

At the Bend of the Trail

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A brief story of Africa and a weird vegetable monstrosity that fought two white explorers in the jungle

THEY stood at the bend of the trail, young Bruce Armstrong and white-haired Hubert Whaley, conversing while their black bearers raised their tent and built a cooking-fire. The sun was low on the African horizon and they whiled away the minutes before supper by conversation.

"As I was saying," Whaley told his young friend, "the natives invest every unusual object—rock, hill or what-not—with a supernatural personality and give it a wide berth. Look at this sharp curve in the trail. For years they've been dodging out to one side, just to avoid that root."

He pointed to a strange growth in the lush grass. It was long and crooked, lying in the shape of a letter S. If straight it might have been ten feet long, and it tapered from the size of a man's ankle at the point where it sprouted from the ground to a whiplash tip. It might have been the root of a tree, but there was no stem within yards to which it might attach.

"Rum thing. Looks as if a tree must be growing upside down," commented Armstrong. "Branches in the ground, root in the air, what? A chap could write books and books about uncatalogued plants in these parts. And you say the boys won't touch it?"

"Not one of them," replied Whaley. "Can't say that I blame them. It looks uncanny enough."

"What utter rot!" cried the younger man. "Come now, Whaley, do you mean

to say you give a minute's serious thought to their superstitions?"

"I mean to say that Africa's full of strange beings and doings," was Whaley's sober response. "When you've been here as long as I have——"

"I'm turning missionary this moment," cut in Armstrong. "I don't begrudge the blacks their ideas, but when a good friend and Englishman gets a touch of their religion I have to do something about it.—Hi, you Johnnies!" he cried to the bearers on the other side of the curved trail. "Tumble over here. Tell 'em, Whaley, I don't speak their lingo yet."

At Whaley's call a score of plum-colored men gathered, eyeing the whites with respectful interest.

"Look here, you chaps," said Armstrong. "What's all this about roots and spirits and such like? It's a lot of foolishness, you know.—Pass that on to 'em, Whaley, will you?"

When Whaley had translated, the headman replied that their tribal beliefs had been taught them by wise old men, who must have known the truth.

"Rot!" cried Armstrong when Whaley had rendered this into English. "Rot, I say, and I'll prove it. You're afraid to touch this root, are you?" He stepped close and set his boot-heel on the growth. "Well, then, suppose I show you that it's perfectly harmless."

A cry of alarm went up from the bearers—a cry echoed by Whaley.

"Look out, Armstrong! Look out, man, it's moving!"

The free tip of the root was swaying to and fro, like the head of a blindworm. Even as Armstrong stared in chilled amazement it writhed up from the ground and curled back toward his foot. With a startled exclamation he jumped away. The root-tip sank quickly down and lay motionless again.

Whaley and Armstrong looked at each other, at the root, and at the retreating bearers.

"I call it odd," said Armstrong after a moment, in a voice that quivered ever so slightly. "Something to tell about back home, what?"

"Best leave it alone, old man," counseled Whaley. "Suppose we see what's for supper."

THEY ate in the gathering gloom, ate silently. In silence they smoked their pipes. The usual singing and laughing of the bearers were subdued also. Whaley noticed Armstrong's nervous fidgeting, wondered what to say, and said nothing. A dry rustle in the grass attracted their attention.

"What's that?" demanded Armstrong sharply. "A snake?"

"Let's have a look-see," suggested Whaley, taking the lantern from the tent-pole. "Dashed unpleasant things, snakes. Bring along the gun—it might be a big one."

But they found no snake, and the bearers, called to help look, said that there were few snakes in this part of the country. Finally the two whites returned to the fire to resume their smoking. Armstrong muttered, twitched and finally broke the silence.

"It's all nonsense, and I say it once for all."

"What's all nonsense? What do you mean?" asked Whaley, though he knew well enough.

"This beastly root business. It gets on my nerves. I can't forget it. When it writhed under my foot—ugh! My flesh crept."

"Don't try to worry it out," Whaley said. "You'll only go batty trying to explain it."

At that Armstrong jumped up, reached into the tool-box just inside the tent and grabbed a hand-ax. With this he strode away toward the trail.

"Don't be a silly ass, man," called Whaley, following him. "What are you going to do?"

"Going to cut that root out," flung back Armstrong. "I've bothered about it quite enough. I shan't sleep tonight, not while the thing's there."

"It's just on your nerves, Armstrong," said Whaley. "I tell you, it's nothing. Just a funny-looking plant that rustled when you kicked it.—Hm! What's this?"

They had come into the bend of the trail. The last rays of light showed them that there was no root there, no growing thing larger than a blade of grass, not even a hole to show where it might have been. The ax drooped in Armstrong's hand. The two stared at each other as the night rode down.

"Wood's scarce hereabouts," said Whaley in a low voice. "Perhaps the boys cut it up and used it for a fire."

Armstrong shook his head. "No, Whaley. You said yourself, and so did they, that it was a thing not to be touched."

THEY walked back to their camp. The brightness of the lantern shed a little comfort on them as they again sat in silence. "Bed?" suggested Whaley at last, and they entered the tent. "Now, forget—"

"You're a topping fellow, Whaley, but I don't need babying," said Arm-

strong, sitting on his cot to pull off his boots.

"Of course not. Go to sleep now, there's a good chap, and don't dream of roots."

"Dash it all, who's going to dream about 'em?" said Armstrong as they put out the light and lay down.

Silence yet again, and after a minute or two Whaley could hear Armstrong's deep, regular breathing. The young man was asleep, probably had dismissed the queer adventure of the evening as a trifle, But Whaley, as he himself had said, had lived too long in Africa to banish all strange things so lightly from his mind. He pondered long before he, too, dozed off.

He woke suddenly with a wild shriek splitting his ears, the shriek of a man in mortal terror. He sprang out of bed, shaking the sleep from his eyes. Moonbeams came through the half-opened flaps, showing Armstrong struggling on the ground between the cots. He was fighting somebody or something—Whaley could not see his antagonist. The older man dropped to his knees, reaching out to help. His hands fell on a quivering band that circled Armstrong's chest. He recoiled from it with a cry. He had touched wood, wood that moved and lived like flesh!

"Whaley — the thing — it's choking me!" gasped Armstrong in a rattling voice. "It has a spirit—it's after revenge——"

He writhed along the ground and half out of the tent, then collapsed. In the light from the moon Whaley saw a sight that stirred his white hair. A writhing, cable-like thing was grappling with Armstrong. It had wound twice around his body and arms, and the two loose ends were lashing to and fro like flails.

Whaley flung himself forward again.

One of the flailing ends fell on his head, knocking him back into the tent. He went sprawling, half stunned and almost out of the fight. His hand fell into the open tool-box. A single grab found the handle of the ax that Armstrong had picked up earlier in the evening. The feel of the weapon seemed to restore Whaley's strength. Once more he charged into the battle.

Armstrong barely quivered now. Only the nameless attacker moved. Whaley put out his hand and clutched the larger coil that crushed his friend's chest. Sinking his nails into the coarse, splintery skin that coated it, he dragged it a little free of its hold and struck with the ax. The blade sank deeply into the tough tissue. He wrenched the ax free, and the moonlight fell upon the gash, as white as fresh-cut pine.

The floundering coils churned with new, hostile energy, loosening their hold on the fallen Armstrong. Whaley dragged at them, and they leaped and twisted in his hand like a flooded fire-hose. The smaller end glided across the ground and whipped around Whaley's ankle, climbing it in a spiral. Another loop snapped on his wrist like a half-hitch, almost breaking it. He grunted at the crushing agony, but with a supreme effort, drew a length almost taut between arm and leg. With all the strength of his right arm he drove the ax. He felt the steel edge bite deep. The grip on wrist and ankle relaxed and he freed himself with a sudden struggle. The two sun-dried halves of the thing flopped and twisted on the ground, like the pieces of a gigantic severed worm.

Whaley's mind whirled and he yearned to let himself drop and swoon, but he lifted the ax and struck again and yet again. His chest panted, his brow streamed sweat, but he chopped

and chopped until only pulsating fragments lay around him. He dashed them all into the half-dead fire, which blazed quickly over this new food.

Then for the first time he realized that the native bearers were gathered, watching in frozen horror. He looked at them, then at the silent form of his partner. He

knelt and passed his hands over the still body.

"Broken arm—three cracked ribs," he said aloud. "Not bad for an evil spirit." He called to the headman. "Build up the fire, heat water. Bring a bottle of brandy. You other boys, carry him into the tent. Lord, what a country!"

