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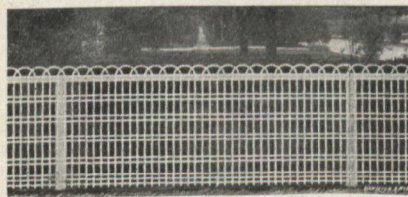
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mask, while the audience shouted.

"Little Balsa has chosen. What fate for the fallen? Ask her, priest."

The man stopped his capering and held the mouth of Little Balsa to his ear, nodding from time to time as though she were speaking to him and he heard what she said. Then he passed round the dais where Alan could not see him, and presently re-appeared holding Little Balsa in his right hand and in his left a great gold cup. A silence fell upon the place. He advanced to the first man who had jumped and offered him the cup. He turned his head away, but a thousand voices thundered, "Drink!" Then he took it and drank, passing it to a companion in misfortune, who in turn drank also and gave it to the third priest, he who would have snatched the mask had not the Asika lifted it out of his reach.

This man drained it to the dregs, and with an exclamation of rage dashed the empty vessel into the face of the chosen priest with such fury that the man rolled upon the ground and for a while lay there stunned. Now he who had drunk first began to spring about in a ludicrous fashion, and presently was joined in his dance by the other two.

At first Alan thought that the thing was a joke and that the men had merely been made mad drunk, till catching sight of their eyes in the moonlight, he perceived that they were in great pain, and turned indignantly to remonstrate with the Asika.

"Be silent, Vernoon," she said savagely, "blood is your *orunda*, and I respect it. Therefore, by decree of the god, these die of poison," and again she fell to laughing at the contortions of the victims.

Alan shut his eyes, and when at length, drawn by some fearful fascination, he opened them once more it was to see that the three poor creatures had thrown themselves into the water, where they rolled over and over like wounded porpoises, till presently they sank and vanished there.

This farce, for so they considered it, being ended and the stage, so to speak, cleared, the audience having laughed itself hoarse, set itself to watch the proceedings of the newly-chosen high-priest of Little Balsa, who now had recovered from the blow dealt to him by one of the murdered men. With the help of some other priests he was engaged in binding the fetish on to a little raft of reeds. This done, he laid himself flat upon a broad plank which had been laid ready for him at the edge of the water, placing the mask in front of him, and with a few strokes of his feet, that hung over the sides of the plank, paddled himself out to the centre of the canal where the god called Big Balsa floated, or was anchored. Having reached it he pushed the little raft off the plank into the water, and in some way that Alan could not see, made it fast to Big Balsa, so that now the two of them floated one behind the other. Then while the people cheered, shouting out that husband and wife had come together again at last, he paddled his plank back to the water's edge, sat down, and waited.

Meanwhile, at some sign from the Asika all the scores of priests and priestesses who were dressed as devils had filed off to right and left, and vanished, presumably to cross the water by bridges or boats that were out of sight. At any rate now they began to appear upon its further side and to wind their way singly among the thousand of the Asiki people who were gathered upon the rocky slope beyond in order to witness this fearsome entertainment. Alan observed that the spectators did not appear to appreciate the arrival amongst them of these priests, from whom they

seemed to edge away. Indeed, many of them rose and tried to depart altogether, only to be driven back to their places by a double line of soldiers armed with spears, who now for the first time became visible, ringing in the audience. Also other soldiers, and with them bodies of men who looked like executioners, showed themselves upon the further brink of the water and then marched off.

"What's the matter now?" Alan asked of Jeeki over his shoulder.

"All in blue funk," whispered Jeeki back, "joke done. Get to business now. Silly fools forget that when they laugh so much. Both Bongsas very hungry, and Asika want wipe out old scores. Presently you see."

Presently Alan did see, for at some preconcerted signal the devil priests, each of them, jumped with a yell at a person near to them, gripping him or her by the hair, whereon assistants rushed in and dragged them down to the bank of the canal. Here, to the number of a hundred or more, a wailing, struggling mass, they were confined in a pen like sheep. Then a bar was lifted and one of them allowed to escape, only to find himself in a kind of gangway which ran down into shallow water. Being forced along this he came to an open space of water exactly opposite to the floating fetishes, and there was kept a while by armed men with spears. As nothing happened they lifted their spears and the man bolted up an incline and was lost among the thousands of spectators.

The next one, evidently a person of rank, was not so fortunate. Jumping into the pool off the gangway, he stood there like a sheep about to be washed, the water reaching up to his middle. Then Alan saw a terrible thing, for suddenly the horrid, golden head of Big Balsa, towing Big Balsa behind it, began to swim with a deliberate motion across the stream until, reaching the man, it seemed to rear itself up and poke him with its snout in the chest as a turtle might do. Then it sank again into the water and slowly floated back to its station, directed by some agency or power that Alan could not discover.

At the touch of the god the man screamed like a horse in pain or terror, and soldiers leaping on him with a savage shout, dragged him up another gangway opposite to that by which he had descended, whereon, to all appearance more dead than alive, he departed into the shadows. The horns and drums set up a bray of triumph, the Asika clapped her hands approvingly, the spectators cheered, and another victim was bundled down the gangway and submitted to the judgment of the Bongsas, which came at him like a hungry pike at a frog. Then followed more and more, some being chosen and some let go, till at last, growing weary, the priests directed the soldiers to drive the prisoners down in batches until the pen in the water was full as though with huddled sheep. If the horrible golden masks swam at them and touched one of their number they were all dragged away; if these remained quiescent, they were let go.

"Lady," he said to the Asika, when she paused for a moment from her hand-clapping, "I am weary, I would sleep."

"What," she exclaimed, "do you wish to sleep on such a glorious night, when so many evil-doers are coming to their just doom? Well, well, go if you will; for then my promise is off me, and I can hasten this business and deal with the wicked before the people, according to our custom. Good-night to you, Vernoon, to-morrow we will meet," and she called to some priests to lead him away, and with him the Ogula cannibals whom she had given to him as servants.

(To be Continued.)

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