



Jungle Breath

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

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

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

Some few persons who read Spanish or Portuguese may have seen some mention of the case in South American newspapers; others will not have done so for nations naturally try to suppress news of the calamitous or horrible, just as the official communiques during the war suppressed the news of defeats. In fact, the correspondent of one of the New York newspapers at Rio de Janeiro told me afterwards that he tried to get some word of it through and was gently informed that even though some of the persons concerned were Americans, it would be infinitely more tactful not to send any report.

The curious may find details which I may have passed over in the "Jornal do Commercio," published at Rio de Janeiro or the "La Razon," at Pernambuco. For obvious reasons the names of the Americans involved have been changed. Those of the Brazilians have not. But I am wasting time talking about the story and not telling it.

The case began in Porto Verde, a small town in the more mountainous section of West Central Brazil on one of the lesser tributaries of the Amazon. Despite its smallness, it is really a New York in its cosmopolitanism. Its native population is Brazilian, of course, ranging in color from coal-black to mild-white—the color not always indicating place in society as there is no color line in Brazil. Besides these are Italians who have come to work on the coffee plantations nearby, Germans who have come to farm, English to develop the rich industrial resources of the region, a few Americans who have journeyed there to cooperate or compete with their fellow Anglo-Saxons, and a few others, pioneers in spirit, who seek the adventurer's ever-shifting frontier.

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

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

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

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

She was a very beautiful person. Her hair was black; her skin was tinged with olive, her eyes possessed that soft lustre peculiar to women of the tropics. She saw the old man, to his surprise turned and blew him a kiss, then rode on down the highway.



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

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

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

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

He wiped his wrinkled forehead with a tiny immaculate handkerchief. "Don't you . . . er . . . frighten me any more.

You save your energies for carrying that . . . er . . . bag of mine. You're letting it drag the ground every other foot. Yes, every other foot."

The Brazilian shrugged his shoulders apathetically. "No fright you," he mumbled thickly. "Why Frascito fright you? Tell truth. Frascito always tell truth. Anybody come here Porto Verde big fool. Bad people here. Murder. Theeings here. Evil theeings. Theeings which kill. One month, one people. Two months, two peoples. Three months, three peoples. And how? Knows nobody. Kill more peoples two, you see. Give Frascito tip for tell you this. Huh?"

The newcomer hesitated, put his hand into his pocket and, drawing out a coin, gave it to his gloomy servant. They reached the hotel from whose brick walls the plaster and paint had begun to fall, and entered. The newcomer wrote in a tiny, very legible hand "Lincoln Nunnally, Ridgewood, New Jersey, U. S. A."; saw his luggage safely deposited in his room, took out a package of artistically labeled cigars of a mildness which a teamster would have laughed to scorn, obtained a light after many futile, nervous attempts, then sauntered outside to a blistered balcony where a wooden blind flapped feebly in the hot wind, and looked down upon the narrow, shack-lined street.

He had been watching the motley passersby who made up the town's population for perhaps half an hour, when a young woman drove by in a sort of chaise. Beside her sat a negress holding in her arms a fine-featured, dark-skinned child of perhaps two years, which, judging by the young woman's affectionate glances, might be her son or daughter, though she seemed extremely young to be a mother.

She was a very beautiful person, Nunnally thought, as he watched her graceful movements. Her hair was black and strayed shiningly around her delicate ears; her skin was tinged with olive; her black eyes possessed that soft lustre peculiar to women of the tropics; he might easily have mistaken her for a lovely high caste Brazilian had not her informality of dress and the fact that she herself held the reins of the roan horse and drove in most vigorous fashion instantly betrayed her as American. She saw the old man, to his surprise turned and blew him a kiss, then rode on down the highway.

Nunnally chuckled amusedly and watched her drive round one of the great royal palm trees which grew everywhere along the road. Then his glance drifted to the window of the house opposite, where a tall individual of a decided Italian cast of countenance with a patch of red-grafted skin on his left cheek and an ugly protruding Adam's apple, stood pointing furtively in the direction of the girl and making some queer signals with his fingers. The old man, who could make nothing of these signs, at first thought they were intended for himself. Not satisfied, he looked about and saw that they were being directed toward an individual in the second story of a shabby dwelling adjoining the hotel. This man, like the other, was decidedly Italian, with a ragged stump instead of an arm and a mouth in which four of the upper teeth had been broken off as though he had been struck by a belying pin or a crowbar. As Nunnally saw the second man, the signaling abruptly ceased. Then the doors of both houses opened quietly, the two men stepped out and, taking opposite sides of the road, began skulking through the brush in the direction of the carriage.

Nunnally's first impulse was to hasten and tell the hotel people of the scene he had just witnessed. Then he realized that he was in a strange country, that he knew nothing whatsoever of the meaning of what he had seen, that he would probably be interfering in some perfectly innocent matter of two of the natives, and that he would undoubtedly make himself ridiculous.

"Everything is . . . er . . . queer down here," he murmured to himself. "Nothing normal since I landed at Rio . . . nothing. Everything seems somehow mad, but they all seem . . . er . . . happy. So I shall not worry about it."

He remained on the balcony a few moments longer, then rubbed his hand inquiringly over his feeble beard, strode down stairs and through a door in a corner of the hotel where a sign in Portuguese proclaimed a barber shop. He nodded to the barber and to the richly dressed Brazilian planter he was shaving, then sat down to await his turn. The face of the barber instantly attracted him, and with nothing else to do but smoke one of his dainty cigars, he began to study it.

"This city is a gallery of . . . er . . . rogues," he murmured to himself. "I doubt whether I should . . . er . . . trust myself to that barber. I . . . er . . . doubt it."

It was undoubtedly an odd face, a face such as one sees only in the meeting places of the world where racial mixtures are common. Such a face as might be found in the obscure cafe of New York's Mott Street or Mulberry Bend, or of Paris' Montmartre or La Villette. To exaggerate slightly, for it is some times only by exaggeration than an accurate picture can be given, it was such a visage as might have resulted if a sculptor had begun to mold the head of one of the swarthy round-skulled Oriental races, but in the midst of his task had changed his design and completed it with a long angular head of an Anglo-Saxon.

The hair sweeping down over the high forehead was black, but the bushy eyebrows were in striking contrast blond; a thin fine mouth showed below a long hooked nose and heavy cheekbones; brilliant blue eyes flashed from deep-set sockets. But the line of these eyes was distinctly slanted and Chinese. About this there was no exaggeration, no doubt.

Further bizarreness was added by the left ear, which the base was sharp and triangular as though the lobe had been smoothly slashed off with a razor. Yet with all its bizarreness it was not a cruel face, though it gave the old man an uncomfortable feeling that he had seen it before.

At length the planter departed, Nunnally took the vacant chair. He noticed the barber glance singularly at him, but thought nothing of it and stretched out in his chair, closing his eyes as one resigning himself to necessary torture. He felt the other's deft fingers coursing over his cheek and was rapidly sinking into a doze when a few quiet words from the barber caused him to sit up on open-mouthed astonishment.

"What did you . . . er . . . say?" he demanded.

"I said, my dear Nanny, that I was wondering when you would come," the barber repeated in smooth, cultured accent. "And I added that you were always bad at remembering faces. Even such an unusual one as mine. When you've recovered suggest that we shake hands."

Recognition flashed into Nunnally's wrinkled visage. His thin hands seized the other's wrist. "Vilak!" he exclaimed. "Er . . . Vilak . . . er . . . really . . ." He jerked out his handkerchief again and wiped the bald top of his head. "You're very . . . er . . . unpleasant. My vocabulary's totally inadequate to . . . er . . . describe you. Do you realize that the shoe you gave me will take at least ten years off my already . . . er . . . short life? You have a sense of humor which is . . . er . . . perverted. . . Really perverted."

"Unfortunately too true. Too true, my dear Nanny," Vilak replied blandly as he flicked the razor against the other's lamentable beard. "But I'm afraid it can't be helped. What do you expect when a wild and strenuous manufacturer goes to the Balkans to sell a lot of steel rails, falls in love with lovely Balkan princess, supposedly with a streak of Turkish-Chinese blood in her veins—there's more Tartar in the Balkan races than most people realize—sells the rails, marries the princess, and they baptize their only child Vilaka Pennington West? Doesn't that only child—none other than myself—have to develop a sense of humor in order to keep from withering like a leaf?"

The old man shook his head in bewilderment. "I suppose it is you. You are always . . . er . . . where you ought not to be. Though I think I can be excused for not recognizing you after ten years . . . er . . . ten years. I had no reason to expect to see an one I knew here . . . er . . . in this wild place, and a . . . er . . . barber especially. Tell me, why are you . . . er . . . following an occupation so . . . er . . . unusual . . . yes positive . . . unusual? And what are you . . . er . . . doing here in a case? . . . It is a most . . . er . . . astonishing coincidence . . . yes, astonishing."

"It isn't a coincidence," Vilak replied suavely. "Quite the contrary. I sent for you."

(To Be Continued).

What sort of place is this mysterious Porto Verde, with its sinister jungle surroundings? A mysterious killing is disclosed in the next chapter.