

**THE GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST**

THE GUARDIANS OF THE FOREST

Very little South of the Equator there lies a tract of Country which some few years ago was boomed by certain speculators in land. Little or nothing was known of the region; it was a political asset run by the Foreign Office in England and by a handful of Englishmen, all officials, on the spot. It was not a land flowing with milk and honey; it was not a health resort; and, above all, it was not a place where fortunes could be made—rapidly or otherwise. It was however loudly <sup>acclaimed</sup> boomed, and white men from all parts of the world poured into it, thinking to pick up wealth and fame. The scramble for money went on under a blistering tropical sun and in deadly fever-ridden swamps. The white men fought the blacks, trying to shoulder them out of their possessions, successfully pushing them farther and farther back, only to sicken and die themselves on their hardly-gained foothold.

Africa — that lodestone<sup>as</sup> which draws men on, and ever on, through danger and dread, until she has gripped them so firmly that there is no going back,—took her toll of the men who invaded her dominion in the attempt to wrest gold from her

hidden treasury: <sup>Report represented</sup> (the highlands as the finest health resort of the world, where everything would grow; and in the Coast-region fortunes were to be made in Vanilla and Cotton. The forests were full of rubber; vines were waiting to be tapped, and fibre ready to be cut.

At the height of the boom two young men, Thomas Harvey and George Sox, joined the rush. They were both of them blessed (or <sup>perhaps</sup> ~~shall we say~~ cursed?) with some hundreds a year, which effectually prevented them from working, and was not sufficient to supply them with what they considered the necessaries of life. Thomas Harvey, the elder of the two, had once been <sup>on a</sup> big game shooting <sup>expedition</sup> in the hinterland of this portion of Africa, and <sup>he</sup> felt <sup>that</sup> he knew Africa through and through. He had a slight smattering of the trade language of the country, could curse his porters freely, and give them intelligible, if ungrammatical, orders.

Having previously halted a couple of weeks at the port of Baiñan, while collecting and organizing his shooting expedition, he had been enormously attracted by its brilliant beauty and lavish fertility. The towering and graceful cocconut palms, the great polished mango trees, the waving emerald bananas, the guavas, custard-apples, pineapples, oranges and limes — not to mention the more homely maize, millet and sweet potatoes which covered the land in a jostling profusion, ~~and which grew with a minimum of cultivation~~

had impressed him with the dormant possibilities of the Coast belt. Long after he had left Africa behind him, he used to dream of a return, the result of which would be an Arcadian life of ease and plenty in Africa for a few years, and an ultimate large fortune to be spent in Europe. Africa, unknown to him, had set her seal upon him, and her strong cords pulled him back. <sup>(When this very portion of the country)</sup> leapt into prominence on the crest of the speculators' wave, Thomas Harvey made up his mind to try his luck there, and he persuaded his younger and quite inexperienced friend to accompany him. He had seen enough of Africa to know that two white men can get through where one alone goes under. Being a man of considerable insight and acumen, Harvey decided that he would not join the rush of white men to the Uplands, some <sup>three</sup> ~~five~~ hundred miles from the Coast. On his previous trip he had seen the richness of the Coast belt, and he determined to try his luck in that region. He remembered the stories his porters, all of them Coast men, had told him of the wonderful plenty of their land; how they had described its great forests to him, forests whose huge trees were draped with rubber vines, and whose timber was crying out to be cut and used. When closely questioned about these forests, however, the men had always looked uneasy; yes, they were there, and richer than words could describe, but black men could not negotiate them, as they were inhabited by evil and powerful spirits, and he who entered their green portals was swallowed up for ever. Once or twice men bolder than their neighbours

had penetrated, and one or two had returned. But they were no longer men; they gibbered like the monkeys, they knew not their friends, and a ~~dark~~ <sup>dark</sup> terror was ever behind them, pursuing them till their death..... ~~It is~~ <sup>To harrow these ghosts, embodying</sup> the lurking cruelty of Africa, the violence which lies just below the smiling mask of beauty, ~~which forms~~ <sup>suggested</sup> part of the attraction, ~~or is it the feeling that~~ <sup>He was convinced</sup> ~~success would crown his venture.~~ though others ~~had~~ <sup>had</sup> failed and fallen, ~~we will succeed?~~ <sup>(Who</sup> ~~can tell what is the glamour that beckons to the Unknown?~~

<sup>his</sup> Undoubtedly ~~Thomas Harvey's~~ selection of the Coast as the seat of his speculative manoeuvres, was a sound idea. In the first place he had it practically to himself, and could make advantageous terms with the Natives. No one was there to bid against him for land; no one was there to compete with him and raise prices; and yet he was shrewd enough to foresee that in a very few years the highlands would be deserted and the Coast lands sought after. He fully realized that no white man could become a settler in those regions; every year or eighteen months he must return to Europe to renew his lease of life. But the man with small permanent means of his own can afford to do this; and the ever-increasing demand for rubber and fibre led Harvey to believe that in very few years' time he would be drawing a large income from his African property.

Every facility was given to the two men by the Authorities; they were told to choose what land they wanted, and, if possible, to get on friendly terms with the Local Chief, to ascertain

whether he <sup>and</sup> ~~or~~ his tribe were willing to part with the land. If the natives consented, the administration would then go into the matter and legally arrange for the transfer.

The officials did not appear to hold the same rosy views in regard to the future of the country as the speculators did; they talked of not unfrequent droughts and of very frequent fevers; they said that ticks and tse-tse flies abounded to destroy one's beasts, and that mosquitoes swarmed to the undoing of mankind. They evidently regarded Harvey and his friend as a couple of harmless lunatics; for the thought that men, with enough money to enable them to live elsewhere, should, of their own free will, select this part of the world as a residence, was quite beyond them.

With an escort of twenty-five porters, and five khaki-clad policemen, Thomas Harvey and George Cox set off in high spirits for the unknown. Their idea was to march to a place called Idda — a small Arab town; about sixty miles from headquarters, which lay on the edge of the forest-belt. From Idda they proposed to work their way through the forest, reported to be several hundred miles wide, to see for themselves if the native accounts in regard to the rubber were true, and finally to try to find a suitable piece of land for their headquarters.

This they determined should be near the forest. They would obtain the rights to work the rubber, and at the same time start

a plantation of sisal or cotton on their own property. //

The march was full of interest <sup>to the ~~two~~ <sup>both</sup> men</sup> The start was made before dawn, in the peculiar hush which hangs like a curtain veiling the birth-throes of the new day, silencing all nature as well as mankind — a perpetual contrast to the African night which teems with movement and sound. In this furtive half-hour before the sun leaps into view, banishing darkness and dread, men learn deeply of the great cruel spirit of Africa; <sup>spirit</sup> following, waiting and watching, patient for the right moment, and then swift to drag down and destroy her victim. Even the porters, those ~~most~~ noisy and cheerful members of society, who laugh, sing, and shout with untiring persistence night and day, are cowed into silence and pad noiselessly along, casting furtive glances towards the shadows, expecting to see at any moment that which they know for ever follows and must finally claim them. The trees are motionless, not a whisper of leaves or crackle of twigs; the birds alert but immovable; the animals awake but afraid to stir. ~~The silence is of expectancy — the expected event one of violence and dread.~~ Suddenly the sun floods the ~~frightened~~ world with brightness and hope, and man, beast, insect, and even inanimate nature unite to cast their burden from them. A faint breeze rises, and <sup>stirs</sup> ~~rattles~~ the quiet leaves; a bird breaks into <sup>a</sup> sudden note of song; insects hum in the grass; the sharp bark of a dog tears the air; and the porters laugh shamefacedly, wondering, now that it is past, what held them in that iron silence of fear.

A sigh of relief rises from all sides - another day is born.

Harvey had previously experienced these feelings on his shooting trip, but they gripped him anew and affected him much more strongly than they did George Cox, who was <sup>influenced</sup> ~~rather affected~~ by the general uneasiness of the caravan <sup>rather</sup> than by personal disquiet. He was of a phlegmatic and unimaginative nature, and the unseen had little or no significance for him. Harvey lighted his cigarette with a not quite steady hand, and the caravan dipped into a vast cocconut plantation. Sun-flecked shadows, of brilliant <sup>emerald</sup> green surrounded them; the tall, slender stems of the palms, cut the green with silver-grey lines; a cocconut thudded to the ground, and then another; a flight of green parrots flashed screaming through the palm leaves; and a couple of partridges scudded across the track. In the distance a column of blue smoke indicated a native hut, and probably an awaking village - the sounds of stirring humanity were in the air. Already two or three women, their graceful figures draped in <sup>coloured</sup> simple cloths, were making their way to the well with earthenware pots lightly poised on their heads. A party of fishermen with newly-mended nets joined the caravan, cheerfully greeting friends and strangers alike, asking for and giving news, looking curiously at the two white men, and on Harvey's saluting them in their own language evincing a childlike pleasure. They accompanied the caravan for about half-an-hour until the track dropped on to the sea-shore. There a fairyland met the eye. A silver-



white beach of finest shell-spotted sand; a sea of every shade of blue and green, lying like a sheet of variegated glass immovable in the glaring sunlight. Some distance out, a semi-circle of brilliant white cut the colour and showed where the edge of the reef lay — the breakers hurling themselves forever against it with a dull ceaseless booming, audible at a distance of several miles. Native fish-traps, like lines of irregular hurdles, ran out into the water at intervals of about five hundred yards, their reflections so perfect as to make trap and sea one. ~~Beauty and colour flooded the eye.~~ The Emerald palms edged the white beach; and the blue sea and the blue sky insistently repeated the dominant note of colour.

After a couple of miles walk along the <sup>hard</sup> level white sand, the track turned upwards and inwards again, This time it wound away between walls of greenery — thick bush, some twelve feet high, shut in the track and shut out the view and the air. It was stifling and monotonous; for though the green tunnel was hiding both elephant and buffalo, nothing but an occasional footprint, or some roughly torn down and broken branches, indicated their nearness. It was a relief when the walls suddenly broke away and the caravan found itself in a zone of cultivation again. Huge mango trees, their dark-green polished leaves throwing great circular patches of grateful shade, dotted the path at irregular intervals; and the ground between them was planted with maize, millet & sweet potatoes.

Here and there a small group of native huts showed in the distance. The march of four hours ended in one of these plantations, and the camp was pitched in cool comfort under the shade of the mangoes. The luxury of hot bath,<sup>a</sup> ~~and~~ change, and a comfortable meal, followed by a siesta in a comfortable long chair, can hardly be ~~appreciated~~<sup>colimated</sup> by those who have not tramped for hours under a tropical sun on an inferior native track. Our two heroes appreciated to the full the fact that their days work was ~~done~~<sup>over</sup>, and though they strolled out later in the day to watch the natives tapping the cocoanut palms, and the women drawing water, they did nothing more than exchange friendly greetings with them and arrange to supplement their commissariat department with half a dozen sinewy fowls, a *fezful* of doubtful looking eggs, and a great basket of fruit.

Five days' marching, one day just like the last, brought the caravan to its goal - Idda. Here a permanent camp was made; a large hut of palm leaves was built for the white men, ~~and~~ surrounded by a circle of smaller huts for the porters. Peace and plenty reigned; the Chief, a courteous old Arab called Said bin Ali, was friendly and helpful, and food was abundant.

Three days after their arrival Harvey asked the Chief to come in to hear what they wanted. By this time both sides had taken stock of one another, and the white men having passed muster with the Chief, he was willing to do all that he could

for them. He had taken one of those strong fancies to Harvey which coloured people so frequently feel, and so seldom make a mistake over. The liking was mutual, for Harvey had been greatly attracted by the courteous behaviour and genuine helpfulness and intelligence of the old Arab. Matters looked well, therefore, and hope rose high in Harvey's heart — he was healthy, happy, and according to his own ideas, on the high road to making his fortune. To him, Africa, or rather this particular part of Africa, was the Promised Land — it was the "best <sup>of all</sup> possible worlds". He even infected Cox with some of his superabundant enthusiasm, as he painted a brilliant future of wealth and success.

Said bin Ali spoke confidently of the rubber, but when questioned as to guides to conduct the caravan through the forest, he became silent and doubtful. He maintained that the forest itself was safe, but the belt surrounding it was, he said, haunted by evil spirits. Could one pass untouched through this belt, the dangers were over; but his own idea was that the spirits of the forest, resented <sup>my</sup> intrusion on the part of men, ~~so they~~ placed their guardians at <sup>the</sup> gates to prevent human ingress. Being pressed, he confessed unwillingly that as a young man he had, with certain of his companions, once penetrated into this danger-laden zone; that there they had found the ruins of a great city buried among undergrowth and trees, hidden to the casual passer-by. The city walls and gateways still stood in parts; the mosques were almost intact, their decorations untouched upon the walls. Houses, large & small, wells, baths, signs of where the streets had run, and

even the burial ground, were still distinguishable. The strange part was that the remains of household ~~furniture~~, cooking utensils, agricultural and other implements, were everywhere visible. The inhabitants of this hidden city must have left it in the utmost haste, taking nothing with them; or they must have been stricken to death and had no time to flee. <sup>In</sup> ~~On~~ the grass-covered streets, where the bushes grew so thickly he had to force a passage through them, his foot had stumbled on human bones; and in one of the houses ~~into which~~ he had entered, bleached bones were lying in considerable quantities. He and his companions, had barely had time ~~to ascertain~~ these few facts <sup>when</sup> ~~where~~ the sun was darkened, a sound as of the rushing of mighty wings filled the air, a fetid smell arose, and enveloped them. They fled down the path they had cut for their entry, blind terror in their hearts, and horror and dread at their heels. Each man thought of himself only, and each man fled to save himself from that rushing wave of black and stenching terror. Said bin Ali was the first to come to his senses, and this he only did when he found himself once more in the sunlight. Three of his companions stumbled along at his heels, and fell as they reached his halting place. One of them was torn and bleeding at the neck—a ghastly wound which never healed, and from which he died in agony about ten days later. The remaining three were nowhere to be seen. Said bin Ali waited a few moments, and <sup>then</sup> ~~called~~ their names loudly, pausing after each call for a reply. Faintly there came to their ears a series of anguish-wrung screams -- screams which had lost all human attributes, and suggested an

animal being torn to pieces. ~~[Were these the voices of his companions, or were they the voices of those dread spirits who had attacked him and his friends?]~~ Said bin Ali, filled with a blind desire to save his friends, re-entered the dim, green portals of the forest. He entered alone, for the three companions who had followed him were ~~shivering with terror, and~~ too imbecile with their recent fears to realize even what he was <sup>d</sup>going. He <sup>ran</sup>saw for about a hundred yards on the now sharply distinguishable track, ducking his head to avoid the over-hanging and thickly interlaced branches, peering to right and left as he dodged along. Suddenly he almost fell over the body of one of his friends. The dead and sightless eyes were wide open and glaring, the head almost torn from the body. He shrank back appalled, and as he moved backwards, a large dark form dropped, <sup>out of the air</sup> ~~it appeared from a tree,~~ and fell upon the corpse, tearing with claws and teeth at its neck and head. Said bin Ali turned and fled - what could he, a mere human being, do against this ferocious spirit? He had seen it with his own eyes, seen it tearing his friend to pieces. What it was he could not say - it <sup>swooped</sup> ~~dropped~~ on to its prey like a vulture/ <sup>f</sup>from above; he saw its great wings close and fold behind it as it touched the ground, but this was all the impression his terror-blinded eyes and senses had formed or remembered. Terror, superstitious terror, filled his soul - he had seen that which lived and moved behind the curtain, that which haunts Africa, and the African; that which is daily watching and following, waiting for

its prey, certain of victory in the end. // Even after these many years, as the old Arab told his tale, at first haltingly, then the words tumbling over one another in his excitement, his face went grey with the remembrance of his past fear, and his body shook as with an ague. Harvey was impressed in spite of <sup>a</sup> desire to believe that it was all bunkum. He had a curious tingling feeling as if he had physically brushed against the spirit-world — the spirit-world of evil. // He and Said bin Ali were silent for some time, each occupied with his own thoughts. The Arab eventually broke the silence with the pious ejaculation of, "Allah is Great," and went on to say that in his belief it was possible to enter the forest at a different point, some hours away from the buried city, and that when Harvey wished to do this, he himself would go with him.

The following day was fixed upon for the trial. Two alone of the caravan could be persuaded to accompany Harvey and Said; one was an up-country native, who only knew and feared his own especial devils, and the other was Harvey's personal servant, a mission boy called Paul. ~~The expedition occupied the whole day,~~ and elaborate arrangements were made in the event of accidents or alarms. Cox, with a detachment of porters, halted on the edge of the forest. He and Harvey arranged a series of signals; every half-hour Harvey was to fire a shot, and Cox was to answer with another. If Harvey failed to fire, Cox was to do so; and if he elicited no reply, he was to follow into the forest with the <sup>Uokaris,</sup>

As events occurred everything went without a hitch: the signals were made and answered with great punctuality, and, after about five hours, Harvey and his party emerged from the gloom, much to the relief of Cox, and the boisterous joy of the men. Harvey was enchanted with what he had seen, and felt confident that it would be a really paying concern to work the rubber. He had also secured several samples of timber which he was sure, were valuable, and he was in consequence ~~in~~ high spirits. Nothing untoward had happened: not a sign of danger, not a hint of horrors. Neither evil beasts nor evil spirits had shown themselves: the silent green majesty of the forest had rolled away in every direction, its fern-strewn carpet soft to the tread, its flower-draped trees beautiful to the eye. It seemed impossible to imagine anything of a sinister nature happening in such lovely surroundings. Harvey felt his mission was accomplished: Said bin Ali was friendly and most anxious for the white men to remain; he had arranged with the tribe to let them have an excellent piece of land for their buildings and plantations, and now all that remained to be done was to obtain a concession from the Government to work the rubber, and to procure labour. The Natives of the locality absolutely declined to enter the forest, but Said <sup>bin Ali,</sup> suggested to Harvey that he could obtain up country Natives and bring them with him on his return from Bairan. // It was arranged that the caravan, with the exception of <sup>ten</sup> ~~two~~ men who were to remain behind to look after the camp and the extra loads, should start for Bairan the next day. Said bin Ali