

Strange STORIES

VOL. II, NO. 1

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AUGUST, 1939

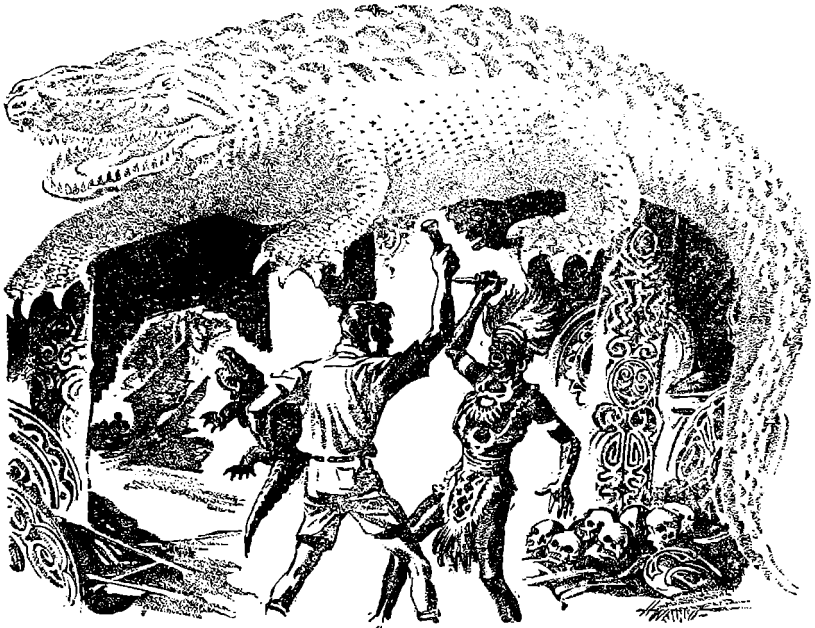
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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$2.00, single copies, \$1.00; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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The Curse of the Crocodile



The native rushed at Koreing with some kind of dagger in his hand

The Man Who Violates the Banga Ju-Ju Returns to the Saurian Ooze from Whence He Sprang!

By **BERTRAM W. WILLIAMS**

Author of "Strange Waters," "The Treasure of Ah Loo," etc.

"**B**LASTED lot of black swine!" Koreing growled. "If I had my way I'd start the day by lambasting every native in the safari with a chicotte just to show him what to expect if he didn't keep his end up."

"They might not like it," Cummins

remarked dryly, a quizzical expression on his lean, tanned face. "They might even mutiny."

More and more Cummins was becoming convinced that it had been a mistake for the superintendent at Akassi Mines to hire Koreing, sight unseen, on the strength of a few

recommendations. But it was not easy to secure mining engineers who were willing to go into the deep bush to Akassi, and the super had obviously been pleased when he had ordered Cummins—the guide, hunter, and handyman at the mines—to bring Koreing back with him on his return from a few weeks' vacation on the Coast. Now the stocky, craggy-faced engineer kicked viciously at a stone in the jungle trail.

"Mutiny?" he grunted. "Not them. They might desert—some of 'em have already. But that's why I'm letting you run things. I'll never learn to kow-tow to a native."

"Don't make the mistake of thinking the African will stand for too much," Cummins retorted.

"Yeah. I've heard all those yarns about putting ground glass in the *bwana's* chop, and that sort of thing. But I'm not scared of any damn native."

"Well, we don't want anything to happen on this trip," Cummins snapped, exasperated by the other's self-confidence. "We're not making nearly such good time as I'd figured. You brought too many—luxuries with you, and we haven't enough porters now."

"I'm a white man," Koreing returned stiffly.

The inference was obvious. Cummins flushed, remembering that the "luxuries" consisted mainly of whiskey, of which Koreing consumed the greater share.

THERE is considerable truth in the statement if you have seen one mile of the African bush, you know what the rest of the continent looks like. The two hundred mile strip bordering the coast is monotonous past belief. Narrow trails wind through a dense forest which is impenetrable as a brick wall in most places. Occasionally the traveler passes small clearings, generally the site of a village. And always, a short distance away, and in the densest part of the jungle, is the fetish house.

This may be a pretentious building with some old man officiating as

high priest, or just a tiny space cleared of brush with nothing to denote its sanctity but a few pathetic offerings—a bowl of cassava, a broken gin bottle, or a dead fowl.

Fetishism is a subject about which practically nothing is known. The whole business of pagan practices, superstitions and secret religious rites is usually lumped together under the term ju-ju.

"What the devil are the boys sidestepping that place for?" Koreing demanded as the safari passed a small hut before which squatted an old native. "Don't tell me they're scared of his nibs there!"

Cummins merely nodded. He was tired; the hour was late, and he was in no mood for casual conversation. Ju-ju houses were common enough, and there was nothing to distinguish this one from a hundred others he had seen.

That night they camped at the adjacent village, one which lay on the shore of a river, and after supper Koreing muttered something about strolling around to see if he could pick up any curios.

"Might have a peek in that ju-ju hut. I've heard that's where they keep their best stuff."

"You'd better keep out of there," Cummins exclaimed in sudden alarm.

"Why? Afraid these bushmen will start something?"

"It isn't them," Cummins said, frowning. "It's our own boys. You noticed how they looked when they filed by that hut—cowed, frightened. We don't want any more of them vamoosing in the night."

"To hell with them! They won't know, anyhow." Koreing grinned at Cummins, helped himself liberally to a whiskey and sparkle, and after a time sauntered off.

It was one of those dank, sultry nights common in Africa when a white man sleeps only in broken snatches. The noises in the bush after dark are continual and nerve-racking. Frogs croak from adjoining swamps, and the chorus of insects is unbelievable in its volume. Flying foxes squawk discordantly through the mango trees, and every living

creature, silent during the day, seems to come to life determined to advertise its presence.

Cummins awoke from a doze and saw by the luminous hands of his watch that it was nearly ten. Koreing's cot on the opposite side of the tent was still empty. Didn't the fool realize that it was absolutely necessary in that climate to make an early start? Didn't he realize also that the natives in this region, peaceable in all other respects, would not stand for any interference with their religious customs?

AT THAT moment, Koreing staggered in the tent, threw a bundle on his cot, and lit the kerosene lamp. He poured himself half a tumblerful of whiskey. Cummins noticed his hands were shaking.

"Better go easy on that, old man," he advised. "It's none of my business, but—"

"Oh, shut up!" Koreing snarled. "You'd need a bracer, too, if you'd been through what I have tonight."

"Been robbing the local bank?" Cummins asked.

Koreing put down the glass and began to unlace his boots. "Worse than that. Sacrilege, I guess you'd call it, and—oh, well, accidents will happen." He muttered the last.

Cummins sat up in instant alarm. "What do you mean, Koreing? What's that thing on your bed?"

Instead of replying, Koreing refilled his glass, lit his pipe, and after a moment's hesitation handed over the object in question.

At first Cummins thought it was merely an ordinary West African curio, one of those grotesque representations of animals or reptiles that the savage loves to carve. But when he took it nearer to the light he saw that here was no toy or article of commerce.

It was an almost perfect model of a crocodile, made from some species of hardwood and colored the exact shade of greenish gray the saurian attains at maturity. The image was about three feet long, extremely heavy, and so lifelike Cummins could not repress a shudder of distaste.

Whoever had made it knew crocodiles. There was not a detail missing; scales, the many rows of teeth—the mouth was open—and squat, handlike paws; all were there.

"Just feel the thing," Koreing urged. "If that isn't the genuine goods, I'll—I'll eat it."

It might have been imagination, but it seemed to Cummins that there was actually a clammy feeling to the light-shaded belly. Certainly there was a distinct odor of musk coming from the open throat.

"That's what I've been wanting ever since I hit the Coast," Koreing went on. "Something that was a bit more than a mere curio. This little chap mayn't have much actual cash value—"

"How did you get it?" Cummins interrupted. "The natives up here don't savvy money, and I know you haven't any trade goods with you."

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning," Koreing muttered.

"You'll tell me now," Cummins snapped. If the other had stolen it there might be a chance to restore the idol before the loss was discovered.

Koreing mixed himself a third drink, and this time Cummins did not remonstrate. Koreing's tongue thickened.

"I had a hunch," he said, "that that ju-ju house we passed had something out of the ordinary; at any rate, there was no harm in giving it the once-over. It was dark when I got there, but I had my flashlight, and crawled through the entrance hole. First time I was ever inside one of those fetish places. There was a lot of junk—skulls of animals, bones, and mummies. The old geezer was sitting in the middle of the floor, stark naked and mumbling to himself like—well, you know how they do when they've passed the whittling stage. The funny thing was that he didn't look up or seem to notice me at all. Deaf *and* blind, I thought. But if he didn't see me, something else did. I tell you I jumped when I saw what it was, and only a yard away from where I was squatted. Notice it?"

Cummins nodded. He was strangely conscious of the dull reptilian eyes of the image. The deadly, passionless glare of the hideous original had certainly been reproduced faithfully.

"That's what I call art," Koreing observed, grinning as he saw Cummins' involuntary gesture of distaste.

"What did you have to pay for it?"

Koreing evaded the question. "Heaven knows my intentions were honorable enough when I entered that hut."

"Just what do you mean?" Cummins was more and more alarmed by Koreing's tone, from which the usual bluster was noticeably absent.

"I picked up this—this thing, and as soon as I did, the old boy showed signs of life. He gibbered at me, and I tell you those red-rimmed eyes of his made me nervous. 'How much, Grandpa?' I asked him, but he staggered to his feet and cursed me out. No mistake about that. He was peeved because I'd made him a bonafide business proposition. I held out the flashlight, switching it on and off. If magic like that wouldn't tempt him, nothing would.

"It didn't. He rushed at me, with some kind of dagger in his hand. Naturally I struck out. With the torch. Not hard, but—well, the thing's heavy, and—and that's all rot about a native's skull being so much thicker than a white man's."

THERE was a pause, pregnant with meaning. Cummins whispered, "You—fool, Koreing!"

"It was self-defense. And he was due to die these last twenty years, anyway."

Cummins was silent, thinking hard. "We'd better beat it first thing in the morning. I'll try to fix it up, but you've raised plenty hell."

Koreing rolled into his cot, and in five minutes was snoring.

After breakfast, Twalo, the headman of the carriers, presented himself.

"Massa," he began without preamble. "All dem boy walk for bush."

Cummins' mouth hardened. This was serious. Translated, it meant that every one of their porters had

deserted in the night. And an African does not sacrifice his hard-earned wages without cause.

"What name run away?" Cummins asked tersely.

Twalo hesitated and peered into the tent where Koreing lay still asleep.

"Ju-ju man live for die," he muttered. "Dat bad too much. White man stealum ju-ju, dat—"

Words failed him; he was divided between his allegiance to his white masters and his horror of last night's heinous crime. Cummins knew it would be fruitless to try to ascertain how Twalo and his men had got wind of the affair. This is one of the mysteries of Africa; natives can smell out news almost before the events take place.

"How about hiring a fresh gang from the village here?" Cummins suggested.

Twalo shook his head. "Dese fellow no savvy safari; be canoemen. 'Sides"—he looked fearfully around—"dey not like it when dey go look ju-ju house."

Cummins knew what he meant. Harmless and the least pugnacious of men naturally, the West African is capable of being extremely nasty when his superstitious fears have been aroused. And the farther away from civilization a tribe is, the greater indifference it has for the white man's power.

Koreing came outside rubbing his eyes. Cummins explained the trouble and suggested he slip back to the fetish temple and replace the image.

"Like hell I will!" Koreing growled. "Huh, I'll get you some recruits." He snatched up a hippo-hide whip and turned toward the village.

Cummins seized his arm. "You fool—you've made trouble enough! We'll be lucky if we come out of this business with our lives."

He pushed the other back into the tent, and for once Koreing put up no argument. Possibly he was beginning to realize that the situation might be really serious after all. Cummins was puzzled as to the best course to take. He would have liked to ask Twalo, but a white man does

not seek advice of a native. Their destination, Akassi, was over a week's march overland. By using the river they could travel by canoe a more roundabout and longer route. Cummins decided to take the water trail, although he knew that there would be difficulty in obtaining paddlers.

There was. Not a single native was visible in the village; the huts were deserted.

"Oh, the devil with 'em!" Koreing exclaimed after a fruitless search. "We're foolish to waste time. We'll paddle our own canoe." He stepped into a small dugout drawn up on the river bank and started loading their possessions into it.

Twalo grunted assent. There was no alternative. It was impossible to carry much luggage; three men nearly filled the narrow craft, which was none too stable at the best of times. Cummins insisted that the tent and most of the provisions be left behind; they would be some payment for the canoe, he pointed out, and it was vitally necessary to travel light. But it took a long time to convince Koreing that the whiskey should be jettisoned with the rest of the equipment. Cummins was adamant, however.

"If you're going to take that thing along"—he indicated the crocodile idol which his partner had rolled up in a blanket—"you'd better not let Twalo see it."

"Why not? Do I have to consult a servant about my luggage?"

"Listen, Koreing," Cummins said, "Twalo's a fairly intelligent chap, less superstitious than most Africans, but he's no agnostic. Get what I mean? We're dependent on him just now."

Cummins was never likely to forget that trip up the Ogwan River. By day they paddled, sweating even in the chill of early morning from the unaccustomed work. Their hands were blistered, and every limb ached intolerably from the cramped positions they were forced to take. The heat during the day was almost unbearable. It seemed to press down on them like an unseen weight. Yet they had to carry on till sunset.

Koreing, although a heavy drinker and a man of gross body, appeared to suffer least. Gradually he shed his clothing, garment by garment, till he was practically naked. He had given up shaving and even washing. At their camps in the evening he had little to say; indeed, as the days dragged on he became morosely silent, only grunting when spoken to directly.

While Cummins had more serious things to consider than the appearance of his companion, it annoyed him to see Twalo eyeing Koreing curiously on several occasions. An almost nude white man with long matted hair and bloodshot eyes is not calculated to improve a native's morale.

ONE evening he ordered Twalo to examine the fish-lines he had set, and when the headman was gone, took Koreing to task.

"We'll be hitting some of the up-river villages tomorrow. How about brushing up a bit?" Receiving no reply, he went on. "You'd better come closer to the fire, old man; some croc is likely to swipe you out there. Lots of 'em round here, you know."

"Let 'em," Koreing grunted without moving. "I'm not scared of those things."

"Well, how about a shaving and a wash?" Cummins ventured.

"What for?"

"Listen, Koreing. This kind of thing doesn't go—not here in Africa. We whites have to keep up a certain appearance for our own sakes."

Koreing's only reply was to edge nearer the river.

Presently Twalo returned with a few fish. He began to clean them preparatory to broiling some over the fire. Koreing seemed annoyed by this. He lumbered clumsily to his feet, snatched a fish from the native's hand, and while the other two stared in amazement, he devoured it raw, tearing at the flesh and crunching the bones. Cummins caught Twalo's eye and looked hastily away.

Cummins awoke in the middle of

the night and glanced at the spot where Koreing had been lying. There was no one visible in the camp but Twalo, some distance away, also awake.

"Where?" Cummins asked softly.

Twalo grunted. "Massa Koreing live for water. Go swim."

"Swim?"

"Yah. P'raps he catchum fish."

Odd, Cummins reflected. A little tingle of apprehension crawled down his spine. White men do not as a rule get up in the middle of the night to bathe in crocodile-infested African rivers. He examined the bundle of possessions his companion had been using for a pillow. The wooden fetish was gone.

"If he walk river, he live for die," Cummins told Twalo. "Plenty *jambuka* stop longa there."

"He no die; he takum de *jambuka* ju-ju longa him."

CUMMINS pondered in silence. He had no idea of indulging in a religious argument with Twalo in the middle of the night. Instead, he crawled back under the cheese-cloth net, more annoyed by the swarm of mosquitoes he found there than by Koreing's sudden penchant for moonlight swimming.

An hour later Koreing returned, but so silent that Cummins did not realize his presence till he heard a peculiar noise close by. Peering from under the net he saw Koreing squatting on the sand eating a large fish—alive. His eyes gleamed in the starlight, passing over the other two men as though they did not exist.

The same thing happened during the next two nights. By day Koreing would paddle, hunched up in the bow of the canoe, morose and silent; at night he went "fishing." And always with him went the fetish. Cummins tried to believe that it was nothing more than a craving for flesh diet, and that in some way the carved image lured fish so that they might be caught by hand.

All very well, but that did not account for the overpowering stench of musk which had begun to emanate from Koreing. Cummins spoke to

Koreing about this on one occasion, receiving a wordless snarl for answer.

Twalo kept as far away from Koreing as possible, and but for the fact that his interests lay with his white masters, there was no doubt that he would have deserted.

The affair came to a head on the third night when Cummins was awakened to find Twalo shivering in the dim moonlight.

"Massa, you come look."

Without a question Cummins followed the native to the river bank. Crouching in the reeds, they saw through a break in the mangroves the coffee-colored stream gliding sluggishly through the jungle. Scattered about a mud flat were several objects resembling stranded logs.

"*Jambuka*," Twalo whispered. "Crocodiles!"

Cummins did not answer; he was staring at Koreing, who, stark naked, had something silvery in his hands, a freshly caught fish. He was on the mud flat, and watching him, barely ten feet away, was a crocodile.

It was not a large one—perhaps six feet long—but quite large enough to be dangerous. Cummins was about to shout a warning when Koreing tossed the remnants of the fish to the saurian and slid into the water.

Twalo clutched his master's arm. "Look, massa, he takem 'long."

Cummins supposed he meant the idol which he knew Koreing carried with him on these excursions, but at the moment he was more interested in the living reptile. It finished the morsel and floundered into the water also.

The situation was beyond Cummins. He had no gun with him, and to run back to where they had moored the canoe and paddle down in the darkness would have been useless. Too, he doubted whether Twalo would accompany him on such an errand. After peering uncertainly into the darkness for several minutes the watchers got to their feet without comment and returned to camp.

Twalo replenished the fire, glancing furtively at his master.

"You savvy this palaver?" Cummins asked.

It appeared that Twalo did savvy, or thought he did. The ancient at Banga, the village where the carriers had deserted, was a medicine man of some renown throughout that part of the country. He had specialized in the worship of reptiles—snakes, crocodiles, and lizards.

"S'posin' he no like man, he makem ju-ju for dem man—*jambuka* ju-ju."

"Well," Cummins prompted as the other hesitated. "What happen—the man live for die?"

Twalo shook his head. "Be worse, too much worse."

Cummins did not pursue the subject. There were worse things than death; even the superstitious black was able to perceive that.

Koreing was asleep when Cummins opened his eyes next morning. There was nothing about the man to denote he had not been there all night save the musk smell, which was stronger than usual. At breakfast Cummins remarked:

"We'll be leaving the river this afternoon, Koreing. Have to go overland by boat then. Three days' march across country."

Koreing grinned mirthlessly. "I stop here. Like this river."

The words came thickly as if speech hurt him; yet they were not like those of a drunken man. Cummins stared for a moment, then shrugged resignedly. At Agwasse, through which they would pass, was a government medical officer to whom he could report Koreing's conduct. Plainly this was a case for a doctor.

Before leaving, it might not be a bad idea to steal the fetish. Cummins was beginning to believe that the thing was somehow connected with the man's immunity from the river carnivores, however, and he took the first opportunity of mentioning the plan to Twalo.

"Massa, I beg you not," the headman pleaded. "You lookum—" He gestured toward where Koreing was crouched, gazing dully across the river.

"Oh, rot! You fear too much,

Twalo. Dem ju-ju man put smell on dem bit wood, that's why *jambuka* don't bite Massa Ko."

Yet Cummins was relieved when he learned that there was a village two miles from their present camp on the river. He would ask some of the natives there to supply the *ibo*—the white man—with food, and incidentally to keep an eye on him, as he was "sick too much."

THE doctor was away when Cummins and Twalo reached Agwasse, and the young district commissioner in charge did not seem to take the story very seriously.

"Maybe your friend's gone *fantee* temporarily," he surmised. "I've read about whites in India turning native, but this goes one better—palling up with the crocs. Wonder if he could induce one of his chums to come close enough for me to pot it?"

But he ceased to joke when they returned to the river. A crowd of natives met them with the news that a small child had been killed while filling a water-pot the evening before. At least, they supposed the youngster had been eaten by the crocodiles, but there was no trace of the body. The village oldsters threw out dark hints about an evil spirit in human form that had been seen in the neighborhood. As for the sick *ibo*—nothing had been seen of him.

Actual witness of the child's disappearance was a small black boy name Yomba. Yes, he knew where his playmate had gone, and if the white men would give him a wire bracelet he could take them to the spot and explain how the tragedy had occurred.

The D.C. shrugged. "I'll have to stay and calm down this mob. The kid's probably been chopped by a croc, but you can't get these blighters to believe it's not black magic of some sort."

Followed by Cummins, Yomba led the way to the river beach and pointed to several tracks in the mud, one of which had the appearance of having been made by a white man.

Seeing that this service was not enough to justify the reward, he pointed to a narrow opening in the mangroves. There he halted and refused to go any further. With none of his own people around him his boyish bravado had evaporated. It appeared the trail led to a ju-ju place and—

Cummins swore under his breath. Everywhere one ran up against this blank wall of native superstition. He pushed on alone.

A HUNDRED yards up, the path opened into a clearing, in the center of which was a large mango tree. Close by was a pool, fed from the river through a shallow channel, and on its inky surface floated the *jambuka* image. On the bank several fish had been placed in a row.

Cummins examined the place for footprints—fruitlessly. At last he kicked the fish back into the water, gathered up what dry wood he could find, and burned the crocodile image, waiting until the "curio" was a mass of glowing embers.

"Palaver finish," he muttered. "If this business had gone on much longer I'd have been bowing down to graven images myself."

They would have to turn out all the villagers, he reflected, and scour the bush until they found Koreing. After that, the engineer would be sent back to civilization and sanity. As for the missing child. . . . Cummins hastily dismissed the horrible thought that had come to him. After all, there were a hundred ways one could meet death in the African jungle.

But none of the villagers was willing to have anything to do with the sick *ibo*. Cummins' offers of bribes were met with dull stares. He wished he had kept the D.C. with him, but the young man had seemed to think that a missing white civilian was none of his business.

"Sorry, old chap," he had said. "I can't spare any more time. Got to write up my blasted reports. According to that head-man of yours, all your friend has done lately is swim in the river and catch fish.

No law against that, you know. You've probably got a touch of fever yourself, Mr. Cummins. Better take some quinine."

Cummins had been so disgusted by the D.C.'s attitude that he had entirely forgotten to demand cooperation from the villagers.

"We go catchum white massa—you, me," he told Twalo.

Twalo growled a decided negative, much to his master's surprise.

"More better we go 'way one time, Massa Cummy. Me fright too much for look."

Argument was useless. Cummins saw he would have to do the job himself. After all, there was no telling what further degradations Koreing might commit to imperil the white man's prestige, and the fewer witnesses the better. What a fool he had been not to have borrowed the D.C.'s rifle! It would be no fun sitting in a swamp with those murderous reptiles all around.

Taking only his mosquito net and a bottle of whiskey he went back to the clearing. Surely Koreing would visit the place again to recover his wooden plaything! What his reaction would be on finding it destroyed, Cummins could not guess—perhaps, he hoped, a return to sanity. Anyhow, the man was almost certain to drink some of the liquor which Cummins meant to leave under the tree—whiskey heavily doped with sleeping-powders.

On a long vigil one eventually becomes almost oblivious to one's surroundings. Cummins was in that state when a slight splash in the pool made him sit up alertly. A crocodile was crawling up the bank. Another followed, and another, till there must have been nearly a dozen. The last to appear was an enormous brute, fully twelve feet in length. It advanced a little further from the water than the others.

A fetid, musky odor filled the air, but Cummins scarcely noticed it. For instead of the usual somnolent attitude of saurians on land, these brutes seemed to be waiting for something with tense expectancy. They kept their heads raised, and

occasionally one would give a slight flick of his tail.

Presently there was a slight rustle in the bushes. An indistinct form came into view, halting at the base of the mango. The waiting reptiles shuffled closer. The patriarch in the lead opened its huge jaws; then shut them with a loud snap that startled Cummins. The vague blur in the shadow dissolved into two parts. The foremost straightened up and advanced a few paces.

It was Koreing—Koreing covered with the black ooze of the river and bearing no likeness at all to a white man anymore, or, indeed, to a human being. The light was too vague to make out details, but it seemed to the watcher that Koreing was searching for something. He padded around the opened space with hunched shoulders, ignoring the bottle of whiskey, plainly visible in a patch of moonlight. When he reached the spot where Cummins had burned the fetish he dropped to his knees and began groping in the ashes.

Now was the critical moment. Would this beast-man recover from his strange malady, freed from the evil influence of the crocodile image? Or would he—Cummins held his breath.

But Koreing showed no more emotion than the reptiles around him. He squatted motionless for several minutes. The big crocodile made a sweep with its tail, and as though at a signal the others crawled closer, their short legs moving together in a kind of awkward rhythm.

Koreing put his head down till it was almost on a level with that of the beast. Then, apparently remembering something, he clambered over the back of the giant saurian and on all fours returned to the mango tree.

Cummins strained his eyes to see what would come next. Unfortunately it was not possible to follow Koreing's movements without shifting his own position, and he had no intention of frightening Koreing away now. He waited.

Again Koreing came into the moonlight. This time he was erect

and carrying something in his arms, something that seemed to struggle feebly. Cummins, shocked into forgetfulness of his own danger, stood up, moved forward out of the mangrove thicket.

But none of the crocodiles took the least notice of him. Their dull opaque eyes were fixed on Koreing's burden—a feebly struggling native child.

Too dazed to scream, the boy—obviously the one who had disappeared from the village—could only express his fear in choking sobs. Koreing raised him high and commenced a chant in a throaty animal-like gibberish, swaying his body from side to side, increasing the tempo with every dip.

THE action roused Cummins; he leaped, forgetting the monsters underfoot. In his haste he tripped and fell over the giant tail of the nearest saurian. For a moment he lay, blinded with the sticky ooze and half asphyxiated by the nauseous odor that clung close to the ground. Around him jaws snapped and heavy bodies squelched through the slime. When he cleared his eyes and struggled to his feet he found Koreing gone.

The crocodiles were milling around at the foot of the bank, which was about four feet high. On the verge of the incline the native child lay, wide-eyed and frozen with terror. Behind the boy something crouched, something that Cummins did not at first recognize. Then a cold sweat broke through his pores; he stood rooted in mud, staring up blankly.

The thing was neither brute nor human. Its dull eyes passed unseeing over the watching white man and the hideous crocodiles waiting below. Whether it was imagination or the fantastic effect of moonlight and shadow through the overhanging jungle Cummins never knew, but it seemed to him as though the creature lying belly down opposite him underwent a metamorphosis. The streaks of dirt on the once white body seemed to assume the reticu-

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THE CURSE OF THE CROCODILE

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lated appearance of scales, and the bowed head, hidden in shadow, seemed oddly malformed and inhuman. The arms were grotesquely bowed, pointing outward at the elbow like the limbs of the monsters beside the pool.

"K-Koreing!" Cummins called hoarsely, forcing the word through parched lips.

There was no answer, no sound save for the shuffling of the crocodiles as they moved to and fro in restless impatience.

CUMMINS plunged through the mud and gained the bank. He snatched the child and ran for the tree. But he had reckoned without the beast-man.

Koreing—if Koreing it was—snarled savagely and struck at Cummins. His teeth clicked together audibly. The loose dirt on the bank gave way.

Perhaps it was this that saved Cummins. Koreing was momentarily distracted. The fallen earth formed a slope up which the crocodiles could climb, and the monsters moved forward swiftly. Hampered by the child, Cummins almost lost his balance; he flung himself forward desperately. From the corner of his eye he saw the deadly circle closing in. Something stirred in the outspread branches above his head, and a naked arm shot down.

"Massa, me catchum!"

Twalo! Cummins did not hesitate. He thrust the little black body upward, grunting with relief as Twalo clutched the child.

"Massa, you go 'way one time."

Good advice, but not easy of accomplishment. All around Cummins horny bodies were twisting and squirming; huge snouts nuzzled at his legs as the horrible creatures slithered back and forth uneasily. The thing that had once been Koreing had retreated to the edge of the mangroves. Cummins shuddered as he noted the lusterless eyes, now

glazed and bestial and inhuman. Whatever slight veneer of civilization had clung to the man up to this moment had vanished completely. Koreing was back in the dim past—a past that reached into a period long before the first ape-man left the trees to battle the lesser beasts for supremacy.

Dripping with sweat, his breath rasping hoarsely in his throat, Cummins stepped back involuntarily. His leg rasped against an armored hide; something swished through the air, and he was flung headlong into the bushes. Darkness took him.

"Massa, you fit walk?"

Twalo was bending over him. The moon had disappeared; a gray mist was creeping up from the river, sure precursor of dawn. Cummins raised his stiff body from the ground, groaned as a blinding ache shot through his head.

"The picanin and—and Koreing?" he gasped.

Twalo gestured toward a nearby bush. "Picanin sleep," he said, and hesitated. "Massa Koreing, he live for die Banga, long time."

"Banga? The village where he got the fetish—what fool talk this, Twalo? You no see dem palaver under tree?"

The native shook his head stubbornly.

"No see palaver, on'y *jambuka*. Me no lie. You go lookum self."

Cummins complied. The clearing was deserted. Beast and man had gone. Nothing remained save a broken bottle and the tracks of many crocodiles. Nothing—save for two narrow furrows close together that ran across the bank and disappeared into the pool. Cummins glanced up quickly, his face white beneath the tan, and Twalo met his eyes.

"*Jambuka* pullem dem—dem meat under water," he mumbled. "Croc eat croc."