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The Tree-Man

By HENRY S. WHITEHEAD

A tale of the Virgin Islands—the Blacks who came from Dabomey brought their eery superstitions with them

MY FIRST sight of Silvio Fabricius, the tree-man, was within a week of my first arrival on the island of Santa Cruz not long after the United States had purchased the Danish West Indies and officially renamed its new colony "The Virgin Islands of the United States."

On that occasion, which is a number of years ago, the ship on which I was travelling down to the islands came into Frederiksted Harbor, on the west coast of the island, just at dusk. I saw a half-moon of white sand-beach with the charming little town in its middle, and I was entranced. I had the feeling of "coming home," which was strange enough because it was my first sight of the island whereon my residence has been ever since except when I come north summers or spend the winter on St. Thomas, the chief island of the group where the capital town and the U. S. Naval Station are located.

In the midst of the bustle aboard ship incident to anchoring in the roadstead there came over the side an upstanding gentleman in a glistening white drill uniform with shining brass buttons. This gentleman came up to me, bowed in a manner to commend himself to kings, and said:

"I am honored to welcome you to Santa Cruz, Mr. Canevin. I am Director Despard of the police department. It is my privilege to place the police boat at your disposal when you are ready to go ashore. May I be of any assistance in seeing that your luggage is cared for?"

This was a welcome indeed, and decidedly unexpected. Beyond the fact that I was to live here for perhaps a year, had engaged a house by long-distance communication, and had notified the persons with whom I transacted this necessary business of the date of my arrival, no one, I supposed, had ever heard of me, Gerald Canevin, a young fellow quite obscure and without in those days even that evanescent recognition which comes—and goes—in the case of a writer of fiction and informative articles.

I was, as you can imagine, surprized. To put it mildly, I was simply knocked off my feet by such a reception on the part of this magnificent official whose courtesy was easily matched by his aristocratic appearance.

I thanked Director Despard in carefully chosen phrases, and before many minutes, and wholly because of his solicitous kindness, my four trunks were over-side, my various articles of hand-luggage were bestowed in the police-boat waiting at the ladder gangway, and I was seated beside him in the boat's stern-sheets, he holding the tiller ropes, while four coal-black convicts rowed us ashore with tremendous pulls at their long sweeps.

Through the dusk I observed that the landing-wharf was crowded with Black people. Behind these there stood half-a-dozen knots of White people, conversing together. Along the background of waterfront buildings stood, parked, some thirty or forty cars. I remarked to the Police Director:

"Is it usual for so many persons to be

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"Those Blacks danced and pounded drums and burned flares."

on the docks at the landing of a vessel, Mr. Director?"

"It is not usual," replied the dignified gentleman beside me. "It is for you, Mr. Canevin."

"For me?" said I, and again, stultified, feeling that I was like a person playing without notice a strange part in some gorgeous comedy, "What—my dear sir—certainly not for me. Why——"

"Yes, it is for you, Mr. Canevin," Mr.

Despard's beautifully modulated voice reassured me. "You are Captain McMillin's great-nephew, you know, my dear sir."

So that was it: my great-uncle, who had "been a planter" on Santa Cruz, and who had been, at that moment, before Mr. Despard had enlightened me, about the last person in my mind.

Arriving smartly at the concrete jetty, Mr. Despard and I landed and in what

was left of the daylight I perceived that confronting us and massed together in orderly fashion enough, were perhaps a thousand Negróes. Back of these stood the various groups of White People which I have mentioned, and which were made up, as I was to learn, of practically all the island's landed gentry.

We started along the jetty toward the thronged Negroes and I perceived that their interest—the African is usually quite naïve in such affairs—was entirely genuine. I began to get some glimmerings of the quality of the community which I was now seeing for the first time. . . .

After being received by the people who had come to meet me, I was installed in a small private hotel pending the preparations to my own hired residence. I found every house on Santa Cruz open to me. Hospitalities were showered upon me to the point of embarrassment. Kindnesses galore, considerate bits of information, help of every imaginable kind, ushered my quasi-permanent residence as a transplanted Santa Crucian to a delightfully successful culmination as a member of the inner circle of Santa Crucian society.

I had come because our government had entrusted me with a minor mission—lying wholly outside the scope of this narrative—and I had been advised that its successful prosecution should occupy, normally, about a year. Because of the doors opening before me, the silent cooperation here, the expert, whole-hearted guidance there, this mission of mine was fulfilled at the end of precisely nine weeks from the date of my arrival on Santa Cruz.

I LEARNED, almost at once, many details about my great-uncle, Captain the Honorable William McMillin, which information was almost entirely new to me.

It was, naturally, not long after I had arrived on the island that I went to visit his estate, Great Fountain. I went with Hans Grumbach, in his Ford car, a bumpy journey occupying more than three hours, because this took us not only up hills and through ravines and along precipitous trails, but because the roads were incredibly roundabout.

All the way Hans Grumbach talked about this section of the island, now almost never visited. Hans, in his younger days, had lived up here as the last of the long line of resident managers which the old estate had known since the day, in 1879, when my relatives had sold their land. It was now, after several changes of hands, the property of the largest of the local sugar-growing corporations, known as the Copenhagen Concern, and, because of its inaccessibility, cultivation there had finally been abandoned. Then Hans Grumbach had come to live in Frederiksted; where, having married one of Mrs. Heidenklang's daughters, and so allied himself to a most respectable *creole* family, he had settled down to the keeping of a store in the town.

But, it appeared, Hans had wanted, for ten years, to go back. This trip toward the old place stimulated him, and he sang its praises, a process which I spare my readers. It was, according to this panegyrist, incredibly fertile at Great Fountain. One needed, according to Hans, merely "to stick some seed in the ground, anywhere," and it would "grow and flourish there" like the shamrock on old Ireland's sod!

We arrived at last. I had never, of course, seen the estate land before, but it required no sympathetic assurances on the part of my voluble guide to realize its amazing fertility.

We walked over the nearer and more accessible portions of the old estate, and, as it lay in a great cup of table-land here

in the north-central hills of the island, we also looked out over its domain from various angles. The ancient estate was in a sad state of rack and ruin. The village was about half tumbled down, and even the cabins that remained were out of repair. The characteristic tropical inroads upon land "turned out," that is, out of organized cultivation, were apparent everywhere. Everything except the sporadic cultivation of occasional vegetable patches and one good-sized grove of banana trees was overrun and choked with rank weeds. The ancient farm buildings, although soundly constructed of stone and brick, were likewise terribly dilapidated, and there was only the word of Hans and of the caretaker to account for the site of my great-uncle's Great House, the very foundations of which had disappeared.

I had on this visit to Great Fountain, my first experience with what has come to be known as the "grapevine" method of communication among Africans. I had been perhaps four days on the island, and it is reasonably certain that few of its people had ever so much as heard of me before; certainly none of these obscure village Negroes cut off here in the hills from others the nearest of whom lived miles away. Yet we had hardly come within a stone's long throw of the remains of the village before we were surrounded by the total population, of perhaps twenty adults, and at least as many children of all ages.

As one would expect, these Blacks were of very crude appearance; not only "country Negroes" but that in exaggerated form. Negroes in the West Indies have some tendency to live on the land where they originated, and, as it happened, most of these Negroes had been born up here and several generations of their forebears before them.

All the adult Negroes knew Grum-

bach from his long residence here up to ten years or so previously as manager, but to him they paid scant attention. They crowded about me in much the same way as the Negroes at the wharf at the time of my arrival, only, somehow, in a cruder, more outspoken fashion. "English" though it is, I was at that period of my residence quite unable to understand their speech. The Black people talked to me and *at* me in the friendliest fashion imaginable, and Hans Grumbach, when it seemed desirable for me to speak, prompted me.

I had come prepared with a double handful of small-change. This I handed over to the oldest man of the villagers, requesting him to distribute it among them all, and I was gravely blessed for this *largesse*. Translating the comments of the group on this present which my instinct as a member of the old Captain's family prompted me to make to the descendants of his estate-people, later, on the way home, Grumbach told me that they had compared me to my collateral ancestor!

AFTER lunch, Grumbach took me to see the "fountain" from which the old estate had originally derived its title.

We walked up a ravine toward it, along a sandy stream-bed which, this being an exceptionally dry season near the end of a three-years' drought, was now a mere trickle.

The "fountain" itself was a delicate, natural waterfall, coming thinly over the edge of a high rock, source of the one unfailing stream on an otherwise very "dry" island.

It was when we were coming back, by a slightly different route, for Grumbach wanted me to see everything possible, that I saw the tree-man. He stood, a youngish, coal-black Negro, of about twenty-five years, scantily dressed in a

tattered shirt and a sketchy pair of trousers, about ten yards away from the field-path we were following and from which a very clear view of a portion of the estate was obtained, and beside him, towering over him, was a magnificent coconut palm. The Negro stood, motionless. I thought, in fact, that he had gone asleep standing there, both arms clasped about the tree's smooth, elegant trunk, the right side of his face pressed against it.

He was not, however, asleep, because I looked back at him and his eyes—rather intelligent eyes, they seemed to me—were wide open, although to my surprize he had not changed his position, nor even the direction of his gaze, to glance at us; and, I was quite sure, he had not been in that village group when we had stood among them just before our lunch.

Grumbach did not speak to him, as he had done to every other Negro we had seen. Indeed, as I turned to him for some possible comment, I saw that his face looked a trifle—well, apprehensive; and, I thought, he very slightly quickened his pace. I stepped nearer to him as we walked past the man and the tree, and then I noticed that his lips were moving, and when I came closer I observed that he was muttering to himself. I said, very quietly, almost in his ear:

"What's the matter with that fellow, Grumbach?"

Grumbach glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, and my impression that he was disturbed grew upon me.

"He's listening!" was all that I got out of Grumbach. I supposed, of course, that there was something odd about the fellow; perhaps he was slightly demented and might be an annoyance; and I supposed that Grumbach meant to convey that the young fellow was "listening" for our possible comment upon him and his strange behavior. Later, after we had said good-bye to the courteous caretaker

and he had seen us off down the first hill-side road with its many ruts, I brought up the subject of the young Black fellow at the tree.

"You mentioned that he was listening," said I, "so I dropped the matter; but, why does he do that, Mr. Grumbach—I mean, why does he stand against the tree in that unusual manner? Why, he didn't even gee his eyes to look at us, and that surprized me. They don't have visitors up here every day, I understand!"

"He was listening—to his tree!" said Hans Grumbach, as though reluctantly. "*That* was what I meant, Mr. Canevin." And he drew my attention to an extraordinarily picturesque ruined windmill, the kind once used for the grinding of cane in the old days of "muscovado" sugar, which dominated a cone-like hill-side off to our left as we bumped over the road.

BETWEEN getting settled in my house, attending to the preliminary work of my mission, and fulfilling the almost numberless social engagements which crowded upon me, I can not say that I forgot about the tree-man, but, certainly, he and his queer behavior were anything but prominent in my mind. It was not until months later, when I had gained the confidence of Hans Grumbach, that that individual gave me any further enlightenment.

Then I learned that, along with his nostalgia for the life of an agriculturist, there was mixed in with his feelings about the Great Fountain estate a kind of inconsistent thankfulness that he was no longer stationed there! This intrigued me. I saw something of Grumbach and got rather well acquainted with him as the months passed that first year of my residence. Bit by bit, in his reluctant manner of speech, it came out.

To put the whole picture of his mind

on this subject together, I got the idea that Grumbach, while always suffering from a faint nostalgia for his deep-country residence and the joys of tilling the soil, felt, somehow, *safe*, here in the town. If he chafed, mildly, at the restrictions of town life and his storekeeping, there was yet the certainty that "something"—a vague matter at first, as it came out—was not always hanging over him; something connected with a lingering fear.

The Negroes, up there at Great Fountain, were not, it seemed, quite like the rest of the island's Black population. No—the Great Fountain village was, somehow, at least in Hans Grumbach's dark hints, different; *sui generis*, "a peculiar people" as the biblical phrase runs.

They were, to begin with, almost purely of Dahomeyan stock. These Dahomeyans had drifted "down the islands"—in the general southerly direction; that is, from Haiti, beginning soon after the revolt from France in the early Nineteenth Century. They were tall, very dark-skinned, extremely clannish Blacks. And, just as the Koromantyn slaves in British Jamaica had brought to the West Indies their Obay-i ("obeah") or herb-magic, so, it seemed, had the Dahomeyans carried with them their *vodu*, which, properly defined, means the practises accompanying the vague Guinea worship of "The Snake."

This worship, grown into a vast localized *cultus* in unimpeded Haiti and in the Guiana hinterlands down in South America, is a vastly intriguing matter, very imperfectly understood even to this present day. But, its accompaniments; all the charms, *ouangas*, philtres, potions, talismans, amulets, "doctoring" and what-not, have spread all through the islands and are thoroughly established in widely variant forms. Haiti is its West Indian home, of course. But down in French

Martinique its extent and intensity is a fair rival to the Haitian supremacy. It is rife on Dominica, Guadeloupe, even on British Montserrat. Indeed, one might name every island from Cuba to Trinidad, and, allowing for the variations, the local preferences, and all such matters, one might say, and truly, that the *vodu*, generically described by the Blacks themselves as "obi," is very thoroughly established.

According to Grumbach, the handful of villagers at Great Fountain was very deeply involved in this sort of thing. Left to themselves as they had been for many years, forming a little, self-sustaining community of nearly pure-blooded Dahomeyans, they had, it seemed, reverted very nearly to their African type, and this, Grumbach alleged, was the fact despite their easy kindliness, their use of "English," and the various other outward appearances which caused them to seem not greatly different from other "country Negroes" on this island of Santa Cruz.

On the subject of Silvio Fabricius—for that was the tree-man's rather fanciful name—my information was derived directly from Grumbach. He had known the young Negro since he had been a pick'ny on the estate. He knew, so far as his limited understanding of Black People's magic extended, all about Silvio. He had been manager at the time the boy had begun his attentions to the great coconut palm. He had heard the to him "stupidness" which had attended the setting apart of this neophyte; in other words, there had been three days—and nights; particularly the nights—when not a single plantation-hand would do a piece of work for any consideration. It was, as he bitterly remembered it all, "the crop season." His employers, not sensing, businessmen as they were, any underlying reason for no work done when they needed the cane from Great Foun-

tain for their grinding-mill, had been hard on him. They had, in Santa Crucian phraseology, "pressed him" for cane deliveries. And there, in his village, quite utterly ignoring his authority as estate-manager, those Blacks had danced and pounded drums, and burned flares, and weaved back and forth in their interminable ceremonies—"stupidness"—for three strategic days and nights, over something which had Silvio Fabricius, then a rising pick'ny of twelve or thirteen, as its apparent center and underlying cause. It was no wonder that Hans Grumbach raved and probably swore mightily and threatened the estate-hands.

But—the expression of his anger and annoyance, the threats and cajolings, the offers of bonuses, "snaps" of rum, and pay for piece-work; all these efforts to get his ripe cane cut and delivered had come to nothing. The carts stood empty. The mules gravely ate the long guinea-grass. The cane-tops waved in the soft breath of the northeast trade wind, while those three days stretched themselves out to their conclusion.

This conclusion took place in the daytime, about ten o'clock in the morning of the fourth day, and after that, which was a very brief and apparently meaningless matter indeed, the hands sheepishly resumed the driving of their mule-carts and the plying of their canebills, and the Fountain cane travelled slowly down the rutted hill road toward the factory below. On that morning, before resuming their work, the whole village had accompanied young Silvio Fabricius as he walked ahead of them up toward the source of the perennial stream, stepped out into the field, and clasped his arms about a young, but tall and promising coconut palm which stood there as though accidentally, in solitary towering grandeur. There the villagers had left the little black boy when they turned away and filed slowly and si-

lently back to the village and to their interrupted labor.

There, beside his tree, Grumbach said, Silvio Fabricius had stood ever since, only occasionally coming in to the village and then at any hour of the day or night, apparently "reporting" something to that same oldest inhabitant, a gnarled, ancient grandfather with pure white wool; after which brief visit he would at once, and with an unshaken gravity, return to his tree. Food, said Grumbach, was always carried out to him from the village. He toiled not, neither spun! There, day and night, under the blazing sun, through showers and drenching downpours, erect, apparently unsleeping—unless he slept standing up against his tree as Grumbach suspected—stood Silvio Fabricius; and there he had stood, except when he climbed the tree to trim out the "cloth" or chase out a rat intent on nesting up there, or to gather the coconuts, for eleven years.

The coconuts, it seemed, were his perquisite. They were, Grumbach said, absolutely *tabu* to anybody else!

Grumbach's attitude toward Silvio Fabricius was, it came out, one of fear! That his "fear" of this young Negro went deep I sensed. I was, later, to see my suspicion justified!

FOR a long time I had no occasion to revisit Great Fountain. But, six years later, while in the States during the summer, I made the acquaintance of a man named Carrington who wanted to know "all about the Virgin Islands" with a view to investing some money there in a proposal to grow pineapples on a somewhat large scale. I talked with Mr. Carrington at some length, and in the course of our discussions it occurred to me that Great Fountain estate would be virtually ideal for his purpose. Here was a very considerable acreage; the land, as I well

knew, was very rich; the Copenhagen Company would probably rent it out for a period of years for a very reasonable price, since it was bringing them in nothing.

I spread before Carrington these advantages, and he travelled down on the ship with me that autumn to make an investigation in person.

Carrington, a trained fruit-grower, spent a day with me on the estate, and thereafter with characteristic American energy started in to put his plan into practise. A lease was easily secured on terms mutually advantageous, the village was repaired and the fallen stone cabins rebuilt, and within a few weeks cultivating-machinery of the most modern type began to arrive on the Frederiksted wharf.

After a considerable consultation with Hans Grumbach, to whose lamentations over the restrictions of town life I had been listening for years, I recommended him to Mr. Carrington as manager of the laborers, and Hans, after going over the matter with his good wife and coming to an amicable arrangement, went back to Great Fountain, where a manager's house had been thrown up for him on the foundation of one of the ruined buildings. At Carrington's direction, Grumbach set the estate laborers at work on the job of repairing the roads, and, as the village cabins went up one after another, other laborers, enticed by the prospect of good wages, filled them up and ancient Great Fountain became once more a busy scene of simple industry.

During these preparatory works on the estate I was up there several times, because I was naturally interested in Joseph Carrington's venture being a success. I had, indeed, put several thousand dollars into it myself, not solely because it looked like a good investment, but in part for sentimental reasons connected with my

great-uncle. On these occasions, being by then thoroughly familiar with the odd native speech, I made it a point to visit the village and talk at length with the "people." They were courteous to me, markedly so; "deferential" would be a better word to describe their attitude. This, of course, was wholly due to the family connection. Only a very few of them, and those the oldest, had any personal recollection of Captain McMillin, but his memory, aided by the folksong to which I have alluded, was decidedly green among them.

In the course of my studies of Negro matters, especially African manners and customs, which had included a wide course of reading, for I wished to master that abstruse subject, I had run across the peculiar affair of a "tree-man." I understood, therefore, the status of Silvio Fabricius in that queer little Black community; why he had been "devoted" to the tree; what were the underlying reasons for that strange sacrifice.

It was, on the part of that handful of nearly pure-blooded Dahomeyan villagers there at my great-uncle's old place, an attempt, a recrudescence perhaps—a revival, certainly—of a custom probably as old as African civilization. For—the African *has* a civilization. He is at a vast disadvantage when among Caucasians, competing as he necessarily must with Caucasian "cultures." His native problems are utterly different, utterly diverse, from the White Man's. The African's whole history among us Caucasians is a history of more or less successful adaptation. Place an average American businessman in the heart of "uncivilized" Africa, in the Liberian hinterland, for example, and what will he do—how survive? The answer is simple. He will perish miserably, confronted with the black jungle night, the venomous insect-life, the attacks of wild beasts, the basic problem of how to

feed and warm himself; for even this last is an African problem. African nights chill to the very bone. I know. I have been on *safari* in Uganda, in British East Africa, and in Somaliland, and I speak from experience.

Africans, supposedly static in cultural matters, have solved all these problems. And, very prominent among these, especially as it concerns the agricultural nations — for there are, perhaps, as many Black nations, kindreds, peoples, tongues, as there are Caucasian—is, of course, the question of weather.

Hence, the "tree-man."

Introduced with the ceremonies which were ancient when Hammurabi sat on his throne in Babylon, a young boy is dedicated to a forest tree. Thereafter he spends his life beside that tree, cares for it, loves it, "listens" to it, becomes "the-brother-of-the-tree" in time. He is "set apart." To the tree he devotes his entire life, dying at last beside it, in its shade. And—this is African "culture" if you will; a culture of which we Caucasians get, perhaps, the faint reactions in the, to us, meaningless jumble of Negro superstition which we sense all about us; the "stupidness" of the West Indies; faint, incomprehensible reflections of a system which, in itself, is practical, dogmatic, and utilitarian.

These Negroes at Great Fountain were, primarily, agriculturists. They had the use of the soil bred deeply in their blood and bones. That, indeed, is why the canny French brought their Hispaniola slaves from Dahomey. Left to themselves at the old estate in the north central hills of Santa Cruz, the little community rapidly reverted to their African ways. They tilled the soil; sporadically, it is true; yet, they tilled it. They needed a weather prognosticator. There are sudden storms in summer throughout the vast sweep of the West India Islands,

devastating storms, hurricanes indeed; long, wasting periods of drought. They needed a tree-man up there. They set apart Silvio Fabricius.

That fact made the young fellow what a White man would call "sacred." Not for nothing had they danced and performed their "stupid" rites those three days and nights to the detriment of Hans Grumbach's sugar-cane. No. Silvio Fabricius from the moment he had clasped his arms about the growing coconut palm was as much a person "set apart," dedicated, as any White man's pundit, priest, or yogi. Hence the various *tabus* which, like the case of the green coconuts, had puzzled Hans Grumbach. He must never take his attention away from the tree. There, beside it, he was consecrated to live and to die. When he departed from his "brother the tree," it was only for the purpose of reporting something which the tribe should know; something, that is, which his brother the tree had told him! There would be drenching rain the second day following. A plague of small green flies would, the third day later, come to annoy the animals. The banana grove must be propped forthwith; otherwise, a high wind, two days hence, would nullify all the work of its planting and care.

Such were the messages that Silvio Fabricius, austere, introspective, unnoticed, his mind fully preoccupied with his brotherhood to the tree, brought to his tribe; proceeded, the message delivered, austere back to his station beside the magnificent palm.

All this, because of my status as the great-nephew of an old Bukra (White Lord) whom he remembered with love and reverence, and because he discovered that I knew about tree-men and many other matters usually sealed books to Bukras, the old fellow who was the village patriarch, who, by right of his se-

niority, received and passed on from Silvio the messages from Silvio's brother the tree, amply substantiated. There was nothing secretive about him, once he knew my interest in these things. Such procedure as the securing of a tree-man for his tribe seemed to the old man entirely logical; there was no necessary secret about it, certainly not from sympathetic me, the "yoong marster" of Great Fountain Estate.

And Hans Grumbach, once he had finished with his road-work, not being aware of all this, but sensing something out of the ordinary and hence to be feared about Silvio Fabricius and his palm tree, decided to end the stupidity out there. *Grumbach decided to cut down the tree.*

If I had had any inkling of this intention I could have saved Grumbach. It would have been a comparatively simple matter for me to have said enough to Carrington to have him forbid it; or, indeed, as a partner in the control of the estate, to forbid it myself. But I knew nothing about it, and have in my statement of his intention to destroy the tree supplied my own conception of his motives.

GRUMBACH, although virtually Caucasian in appearance, was of mixed blood, and quite without the Caucasian background of superior quality which makes the educated West Indian *mestizo* the splendid citizen he is. Grumbach was quite devoid of the Caucasian aristocrat's tolerance for the preoccupations of the Blacks. To him such affairs were "stupidness," merely. Like others of his kind he held the Black People in a kind of contempt; was wholly, I imagine, without sympathy for them, though a worthy fellow enough in his limited way. And, perhaps, he had not enough Negro in him to understand instinctively even so

much as what Silvio Fabricius, the tree-man, stood for in his community.

He chose, cannily, one of the periods when Fabricius was away from his tree, reporting to the village. It was early in the afternoon, and Grumbach, having finished his road-work several days before, was directing a group of laborers who were grubbing ancient "bush"—heavy undergrowth, brush, rank weeds, small trees—from along the winding road which led from the village to the fountain or waterfall, now feeding, for the drought was no longer plaguing the island, a tumbling stream which Carrington intended to dam, lower down, for a central reserve reservoir.

The majority, if not all, of these laborers under his eye at the moment were new to the village, members of the increasing group which were coming into the restored stone cabins as fast as these became habitable. They were cutting out the brush with machetes, cane-bills, and knives, and, for the small trees, a couple of axes were being used from time to time. This work was being done quite near the tree, and from his position in the roadway overlooking his gang, Grumbach must have seen the tree-man leave his station and start toward the village with one of his "messages."

This opportunity—he had, unquestionably, made up his mind about it all—was too good to be lost. As I learned from the two men whom he detached from his grubbing-gang and took with him, Silvio Fabricius was hardly out of sight over the sweep of the lower portion of the great field near the upper edge of which the coconut palm towered, when Grumbach called the two axmen to follow him, and, with a word to the rest of the gang, led the way across the field's edge to the tree.

About this time Carrington and I were returning from one of our inspections of

the fountain. We had been up there several times of late, since the scheme for the dam had been working in our minds. We were returning toward the village and the construction work progressing there along that same pathway through the big field from which, years before, I had had my first sight of the tree-man.

As we came in sight of the tree, toward which I invariably looked when I was near it, I saw, of course, that Fabricius was not there. Grumbach and his two laborers stood under it, Grumbach talking to the men. One of them as we approached—we were still perhaps a hundred yards distant—shook his head emphatically. He told me later that Grumbach had led them straight to the tree and commanded them to chop it down directly, one working on either side, opposite each other, the ax-strokes to alternate with each other. Detailed instructions such as these are invariably given to such laborers in the West Indies.

Both men had demurred. They were not of the village, it is true, not, certainly, Dahomeyans. But—they had some idea, even after generations away from "Guinea," that here was something strange: something over which the suitable course was to "go stupid." Both men, therefore, "went stupid" forthwith.

Grumbach, as was usual with him, poor fellow, was vastly annoyed by this process. I could hear him barge out at the laborers, see him gesticulate. Then from the nearest, he seized the ax and attacked the tree himself. He struck a savage blow at it; then, gathering himself together, for he was stout like the middle-aged of all his class, and unused to such work, he struck again, somewhat above the place where the first ax-blow had landed on the tree.

"You'd better stop him, Carrington," said I, "and I will explain my reasons to you afterward."

Carrington cupped his hands and shouted, and both Negroes looked toward us. But Grumbach, apparently, had not heard, or, if he had, supposed that the words were directed to somebody other than himself. Thus, everybody within view was occupied, you will note—Carrington looking at Grumbach; the two laborers looking toward us; Grumbach intent upon making an impression on the tough coconut wood. I alone, for some instinctive reason, thought suddenly of Silvio Fabricius, and directed my gaze toward the point, down the long field, over which horizon he would appear when returning.

Perhaps it was the sound of the ax's impact against his brother the tree, apprehended by a set of senses for seventeen years attuned to the tree's moods and rustlings, to the "messages" which his brother the tree imparted to him; perhaps some uncanny instinct merely, that arrested him in his course toward the village down there, carrying the current "message" from the tree about tomorrow's weather.

As I looked, Silvio Fabricius, running lightly, erect, came over the distant "horizon" of the lower field's bosomed slope. He stopped there, a distant figure, but clearly within my view. Without taking my eyes off him I spoke again to Carrington:

"You must stop him, Carrington—there's more in this than you know. Stop him—at once!"

And, as Carrington shouted a second time, Grumbach raised the ax for the third blow at the tree, the blow which did not land.

As the ax came up, Silvio Fabricius reached for the small, sharp cane-bill which hung beside him from his trouser-belt, a cutting tool with which he smoothed the bark of his brother the tree on occasion; cut out annually the choking

mass of "cloth" from its top; removed fading fronds as soon as their decay reached the stage where they were no longer benefiting the tree; cut his coconuts. I could see the hot sunlight flash against the wide blade of the cane-bill as though it had been a small heliograph-mirror. Fabricius was about a thousand yards away. He raised the cane-bill in the air and with it made a sudden, cutting, pulling motion downward.

Fascinated, I watched him return the cane-bill to its place, on its hook, fastened to the belt at the left side.

But, abruptly, my attention was distracted to what was going on nearer at hand. Carrington's shout died, half uttered. Simultaneously I heard the yells of uncontrollable, sudden terror from the two laborers at the tree's foot. My eyes, snatched away from the distant tree-man, turned to Carrington beside me, glimpsing a look of terrified apprehension; then, with the speed of thought, toward the tree where one laborer was in the act of falling face-downward on the ground—I caught the terrified white gleam of his rolled eyes—the other, twisting himself away from the tree toward us, the very epitome of crude horror, his hands over his eyes. And my glance was turned just in time to see the great coconut which, detached from its heavy fibrous cordage up there, sixty feet above the ground, struck Grumbach full and true on the wide pith helmet which he affected, planter-wise, against the sun.

He seemed almost to be driven into the ground by the impact; the ax flew off at an angle, past the tree.

He never moved. And when, with the help of the two laborers, Carrington and I, having summoned a cart from the near-by road-gang cutting bushes, lifted the body, the head which had been that poor devil Grumbach's, was merely a mass of sodden pulp.

We took the body down the road in the cart, toward his newly erected manager's house. And a few yards along our way Silvio Fabricius passed us, running erectly, his somber face expressionless, his stride a kind of dignified lope, glancing not to right or left, speeding straight to his brother the tree which had been injured in his absence.

Looking back, where the road took a turn, I saw him, leaning now close beside the tree, his long fingers probing the two gashes which Hans Grumbach, who would never swing another ax, had made there, about two feet above the ground; while aloft the glorious fronds of the massive tree burgeoned like great sails in the afternoon trade wind.

Later that afternoon we sent the mortal remains of Hans Grumbach down the long hill road to Frederiksted in a cart, decently disposed, after telephoning his wife's relatives to break the sorrowful news to her. It was Carrington who telephoned, at my suggestion. I told him that they would appreciate it, he being the head of the company. Such *nuances* have their meaning in the West Indies, where the finer shades are of an importance. He explained that it was an accident, gave the particulars as he had seen them with his own eyes—Grumbach had been working under a tall coconut palm and a heavy coconut, falling, had struck him and killed him instantly. It had been a quite merciful death. . . .

THE next morning—we were at that time sleeping at Great Fountain as we oversaw in person the carrying out of the basic works there—I walked up toward the fountain again, alone, after a sleepless night of cogitation. I walked across the section of field between the newly grubbed roadside and the great tree. I walked straight up to the tree-

man, stood beside him. He paid no attention to me whatever. I spoke to him.

"Fabricius," said I, "it is necessary that I should speak to you."

The tree-man turned his gaze upon me gravely. Seen thus, face to face, he was a remarkably handsome person, now about thirty years of age, his features regular, his expression calm, inscrutable; wise with a wisdom certainly not Caucasian, such as to put into my mind the phrase: "not of this world." He bowed, gravely, as though assuring me of his attention.

I said: "I was looking at you yesterday afternoon when you came back to yon tree, over the lower end of the field—down there." I indicated where he had stood with a gesture. Again he bowed, without any change of expression.

"I wish to have you know," I continued, "that I understand; that no one else besides me saw you, saw what you did—with the cane-bill, I mean. I wish you to know that what I saw I am keeping to myself. That is all."

Silvio Fabricius the tree-man continued to look into my face, without any visible change whatever in his expression. For the third time he nodded, presumably to indicate that he understood what I had said, but utterly without any emotion whatever. Then, in a deep, resonant voice, he spoke to me; the first, and last, time I have ever heard him utter a word.

"Yo' loike to know, yoong marster," said he, with an impressive gravity, "me brudda"—he placed a hand against the tree's smooth trunk—"t'ink hoighly 'bout yo', sar. Ahlso 'bout de enterprise fo' pineopples. Him please', sar, yoong marster; him indicate-me yo' course be serene an' ahlso of a profit." The tree-man bowed again, and without another word or so much as a glance in my direc-

tion, detaching his attention from me as deliberately as he had given it when I first spoke to him, he turned toward his brother the tree, laid his face against the trunk, and slowly encircled the massive trunk with his two great muscular black arms. . . .

I arrived on the island the middle of October, 1928, coming down as usual from New York after my summer in the States. Our property at Great Fountain had suffered severely in the hurricane of the previous month, and when I arrived there I found Carrington well along with the processes of restoration. Many precautions had been taken beforehand and our property had suffered because of these much less than the other estates. I had told Carrington, who had a certain respect for my familiarity with "native manners and customs," enough about the tree-man and his functions tribally to cause him to heed the warning, transmitted by the now nearly helpless old patriarch of the village, and brought in by the tree-man four days before the hurricane broke—and two days before the government cable-advice had reached the island.

Silvio Fabricius had stayed beside his tree. On the third day, when it was possible for the villagers to get as far as the upper end of the great field near the fountain, he had been found, Carrington reported to me, lying in the field, dead, his face composed inscrutably, the great trunk of his brother the tree across his chest, which had been crushed by its great weight, when, uprooted by the wind, it had fallen.

And until they wore off there had been smears of earth, Carrington said, on the heads and faces of all the original Dahomeyan villagers and upon the heads and faces of several of the newer laborer families as well.