on both sides came down to the water's edge was full of vibrant life. Elephants trumpeted and crashed ponderously through the undergrowth; parrots screamed and darted in gaudy flashes among the dark branches; crocodiles floated athwart the stream with only their snouts visible above the dark surface;

monkeys peered curiously through the foliage and troops of them rushed excitedly along the tree tops, following our course for many miles until even they grew tired of gibbering down their invective; and were left behind chattering and screaming angrily to one another among the high woods.

From minor streams we threaded into others of yet lesser consequence, and finally entered one which narrowed till it became only a dark tunnel through the forest; with still sunless waters that slid soundlessly beneath the canoe like oil.

Leaving the waterway we continued on foot through the forest. The silence and stillness were profound; unbroken by sound or sign of animal or bird life. Vast trees soared up out of sight. No sky could be seen; only a roof of interlocked branches. To the right; to the left—all around, aisle gave vista to aisle of green; pillared with lichened stained trunks of great girth infested with parasitic growths. One moved in a faint chrysophrase twilight; the feet falling soundlessly on ground carpeted with centuries of rotting verdure. Neither sunrise nor sunset affected the gloom; occasionally a wailing sigh of wind passed far overhead.

The forest thinned. Its level floor broke into ridges with sparse outcrops of rock; and after many days the sky was visible, lightly flecked with cloud by day, and at night with a scatter of stars thrown like silver braid across its deep luminous blue.

A nightfall found us at the top of one of these ridges; and our meagre supper done, we sank to an uneasy stupor, disquieted with phantasms of fever, into a heavy sleep—to wake suddenly and start up listening.

A native carrier near by whimpered tremulously in his dreaming sleep. Far down the west was a low continuous mutter of thunder, and the sky flared incessantly with lambent flashes of sheet lightning. The whole atmosphere was still and charged with the electric tension of an approaching storm. From close at hand came unexpectedly the roaring cry of a solitary gorilla.

During the day we had seen one from a distance, sitting at the foot of a tree; leaning its grey-black mis-shapen bulk against the great bole. It was apparently asleep; and its huge arms hanging loosely down, its hands resting on the ground, and its head drooped forward.

Now this travesty of human form was awake; shambling uprightly through the night; turning its head from side to side; its hands trailing the ground, and its eyes instinct with apprehension and suspicious hostility. Who shall say what vague terrors and instincts, what flickering intelligence disquieted its brain; as it beat with hairy fists upon the slabs of pectoral muscle covering its enormous chest and cried through the night—matching its voice against the reverberating thunders of the storm that leapt suddenly upon us from earth and sky with tumults of insentient fury.

On such nights; in such scenes, earlier pages of life's rough story have recorded how a few moments marked the extinction of a species processed to environmental efficiency through incomputable years; how typical remnants were dispersed to remoulding conditions distant in space and time, and how forgotten peoples, fleeing the pitiless lash of elements, huddled in concord of terror with monstrous denizens in their lairs.

What elected of them some to extirpation and some to survival?—Their low planes of development—the rich civilizations to which they had come? Highest and lowliest and in their diversities they had no privilege in the common dissolution of death that overtook them. They were only the pattern on the pot; and then—The Potter's Thumb passed over them.

Doubtless they in their station held to a complacency of self-sufficientness; yet the years from yesterday may have enriched our egoisms to a riper estimation of our selves as both the pattern *and* the pot; but—The Potter's Thumb passes over us. With valiant affirmations of captaincy over our subaltern souls, we may even have achieved the high conception of ourselves as the pattern, the pot, *and* the potter; but—The Potter's Thumb passes over us.

Highly evolved Caucasian, bastard Krooman, Congolese carriers, and great ape; on that night, in a bond of jeopardy, we huddled in abject infinitude on an earth that cringed in seismic tremours beneath a furious heaven; while with winds of fire was written in cataclysmic characters a microcosmic history of creation.

Is it yet or ever within the competence of man to read such script; and reading, interpret; and interpreting, accept? My white companion shouted closely in my ear, "It's a brute." His voice came faintly as from a far cry. The grovelling Krooman ob-

jurgated and entreated every god, religion, sect and voodoo of which, in a widely nefarious life he had come to knowledge. And somewhere little removed in the close confusion, the ape was faintly heard in the lulls of the storm. To me was a pervasive beatitude that the functioning of my physiological processes engendered no shrinking insurgencies of the flesh; as I reflected that nothing of skill nor training that was mine would avail for protection against the sharp aim of the lightning's stroke; or a clubbing blow of missiles flying from the wind-riven forest.

All my academic and physical superiorities were here expunged; leaving me for life's expectation, starkly on the plane of the Krooman and the ape: their ignorance of equal value with my knowledge; the conjurations of the one as validly efficacious in our peril, as my proficiency of conic sections, physics or Attic drama. And for the rest: outside of pragmatistical conceits, no authority countenanced a presumption that the color of my skin, my cast of mind, or such modes of spirituality as were mine; would entitle me to preferential treatment in the microcosmic dispensation. Over me measurably spiritualized and integrated, might pass *The Potter's Thumb*; while they, elementarily human, might at the dawn of the day rise, their peril past, and forth fare in a new morn of bland quiescence, to their further occasions.

One thing yet in the armoury of each of us I suppose, was left: some quality that should dictate our acceptance of the situation and say,—“if death comes here this night for me—it is well . . . if not yet, but on some farther road it waits; then again—it is well. . . !”

In the morning and the cool of the morning; we scraped with knives and spears two shallow trenches in the niggardly fleshing of earth that overlay the rocky ribs of the escarpment—one for a Caucasian; one for a child of Ham.

It had been desirably easier to have given them a common grave; and sensible, too; since they were one in the manner and commonality of their death; and only in teleology could there be any sanction for preferment in resurrection. But that manner of disposal done, would have provoked in its recording a bitter resentment of feeling. Such abhorencies and accessions to sentiment are of the known and accepted inconsistencies of Christendom, and need no enlargement here.

For my part, when it comes to my burial, if it should be in civilization, I could wish in reverential wise that which The Potter's Thumb swears out, should in The Potter's Field be cast for interment; and the monies customary to the sumptuaries of woe, be disbursed to the nurture and equipage of the needy among living men.

It is not enough that we dedicate our lives to the service of fellowship; our dead and our deaths must also be a contribution to continuing mortality; and not countable as an eagerly anticipated extinguishing of the bond.

From tainted sources of Hamitic draff the Krooman had been whelped obscurely into heathendom. His typical life had been a derisive figment of sociology; and his death, to any kith or kin, an un-mournful matter of a living animal turned to carrion.

To the accompaniment of tempest and simian cries, the representative of the dominant race, smashed by whirling debris of storm, had gasped a few broken words of devotional remembrance. For him at birth a joyous *carillon* had pealed over the green English countryside from the louvred fenestration of a village church tower. Over the broad demesne of his heritable acres, yeoman and tenant of the manor roll had held genial festival in guerdon of beef and ale. High dignitaries of the church had received his adolescence into communion; and to his tutelage as a fine soldier and accomplished gentleman had gone no stint of wealth; and then—The Potter's Thumb! . . .

In the morning and the cool of the morning our *safari* passed on over the height of land towards Nigeria: skirting in our route a minor geological fault along which in the night of turbulence, there had been a crustal movement burying old weathered rock; and exposing virgin earths in their pristine colorings and scents, to suffer denudal change before the avid attack of other elemental forces.

Behind us we left living vegetation overwhelmed from the sunlight to be digested in corruption and darkness beneath airless layers of sod; and two human creatures once companions of sentient worth, now removed from the sweet upper face of the earth to the bowels of earth; and become mere faeces of creation passing through the gut of being to a further service as manure of everlasting re-generation.

Here as everywhere was nothing but transposition and transmutation—life rotting into death, and death corrupting into life; for the extremities of being are not life and death, but a phenomenal world exhibiting in its last analysis only a spectacle of alimentation and excreta as the Blazon of the Eternal. . . .

In the day resurgent we faced forwards from where at night we had seen and lived Time in cataracts of flood and flame falling into Eternity.