HATTERAS

By A. E. W. MASON (8740 Words)

The story was told to me by James Walker in the cabin of a seven-ton cutter, one night when we lay anchored in Helford River. It was towards the end of September; during this last week the air had grown chilly with the dusk, and the sea when it lost the sun took on a leaden and a dreary look. There was no other boat on the wooded creek and the swish of the tide against the planks had a very lonesome sound. All these circumstances I think provoked Walker to tell the story, but most of all the lonely swish of the tide against the planks. For it is the story of a man's loneliness and the strange ways into which loneliness misled his soul. However, let the story speak for itself.

Hatteras and Walker had been schoolfellows, though never classmates. Hatteras indeed was the head of the school and prophecy vaguely sketched out for him a brilliant career in some service of importance. The definite law, however, that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children overbore this prophecy. Hatteras, the father, disorganized his son's future by dropping unexpectedly through one of the trapways of speculation into the Bankruptcy Court beneath, just two months before Hatteras, the son, was to have gone up to Oxford. The lad was therefore compelled to start life in a stony world with a stock-in-trade which consisted of a schoolboy's command of the classics, a real inborn gift of tongues and the friendship of James Walker.

The last item proved of the most immediate value. For Walker, whose father was the junior partner in a firm of West African merchants, obtained for Hatteras an employment as the bookkeeper at a branch factory in the Bight of Benin.

Thus the friends parted. Hatteras went out to West Africa alone, and met with a strange welcome on the day when he landed. The incident did not come to Walker's ears until some time afterwards, nor when he heard of it did he at once appreciate the effect which it had upon Hatteras. But chronologically it comes into the story at this point, and so may as well be immediately told.

There was no settlement very near to the factory. It stood by itself on the swamps of the Forcados River with the mangrove forest closing in about it. Accordingly the captain of the steamer just put Hatteras ashore in a boat and left him with his traps on the beach. Half-a-dozen Kru boys had come down from the factory to receive him, but they could speak no English, and Hatteras at this time could speak no Kru. So that although there was no lack of conversation there was not much interchange of thought. At last Hatteras pointed to his traps. The Kru boys picked them up and preceded Hatteras to the factory. They mounted the steps to the verandah on the first floor and laid their loads down. Then they proceeded to further conversation. Hatteras gathered from their excited faces and gestures that they wished to impart information, but he could make neither head nor tail of a word they said, and at last he retired from the din of

their chatter through the windows of a room which gave on to the verandah, and sat down to wait for his superior, the agent.

It was early in the morning when Hatteras landed and he waited until midday patiently. In the afternoon it occurred to him that the agent would have shown a kindly consideration if he had left a written message or an intelligible Kru boy to receive him. It is true that the blacks came in at intervals and chattered and gesticulated, but matters were not thereby appreciably improved. He did not like to go poking about the house, so he contemplated the mud banks and the mud river and the mangrove forest, and cursed the agent. The country was very quiet. There are few things quieter than a West African forest in the daytime. It is obtrusively, emphatically quiet. It does not let you forget how singularly quiet it is. And towards sundown the quietude began to jar on Hatteras' nerves. He was besides very hungry. To while away the time he took a stroll round the verandah.

He walked along the side of the houses towards the back, and as he neared the back he heard a humming sound. The further he went the louder it grew. It was something like the hum of a mill, only not so metallic and not so loud; and it came from the rear of the house.

Hatteras turned the corner and what he saw was this—a shuttered window and a cloud of flies. The flies were not aimlessly swarming outside the window; they streamed in through the lattice of the shutters in a busy, practical way; they came in columns from the forest and converged upon the shutters; and the hum sounded from within the room.

Hatteras looked about for a Kru boy for the sake of company, but at that moment there was not one to be seen.

He felt the cold strike at his spine. He went back into the room in which he had been sitting. He sat again but he sat shivering. The agent had left no word for him.... The Kru boys had been anxious to explain—something. The humming of the flies about that shuttered window seemed to Hatteras a more explicit language than the Kru boys' chatterings. He penetrated into the interior of the house, and reckoned up the doors. He opened one of them ever so slightly and the buzzing came through like the hum of a wheel in a factory revolving in the collar of a strap. He flung the door open and stood upon the threshold. The atmosphere of the room appalled him; he felt the sweat break cold upon his forehead and a deadly sickness in all his body. Then he nerved himself to enter.

At first he saw little because of the gloom. In a while, however, he made out a bed stretched along the wall and a thing stretched upon the bed. The thing was more or less shapeless because it was covered with a black furry sort of rug. Hatteras, however, had little trouble in defining it. He knew now for certain what it was that the Kru boys had been so anxious to explain to him. He approached the bed and bent over it, and as he bent over it the horrible thing occurred which left so vivid an impression on Hatteras. The black furry rug suddenly lifted itself from the bed, beat about Hatteras' face, and dissolved into flies. The Kru boys found Hatteras in a dead swoon on the floor half-an-hour later, and next day, of course, he was down with the fever. The agent had died of it three days before.

Hatteras recovered from the fever, but not from the impression. It left him with a prevailing sense of horror and, at first, with a sense of disgust too.

"It's an obscene country," he would say. But he stayed in it, for he had no choice. All the money which he could save went to the support of his family, and for six years the firm he served moved him from district to district, from factory to factory.

Now the second item of his stock-in-trade was a gift of tongues, and about this time it began to bring him profit. Wherever Hatteras was posted, he managed to pick up a native dialect, and with the dialect inevitably a knowledge of native customs. Dialects are numerous on the west coast, and at the end of six years Hatteras could speak as many of them as some traders could enumerate. Languages ran in his blood; he acquired a reputation for knowledge and was offered service under the Niger Protectorate, so that when, two years later, Walker came out to Africa to open a new branch factory at a settlement on the Bonny River, he found Hatteras stationed in command there.

Hatteras, in fact, went down to Bonny River town to meet the steamer which brought his friend.

"I say, Dick, you look bad," said Walker.

"People are not, as a rule, offensively robust about these parts."

"I know that; but you're the weariest bag of bones I've ever seen."

"Well, look at yourself in a glass a year from now for my double," said Hatteras, and the pair went up river together.

"Your factory is next to the Residency," said Hatteras. "There's a compound to each running down to the river, and there's a palisade between the compounds. I've cut a little gate in the palisade as it will shorten the way from one house to the other."

The wicket gate was frequently used during the next few months—indeed more frequently than Walker imagined. He was only aware that, when they were both at home, Hatteras would come through it of an evening and smoke on his verandah. There he would sit for hours cursing the country, raving about the lights of Piccadilly Circus, and offering his immortal soul in exchange for a comic opera tune played upon a barrel-organ. Walker possessed a big atlas, and one of Hatteras' chief diversions was to trace with his finger a bee-line across the African continent and the Bay of Biscay until he reached London.

More rarely Walker would stroll over to the Residency, but he soon came to notice that Hatteras had a distinct preference for the factory and for the factory verandah. The reason for the preference puzzled Walker considerably. He drew a quite erroneous conclusion that Hatteras was hiding at the Residency—well, someone whom it was prudent, especially in an official, to conceal. He abandoned the conclusion, however, when he discovered that his friend was in the habit of making solitary expeditions. At times Hatteras would be absent for a couple of days, at times for a week, and, so far as Walker could ascertain, he never so much as took a servant with him to keep him company. He would simply announce at night his intended departure, and in the morning he would be gone. Nor on his return did he ever offer to Walker any explanation of his journeys. On one occasion, however, Walker broached the subject. Hatteras had come back the night before, and he sat crouched up in a deck chair, looking intently into the darkness of the forest.

"I say," asked Walker, "isn't it rather dangerous to go slumming about West Africa alone?"

Hatteras did not reply for a moment. He seemed not to have heard the suggestion, and when he did speak it was to ask a quite irrelevant question.

“Have you ever seen the Horse Guards’ Parade on a dark rainy night?” he asked; but he never moved his head, he never took his eyes from the forest. “The wet level of ground looks just like a lagoon and the arches a Venice palace above it.”

“But look here, Dick!” said Walker, keeping to his subject, “you never leave word when you are coming back. One never knows that you have come back until you show yourself the morning after.”

“I think,” said Hatteras slowly, “that the finest sight in the world is to be seen from the bridge in St. James’ Park when there’s a State Ball on at Buckingham Palace and the light from the windows reddens the lake and the carriages glance about the Mall like fireflies.”

“Even your servants don’t know when you come back,” said Walker.

“Oh,” said Hatteras quietly, “so you have been asking questions of my servants?”

“I had a good reason,” replied Walker. “Your safety”; and with that the conversation dropped.

Walker watched Hatteras. Hatteras watched the forest. A West African mangrove forest night is full of the eeriest, queerest sounds that ever a man’s ears hearkened to. And the sounds come not so much from the birds or the soughing of branches; they seem to come from the swamp-life underneath the branches, at the roots of the trees. There’s a ceaseless stir as of a myriad reptiles creeping in the slime. Listen long enough and you will fancy that you hear the whirr and rush of innumerable crabs, the flapping of innumerable fish. Now and again a more distinctive sound emerges from the rest—the croaking of a bull-frog, the whining cough of a crocodile. At such sounds Hatteras would start up in his chair and cock his head like a dog in a room that hears another dog barking in the street.

“Doesn’t it sound damned wicked?” he said with a queer smile of enjoyment.

Walker did not answer. The light from a lamp in the room behind them struck obliquely upon Hatteras’ face and slanted off from it in a narrowing column until it vanished in a yellow thread among the leaves of the trees. It showed that the same enjoyment which rang in Hatteras’ voice was alive upon his face. His eyes, his ears, were alert, and he gently opened and shut his mouth with a little clicking of the teeth. In some horrible way he seemed to have something in common with, he appeared almost to participate in, the activity of the swamp. Thus had Walker often seen him sit, but never with the light so clear upon his face, and the sight gave to him a quite new impression of his friend. He wondered whether all these months his judgment had been wrong. And out of that wonder a new thought sprang into his mind.

“Dick,” he said, “this house of mine stands between your house and the forest. It stands on the borders of the trees, on the edge of the swamp. Is that why you prefer it to your own?”

Hatteras turned his head quickly towards his companion, almost suspiciously. Then he looked back into the darkness, and after a little said:

“It’s not only the things you care about, old man, which tug at you; it’s the things you hate as well. I hate this country. I hate these miles and miles of mangroves, and yet I am fascinated. I can’t get the forests and the undergrowth and the swamp out of my mind. I dream of them at night. I dream that I am sinking into that black oily batter of mud. Listen,” and he suddenly broke off with his head stretched forward. “Doesn’t it sound wicked?”

“But all this talk about London?” cried Walker.

“Oh, don’t you understand?” interrupted Hatteras roughly. Then he changed his tone and gave his reason quietly. “One has to struggle against a fascination of that sort. It’s devil’s work. So for all I am worth I talk about London.”

“Look here, Dick,” said Walker. “You had better get leave and go back to the old country for a spell.”

“A very solid piece of advice,” said Hatteras, and he went home to the Residency.

The next morning he had again disappeared. But Walker discovered upon his table a couple of new volumes, and glanced at the titles. They were Burton’s account of his pilgrimage to El Medinah and Mecca.

Five nights afterwards Walker was smoking a pipe on the verandah when he fancied that he heard a rubbing, scuffling sound as if someone very cautiously was climbing over the fence of his compound. The moon was low in the sky and dipping down toward the forest, indeed the rim of it touched the treetops so that while a full half of the enclosure was lit by the yellow light, that half which bordered on the forest was inky black in shadow, and it was from the furthest corner of this second half that the sound came. Walker leaned forward listening. He heard the sound again, and a moment after a second sound, which left him in no doubt. For in that dark corner he knew that a number of palisades for repairing the fence were piled, and the second sound which he heard was a rattle as someone stumbled against them. Walker went inside and fetched a rifle.

When he came back he saw a negro creeping across the bright open space towards the Residency. Walker hailed to him to stop. Instead the negro ran. He ran towards the wicket gate in the palisade. Walker shouted again; the figure only ran the faster. He had covered half the distance before Walker fired. He clutched his right forearm with his left hand, but he did not stop. Walker fired again, this time at his legs, and the man dropped to the ground. Walker heard his

servants stirring as he ran down the steps. He crossed quickly to the negro and the negro spoke to him, but in English, and with the voice of Hatteras.

“For God’s sake keep your servants off!”

Walker ran to the house, met his servants at the foot of the steps and ordered them back. He had shot at a monkey he said. Then he returned to Hatteras.

“Dicky, are you hurt?” he whispered.

“You hit me each time you fired, but not very badly, I think.”

He bandaged Hatteras’ arm and thigh with strips of his shirt, and waited by his side until the house was quiet. Then he lifted him and carried him across the enclosure to the steps, and up the steps into his bedroom. It was a long and fatiguing process. For one thing Walker dared make no noise and must needs tread lightly with his load; for another, the steps were steep and rickety, with a narrow balustrade on each side waist-high. It seemed to Walker that the day would dawn before he reached the top. Once or twice Hatteras stirred in his arms, and he feared the man would die then and there. For all the time his blood dripped and pattered like heavy raindrops on the wooden steps.

Walker laid Hatteras on his bed and examined his wounds. One bullet had passed through the fleshy part of the forearm, the other through the fleshy part of his right thigh. But no bones were broken and no arteries cut. Walker lit a fire, baked some plantain leaves, and applied them as a poultice. Then he went out with a pail of water and scrubbed down the steps. Again he dared not make any noise; and it was close on daybreak before he had done. His night’s work, however, was not ended. He had still to cleanse the black stain from Hatteras’ skin, and the sun was up before he stretched a rug upon the ground and went to sleep with his back against the door.

“Walker,” Hatteras called out in a loud voice, an hour or so later.

Walker woke up and crossed over to the bed.

“Dicky, I’m frightfully sorry. I couldn’t know it was you.”

“That’s all right, Jim. Don’t you worry about that. What I wanted to say was that nobody had better know. It wouldn’t do, would it, if it got about?”

“Oh, I am not so sure. People would think it a rather creditable proceeding.”

Hatteras shot a puzzled look at his friend. Walker, however, did not notice it, and continued, “I saw Burton’s account of his pilgrimage in your room; I might have known that journeys of the kind were just the sort of thing to appeal to you.”

“Oh, yes, that’s it,” said Hatteras, lifting himself up in bed. He spoke eagerly—perhaps a thought too eagerly. “Yes, that’s it. I have always been keen on understanding the natives thoroughly. It’s after all no less than one’s duty if one has to rule them, and since I could speak their lingo—” he broke off and returned to the subject which had prompted him to rouse Walker. “But, all the same, it wouldn’t do if the natives got to know.”

“There’s no difficulty about that,” said Walker. “I’ll give out that you have come back with the fever and that I am nursing you. Fortunately there’s no doctor handy to come making inconvenient examinations.”

Hatteras knew something of surgery, and under his directions Walker poulticed and bandaged him until he recovered. The bandaging, however, was amateurish, and, as a result, the muscles contracted in Hatteras’ thigh and he limped—ever so slightly, still he limped—he limped to his dying day. He did not, however, on that account abandon his explorations, and more than once Walker, when his lights were out and he was smoking a pipe on the verandah, would see a black figure with a trailing walk cross his compound and pass stealthily through the wicket in the fence. Walker took occasion to expostulate with his friend.

“It’s too dangerous a game for a man to play for any length of time. It is doubly dangerous now that you limp. You ought to give it up.”

Hatteras made a strange reply.

“I’ll try to,” he said.

Walker pondered over the words for some time. He set them side by side in his thoughts with that confession which Hatteras had made to him one evening. He asked himself whether, after all, Hatteras’ explanation of his conduct was sincere, whether it was really a desire to know the native thoroughly which prompted those mysterious expeditions, and then he remembered that he himself had first suggested the explanation to Hatteras. Walker began to feel uneasy—more than uneasy, actually afraid on his friend’s account. Hatteras had acknowledged that the country fascinated him, and fascinated him through its hideous side. Was this masquerading as a black man a further proof of the fascination? Was it, as it were, a step downwards towards a closer association? Walker sought to laugh the notion from his mind, but it returned and returned, and here and there an incident occurred to give it strength and colour.

For instance, on one occasion after Hatteras had been three weeks absent, Walker sauntered over to the Residency towards four o’clock in the afternoon. Hatteras was trying cases in the Court-house, which formed the ground floor of the Residency. Walker stepped into

the room. It was packed with a naked throng of blacks, and the heat was overpowering. At the end of the hall sat Hatteras. His worn face shone out amongst the black heads about him white and waxy like a gardenia.

Walker, however, thinking that the Court would rise, determined to wait for a little. But, at the last moment, a negro was put up to answer to a charge of participation in fetish rites. The case seemed sufficiently clear from the outset, but somehow Hatteras delayed its conclusion. There was evidence and unrebutted evidence of the usual details—human sacrifice, mutilations, and the like, but Hatteras pressed for more. He sat until it was dusk, and then had candles brought into the Court-house. He seemed indeed not so much to be investigating the negro's guilt as to be adding to his own knowledge of fetish ceremonials. And Walker could not but perceive that he took more than a merely scientific pleasure in the increase of his knowledge. His face appeared to smooth out, his eyes became quick, interested, almost excited; and Walker again had the queer impression that Hatteras was in spirit participating in the loathsome ceremonies, and participating with an intense enjoyment. In the end the negro was convicted and the Court rose. But he might have been convicted a good three hours before. Walker went home shaking his head. He seemed to be watching a man deliberately divesting himself of his humanity. It seemed as though the white man was ambitious to decline into the black. Hatteras was growing into an uncanny creature. His friend began to foresee a time when he should hold him in loathing and horror. And the next morning helped to confirm him in that forecast.

For Walker had to make an early start down river for Bonny town, and as he stood on the landing-stage Hatteras came down to him from the Residency.

"You heard that negro tried yesterday?" he asked with an assumption of carelessness.
"Yes, and condemned. What of him?"

"He escaped last night. It's a bad business, isn't it?"

Walker nodded in reply and his boat pushed off. But it stuck in his mind for the greater part of that day that the prison adjoined the Court-house and so formed part of the ground floor of the Residency. Had Hatteras connived at his escape? Had the judge secretly set free the prisoner whom he had publicly condemned?

The question troubled Walker considerably during his month of absence, and stood in the way of his business. He learned for the first time how much he loved his friend, and how eagerly he watched for that friend's advancement. Each day added to his load of anxiety. He dreamed continually of a black-painted man slipping among the tree-boles nearer and nearer, towards the red glare of a fire in some open space secure amongst the swamps, where hideous mysteries had their celebration. He cut short his business and hurried back from Bonny. He crossed at once to the Residency and found his friend in a great turmoil of affairs.

“Jim,” said Hatteras, starting up, “I’ve got a year’s leave; I’m going home.”

“Dicky!” cried Walker, and he nearly wrung Hatteras’ hand from his arm. “That’s grand news.”

“Yes, old man, I thought you would be glad; I sail in a fortnight.” And he did.

For the first month Walker was glad. A year’s leave would make a new man of Dick Hatteras, he thought, or at all events restore the old man, sane and sound, as he had been before he came to the West African coast. During the second month Walker began to feel lonely. In the third he bought a banjo and learnt it during the fourth and fifth. During the sixth he began to say to himself, “What a time poor Dick must have had all those years with these cursed forests about him. I don’t wonder—I don’t wonder.” He turned disconsolately to his banjo and played for the rest of the year—all through the wet season while the rain came down in a steady roar and only the curlews cried—until Hatteras returned. He returned at the top of his spirits and health. Of course he was hall-marked West African, but no man gets rid of that stamp. Moreover there was more than health in his expression. There was a new look of pride in his eyes, and when he spoke of a bachelor it was in terms of sympathetic pity.

“Jim,” said he, after five minutes of restraint, “I am engaged to be married.”

Jim danced round him in delight. “What an ass I have been,” he thought; “why didn’t I think of that cure myself?” And he asked, “When is it to be?”

“In eight months. You’ll come home and see me through.”

Walker agreed and for eight months listened to praises of the lady. There were no more solitary expeditions. In fact, Hatteras seemed absorbed in the diurnal discovery of new perfections in his future wife.

“Yes, she seems a nice girl,” Walker commented. He found her upon his arrival in England more human than Hatteras’ conversation had led him to expect, and she proved to him that she was a nice girl. For she listened for hours to his lectures on the proper way to treat Dick without the slightest irritation and with only a faintly visible amusement. Besides she insisted on returning with her husband to Bonny River, which was a sufficiently courageous thing to undertake.

For a year in spite of the climate the couple were commonplace and happy. For a year Walker clucked about them like a hen after its chickens, and slept the sleep of the untroubled. Then he returned to England and from that time made only occasional journeys to West Africa. Thus for a while he almost lost sight of Hatteras, and consequently still slept the sleep of the untroubled. One morning, however, he arrived unexpectedly at the settlement and at once called on Hatteras. He did not wait to be announced, but ran up the steps outside the house and

into the dining-room. He found Mrs. Hatteras crying. She dried her eyes, welcomed Walker, and said that she was sorry, but her husband was away.

Walker started, looked at her eyes, and asked hesitatingly whether he could help. Mrs. Hatteras replied with an ill-assumed surprise that she did not understand. Walker suggested that there was trouble. Mrs. Hatteras denied the truth of the suggestion. Walker pressed the point and Mrs. Hatteras yielded so far as to assert that there was no trouble in which Hatteras was concerned. Walker hardly thought it the occasion for a parade of manners, and insisted on pointing out that his knowledge of her husband was intimate and dated from his schooldays. Therefore Mrs. Hatteras gave way.

“Dick goes away alone,” she said. “He stains his skin and goes away at night. He tells me that he must, that it’s the only way by which he can know the natives, and that so it’s a sort of duty. He says the black tells nothing of himself to the white man—never. You must go amongst them if you are to know them. So he goes, and I never know when he will come back. I never know whether he will come back.”

“But he has done that sort of thing on and off for years, and he has always come back,” replied Walker.

“Yes, but one day he will not.”

Walker comforted her as well as he could, praised Hatteras for his conduct, though his heart was hot against him, spoke of risks that every man must run who serves the Empire. “Never a lotus closes, you know,” he quoted, and went back to the factory with the consciousness that he had been telling lies.

It was a sense of duty that prompted Hatteras, of that Walker assured himself he was certain, and he waited—he waited from darkness to daybreak in his compound, for three successive nights.

On the fourth he heard the scuffling sound at the corner of the fence. The night was black as the inside of a coffin. Half a regiment of men might have passed him and he not have seen them. Accordingly he walked cautiously to the palisade which separated the enclosure of the Residency from his own, felt along it until he reached the little gate and stationed himself in front of it. In a few moments he thought that he heard a man breathing, but whether to the right or the left he could not tell; and then a groping hand lightly touched his face and drew away again. Walker said nothing, but held his breath and did not move. The hand was stretched out again. This time it touched his breast and moved across it until it felt a button of Walker’s coat. Then it was snatched away, and Walker heard a gasping in draw of the breath and afterwards a sound as of a man turning in a flurry. Walker sprang forward and caught a naked shoulder with one hand, a naked arm with the other.

“Wait a bit, Dick Hatteras,” he said.

There was a low cry, and then a husky voice addressed him respectfully as “Daddy” in trade-English.

“That won’t do, Dick,” said Walker.

The voice babbled more trade-English.

“If you’re not Dick Hatteras,” continued Walker, tightening his grasp, “you’ve no manner of right here. I’ll give you till I count ten, and then I shall shoot.”

Walker counted up to nine aloud and then——

“Jim,” said Hatteras in his natural voice.

“That’s better,” said Walker. “Let’s go in and talk.”

He went up the steps and lighted the lamp. Hatteras followed him and the two men faced one another. For a little while neither of them spoke. Walker was repeating to himself that this man with the black skin, naked except for a dirty loincloth and a few feathers on his head, was a white man married to a white wife who was sleeping—nay, more likely crying—not thirty yards away.

Hatteras began to mumble out his usual explanation of duty and the rest of it.

“That won’t wash,” interrupted Walker. “What is it? A woman?”

“Good Heaven, no!” cried Hatteras suddenly. It was plain that that explanation was at all events untrue. “Jim, I’ve a good mind to tell you all about it.”

“You have got to,” said Walker. He stood between Hatteras and the steps.

“I told you how this country fascinated me in spite of myself,” he began.

“But I thought,” interrupted Walker, “that you had got over that since—why, man, you are married,” and he came across to Hatteras and shook him by the shoulder. “Don’t you understand? You have a wife!”

“I know,” said Hatteras. “But there are things deeper at the heart of me than the love of woman, and one of these things is the love of horror. I tell you, it bites as nothing else does in the world. It’s like absinthe, that turns you sick at the beginning and that you can’t do without

once you have got the taste of it. Do you remember my first landing? It made me sick enough at the beginning, you know. But now——" He sat down in a chair and drew it close to Walker. His voice dropped to a passionate whisper, he locked and unlocked his fingers with feverish movements, and his eyes shifted and glittered in an unnatural excitement.

"It's like going down to hell and coming up again and wanting to go down again. Oh, you'd want to go down again. You'd find the whole earth pale. You'd count the days until you went down again. Do you remember Orpheus? I think he looked back, not to see if Eurydice was coming after him, but because he knew it was the last glimpse he would get of hell." At that he broke off and began to chant in a crazy voice, wagging his head and swaying his body to the rhythm of the lines—

> Quum subita incautum dementia cepit amantem
> Ignoscenda quidem scirent si ignoscere manes;
> Restitit Eurydicenque suam jam luce sub ipsa
> Immemor heu! victusque animi respexit. *
>
> This passage is from Virgil's *Georgics* (Book IV, lines 488–491), describing the tragic moment when Orpheus looks back at Eurydice, losing her forever. Here's a faithful English translation:
>
> *"When sudden madness seized the unthinking lover—*
> *Madness that might be pardoned, if the shades could pardon—*
> *He stopped, and just upon the very edge of light,*
> *Alas! forgetful, overcome, he looked back at his Eurydice."*

"Oh, stop that!" cried Walker, and Hatteras laughed. "For God's sake, stop it!"

For the words brought back to him in a flash the vision of a classroom with its chipped desks ranged against the varnished walls, the droning sound of the form-master's voice, and the swish of lilac bushes against the lower window panes on summer afternoons. Then he said, "Oh, go on, and let's have done with it."

Hatteras took up his tale again, and it seemed to Walker that the man breathed the very miasma of the swamp and infected the room with it. He spoke of leopard societies, murder clubs, human sacrifices. He had witnessed them at the beginning, he had taken his share in them at the last. He told the whole story without shame, with indeed a glowing enjoyment. He spared Walker no details. He related them in their loathsome completeness until Walker felt stunned and sick. "Stop," he said again, "stop! That's enough."

Hatteras, however, continued. He appeared to have forgotten Walker's presence. He told the story to himself, for his own amusement, as a child will, and here and there he laughed, and the mere sound of his laughter was inhuman. He only came to a stop when he saw Walker hold out to him a cocked and loaded revolver.

“Well?” he asked. “Well?”

Walker still offered him the revolver.

“There are cases, I think, which neither God’s law nor man’s law seems to have provided for. There’s your wife, you see, to be considered. If you don’t take it I shall shoot you myself now, here, and mark you I shall shoot you for the sake of a boy I loved at school in the old country.”

Hatteras took the revolver in silence, laid it on the table, fingered it for a little.

“My wife must never know,” he said.

“There’s the pistol. Outside’s the swamp. The swamp will tell no tales, nor shall I. Your wife need never know.”

Hatteras picked up the pistol and stood up.

“Good-bye, Jim,” he said, and half pushed out his hand. Walker shook his head, and Hatteras went out on the verandah and down the steps.

Walker heard him climb over the fence and then followed as far as the verandah. In the still night the rustle and swish of the undergrowth came quite clearly to his ears. The sound ceased, and a few minutes afterwards the muffled crack of a pistol-shot broke the silence like the tap of a hammer. The swamp, as Walker prophesied, told no tales. Mrs. Hatteras gave the one explanation of her husband’s disappearance that she knew, and returned broken-hearted to England. There was some loud talk about the self-sacrificing energy which makes the English a dominant race, and there you might think is the end of the story.

But some years later Walker went trudging up the Ogowe River in Congo Français. He travelled as far as Woermann’s factory in Njob Island, and, having transacted his business there, pushed up stream in the hope of opening the upper reaches for trade purposes. He travelled for a hundred and fifty miles in a little sternwheel steamer. At that point he stretched an awning over a whale-boat, embarked himself, his banjo and eight blacks from the steamer, and rowed for another fifty miles. There he ran the boat’s nose into a clay cliff close to a Fan village, and went ashore to negotiate with the chief.

There was a slip of forest between the village and the river banks, and while Walker was still dodging the palm creepers which tapestried it he heard a noise of lamentation. The noise came from the village, and was general enough to assure him that a chief was dead. It rose in a chorus of discordant howls, low in note and very long drawn out—wordless, something like the howls of an animal in pain, and yet human by reason of their infinite melancholy.

Walker pushed forward, came out upon a hillock fronting the palisade which closed the entrance to the single street of huts, and passed down into the village. It seemed as though he had been expected. For from every hut the Fans rushed out towards him, the men dressed in their filthiest rags, the women with their faces chalked and their heads shaved. They stopped, however, on seeing a white man, and Walker knew enough of their tongue to ascertain that they looked for the coming of the witch-doctor. The chief, it appeared, had died a natural death, and since the event is of sufficiently rare occurrence in the Fan country, it had promptly been attributed to witchcraft, and the witch-doctor had been sent for to discover the criminal. The village was consequently in a lively state of apprehension, for the end of those who bewitch chiefs to death is not easy. The Fans, however, politely invited Walker to inspect the corpse. It lay in a dark hut, packed with the corpse's relations, who were shouting to it at the top of their voices on the off-chance that its spirit might think better of its conduct and return to the body. They explained to Walker that they had tried all the usual varieties of persuasion. They had put red pepper into the chief's eyes while he was dying; they had propped open his mouth with a stick; they had burned fibres of the oil-nut under his nose. In fact they had made his death as uncomfortable as possible, but none the less he had died.

The witch-doctor arrived on the heels of the explanation, and Walker, since he was powerless to interfere, thought it wise to retire for a time. He went back to the hillock on the edge of the trees. Thence he looked across and over the palisade, and had the whole length of the street within his view.

The witch-doctor entered in from the opposite end to the beating of many drums. The first thing Walker noticed was that he wore a square-skirted eighteenth century coat and a tattered pair of brocaded knee breeches on his bare legs; the second was that he limped—ever so slightly. Still he limped, and with the right leg. Walker felt a strong desire to see the man's face, and his heart thumped within him as he came nearer and nearer down the street. But his hair was so matted about his cheeks that Walker could not distinguish a feature. "If I was only near enough to see his eyes," he thought. But he was not near enough, nor would it have been prudent for him to have gone nearer.

The witch-doctor commenced the proceedings by ringing a handbell in front of every hut. But that method of detection failed to work. The bell rang successfully at every door. Walker watched the man's progress, watched his trailing limb, and began to discover familiarities in his manner: "Pure fancy," he argued with himself. "If he had not limped I should have noticed nothing."

Then the doctor took a wicker basket, covered with a rough wooden lid. The Fans gathered in front of him; he repeated their names one after the other, and at each name he lifted the lid. But that plan appeared to be no improvement, for the lid never stuck. It came off readily at each name. Walker, meanwhile, calculated the distance a man would have to cover who walked across country from Bonny River to the Ogowe, and he reflected with some relief that the chances were several thousand to one that any man who made the attempt, be he black or white, would be eaten on the way.

The witch-doctor turned back the big square cuffs of his sleeves as a conjurer will do, and again repeated the names. This time, however, at each name he rubbed the palms of his hands together. Walker was seized with a sudden longing to rush down into the village and examine the man's right forearm for a bullet mark. The longing grew on him. The witch-doctor went steadily through the list. Walker rose to his feet and took a step or two down the hillock, when, of a sudden, at one particular name, the doctor's hands flew apart and waved wildly about him. A single cry from a single voice went up out of the group of Fans. The group fell back and left one man standing alone. He made no defence, no resistance. Two men came forward and bound his hands and his feet and his body with tie-tie. Then they carried him within a hut.

"That's sheer murder," thought Walker. He could not rescue the victim, he knew. But he could get a nearer view of the witch-doctor. Already the man was packing up his paraphernalia. Walker stepped back among the trees, and running with all his speed, made the circuit of the village. He reached the further end of the street just as the witch-doctor walked out into the open.

Walker ran forward a yard or so until he, too, stood plain to see on the level ground. The witch-doctor did see him and stopped. He stopped only for a moment and gazed earnestly in Walker's direction. Then he went on again towards his own hut in the forest.

Walker made no attempt to follow him. "He has seen me," he thought. "If he knows me he will come down to the river bank to-night." Consequently, he made the black rowers camp a couple of hundred yards down stream. He himself remained alone in his canoe.

The night fell noiseless and black, and the enclosing forest made it yet blacker. A few stars burned in the strip of sky above his head. Those stars and the glimmering of the clay bank to which the boat was moored were the only light which Walker had. It was as dark as that night when Walker waited for Hatteras at the wicket gate.

He placed his gun and a pouch of cartridges on one side, an unlighted lantern on the other, and then he took up his banjo, and again he waited. He waited for a couple of hours, until a light crackle as of twigs snapping came to him out of the forest. Walker struck a chord on his banjo, and played a hymn tune. He played, "Abide with me," thinking that some picture of a home, of a Sunday evening in England's summer time, perhaps of a group of girls singing about a piano, might flash into the darkened mind of the man upon the bank, and draw him as with cords. The music went tinkling up and down the river, but no one spoke, no one moved upon the bank. So Walker changed the tune, and played a melody of the barrel organs and Piccadilly Circus. He had not played more than a dozen bars, before he heard a sob from the bank, and then the sound of something sliding down the clay. The next instant, a figure shone black against the clay. The boat lurched under the weight of a foot upon the gunwale, and a man plumped down in front of Walker.

"Well, what is it?" asked Walker, as he laid down his banjo and felt for a match in his pocket.

It seemed as though the words roused the man to a perception that he had made a mistake. He said as much hurriedly in trade-English, and sprang up as though he would leap from the boat. Walker caught hold of his ankle.

"No, you don't," said he; "you must have meant to visit me. This isn't Henley," and he jerked the man back into the bottom of the boat.

The man explained that he had paid a visit out of the purest friendliness.

"You're the witch-doctor, I suppose," said Walker.

The other replied that he was, and proceeded to state that he was willing to give information about much that made white men curious. He would explain why it was of singular advantage to possess a white man's eyeball, and how very advisable it was to kill anyone you caught making Itung. The danger of passing near a cotton tree which had red earth at the roots provided a subject which no prudent man should disregard; and Tando, with his driver ants, was worth conciliating. The witch-doctor was prepared to explain to Walker how to conciliate Tando. Walker replied that it was very kind of the witch-doctor, but Tando did not really worry him. He was, in fact, very much more worried by an inability to understand how a native so high up the Ogowe River had learned to speak trade-English.

The witch-doctor waved the question aside, and remarked that Walker must have enemies. "Pussin bad too much," he called them. "Pussin woh-woh. Berrah well! Ah send grand krau-krau and dem pussin die one time."

Walker could not recollect for the moment any "pussin" whom he wished to die one time, whether from grand krau-krau or any other disease. "Wait a bit," he continued, "there is one man—Dick Hatteras!" and he struck the match suddenly. The witch-doctor started forward as though to put it out.

Walker, however, had the door of the lantern open. He set the match to the wick of the candle, and closed the door fast. The witch-doctor drew back. Walker lifted the lantern and threw the light on his face. The witch-doctor buried his face in his hands, and supported his elbows on his knees. Immediately Walker darted forward a hand, seized the loose sleeve of the witch-doctor's coat, and slipped it back along his arm to the elbow. It was the sleeve of the right arm, and there on the fleshy part of the forearm was the scar of a bullet.

"Yes," said Walker. "By God, it is Dick Hatteras!"

"Well?" cried Hatteras, taking his hands from his face. "What the devil made you tum-tum 'Tommy Atkins' on the banjo? Damn you!"

"Dick, I saw you this afternoon."

“I know, I know. Why on earth didn’t you kill me that night in your compound?”

“I mean to make up for that mistake to-night!”

Walker took his rifle on to his knee. Hatteras saw the movement, leaned forward quickly, snatched up the rifle, snatched up the cartridges, thrust a couple of cartridges into the breech, and handed the loaded rifle back to his old friend.

“That’s right,” he said. “I remember. ‘There are some cases neither God’s law nor man’s law has quite made provision for.’” And then he stopped, with his finger on his lip. “Listen!” he said.

From the depths of the forest there came faintly, very sweetly the sound of church-bells ringing—a peal of bells ringing at midnight in the heart of West Africa. Walker was startled. The sound seemed fairy work, so faint, so sweet was it.

“It’s no fancy, Jim,” said Hatteras, “I hear them every night, and at matins and vespers. There was a Jesuit monastery here two hundred years ago. The bells remain, and some of the clothes.” He touched his coat as he spoke. “The Fans still ring the bells from habit. Just think of it! Every morning, every evening, every midnight, I hear those bells. They talk to me of little churches perched on hillsides in the old country, of hawthorn lanes, and women—English women. English girls—thousands of miles away, going along them to church. God help me! Jim, have you got an English pipe?”

“Yes; an English briarwood and some bird’s-eye.”

Walker handed Hatteras his briarwood and his pouch of tobacco. Hatteras filled the pipe, lit it at the lantern, and sucked at it avidly for a moment. Then he gave a sigh and drew in the smoke more slowly and yet more slowly.

“My wife?” he asked at last, in a low voice.

“She is in England. She thinks you dead.”

Hatteras nodded.

“There’s a jar of Scotch whisky in the locker behind you,” said Walker.

Hatteras turned round, lifted out the jar and a couple of tin cups. He poured whisky into each and handed one to Walker.

“No, thanks,” said Walker. “I don’t think I will.”

Hatteras looked at his companion for an instant. Then he emptied deliberately both cups over the side of the boat. Next he took the pipe from his lips. The tobacco was not half consumed. He poised the pipe for a little in his hand. Then he blew into the bowl and watched the dull red glow kindle into sparks of flame as he blew. Very slowly he tapped the bowl against the thwart of the boat until the burning tobacco fell with a hiss into the water. He laid the pipe gently down and stood up.

"So long, old man," he said, and sprang out on the clay. Walker turned the lantern until the light made a disc upon the bank.

"Good-bye, Jim," said Hatteras, and he climbed up the bank until he stood in the light of the lantern. Twice Walker raised the rifle to his shoulder, twice he lowered it. Then he remembered that Hatteras and he had been at school together.

"Good-bye, Dicky," he cried, and fired. Hatteras tumbled down to the boat-side. The blacks down river were roused by the shot. Walker shouted to them to stay where they were, and as soon as their camp was quiet he stepped ashore. He filled up the whisky jar with water, tied it to Hatteras' feet, shook his hand, and pushed the body into the river. The next morning he started back to Fernan Vaz.