

SERPENT'S FETISH

By JAMES BLISH

What ancient monsters would prowl jungle trails when terror unlocked the Valley of Dragons?

KIT KENNEDY stepped out of his lodge onto the springy turf and took a deep breath. All around him the baobab trees towered, except directly back of the lodge, where the mountain began. Pearly morning light filtered through the leaves and the deep, rich green of the loam. Over the sonorous whispering of the nearby river, there came a chattering of monkeys, and the sound of a scampering game being played invisibly high up among the leaves.

Kit exhaled with a satisfied sigh. Here, in the deep Gunda province, it was cool and clear most of the day. The coast was the steaming country, where white men wasted and died quickly, yellow with quinine and alcohol. Kit was a white man, but he had almost forgotten it—it had been eleven years since he had seen Kansas. That would seem like a foreign country to him now. He was K'Tendi—the other titles the natives had given him didn't matter, it was enough to belong to the jungle.

The wind shifted slightly and Kit felt a delicate pulsing in his ears, as if tiny palms were pattering at his ear-drums. He stiffened. Sure enough—the jungle telegraph was in operation, somewhere down by the Luberfu. A moment later, the thrumming became stronger as the Wassabi village picked up the message and passed it on.

Over Kit's head the foliage stirred, and a great, flat head dipped down to regard the white dweller. Kit looked up.

"Hello, Manalendi," he said gravely. "You hear them too, eh?"

The python shot out a forked tongue with lightning quickness; obviously the huge beast was alert to sounds no human could hear. His head wove questioningly. Kit grinned. Few men see anything but menace in a great constrictor, but to Kit Manalendi's overwhelming curiosity was

funny. The creature had been hanging around the lodge for nearly a year now, following Kit wherever he went, departing only on brief trips to snatch a chicken from the Wassabi.

"I wish you could tell me what you hear," Kit said. "But you can't understand the drum message, so we're even. There are white men coming here, Manalendi. And that means trouble."

The snake did not understand that, either, but perhaps he didn't have to be told that the drums often brought trouble—if he were lucky, interesting trouble that would wind up in a fight. Manalendi was not vicious, and most of the jungle creatures big enough to match him left him strictly alone; it was, Kit supposed, a dull life for the most part.

But the python was a hole card which Kit sometimes had reason to play; no use betraying it ahead of time. He gave the snake the one word-command which he had been able to teach it.

"Upstairs, handsome."

Manalendi pulled in his tongue disgustedly and withdrew, his dappled blue body blending with the shifting leaves. Kit looked speculatively at the drum which hung, its draw-strings flaccid, from the eaves of his lodge. No; if the matter were urgent enough to arouse M'Tombu, he'd already be on the way—the Wassabi tribes had heard the message before Kit had—

The thought had barely entered Kit's head when he saw the brawny body of the black chieftain sprinting silently down the trail toward the lodge. Kit raised his hand in greeting.

"Long life, M'Tombu."

"A thousand years," M'Tombu said automatically. Then, "K'Tendi, there is a safari coming here, a great one, with many guns, and many boys. They have whips."

"Whips! Not just the *sjambok*?"



"No, *bwana*, long plaited whips such as white men use for horses. Already they have had desertions; the deserters claim such cruelty as might frighten a Belgian."

This was one of M'Tombu's rudimentary jokes; neither he nor K'Tendi thought highly of the ostensible rulers of the Congo. Kit said, "What's it all about? Why do the boys have to be driven—doesn't the *baas* pay enough?"

"The pay is high," M'Tombu returned, squatting down on the turf. Kit followed, with the natural grace of a man who had long forgotten the crutch of chairs. "But there are whispers."

"There are always whispers. These people probably hope for gold. Most of the whites know I pay for my shells with raw ore—perhaps they have some silly story about a hidden temple under my hut—white men will believe anything."

"No, *bwana*. One can sense the gold-fever; it shows in the eyes, and in the smell of the sweat. Besides, who would disturb K'Tendi's gold? This is another lust. It is whispered that they seek the Valley of Dragons."

Kit's lips whitened. "If it were not for the bearers," he said grimly, "one might almost wish that they find it. This is very bad, M'Tombu. How came they to hear of the Valley? Do the deserters know?"

"We are to blame, K'Tendi."

"How so?"

"When we found and slew *mokele-mbembe*, the great dragon, last year. The whites you rescued brought the word out; they collected stories of tribesmen and chiefs; there was much excitement. This new safari seeks more *mokele-mbembes*, and their brothers."

Kit nodded. All in all, he was not surprised. Since he had yanked Stahl and the English girl almost out of the mouth of *mokele-mbembe*, he had been fearing some such result—

For *mokele-mbembe* had been a dinosaur, alive and thunderous. The survival of such monsters passed with only a shrug among the blacks, who knew no geology and had long had legends of the snake-headed *lau*, the Elephant-Eater, *mokele-mbembe*, and a dozen other nightmares of the swamps and forests—danger has a million heads in Africa. To the European world, however, which knew dinosaurs only as faint traces in ancient rocks, such a discovery would come like an explosion.

Kit had hoped that the lack of evidence—for they had had to leave the scene in a hurry—would have cast doubt on any story Stahl might tell, but he realized now that the hope had been only a phantom. Stahl had been an important bureaucrat, though a uniquely courageous one; his word would bear weight in Belgium. And Paula—

THE OLD BITTER TASTE was in Kit's mouth again, the alun-and-lye of his hatred for the whole white world. For a while he had thought that the English girl would stick with him. But she couldn't take it; her background overrode her; she yearned for the sound of nasal voices discussing things of no moment, longed to be back in an English drawing room where one might pat lions and snakes on the head at a safe distance of five thousand miles. She had demanded a *poshi* of M'Tombu, and had left Kit's lodge for the long haul to Berghes-

Marie and civilization. With her she had taken Kit's last twinge of sympathy for the white man's world.

And Paula had been some kind of nabob on the English Congo Inquiry Commission; if she told the lords and ladies that there were dinosaurs ranging the Congo swamps, they would say, "My dear girl!", but they'd believe her. Now there was a safari looking for the Valley of Dragons—looking for it, in the old, familiar, European way: with whips.

M'Tombu was watching Kit steadily. "I have sent an advance party to ambush these seekers," he said. "A war-arrow will help desertions, and we can attack the rest at any time. After that—" The big Bantu did not bother to finish the sentence, but his gesture showed what he planned for the whites.

Kit shook his head. "This safari is probably official," he said. "If we break it up, it will give the whites every excuse for a punitive attack—soldiers, whippings, burnings of villages, all the old terror."

"But if they find the Valley, K'Tendi, they will be here by the hundreds."

"I know," Kit said, rising. "They will turn the country into a reservation overnight—or worse, they will stampede the great beasts out of the Valley and turn the whole province into a death-trap. We had best see N'Mnota at once."

The black stared at Kit for a moment. Then he said, "N'Mnota hates you, K'Tendi—and *juju* is a weak reed against whips and guns—"

"M'Tombu, whips and guns impress you overmuch; and I have no intention of using N'Mnota's kind of *juju*. Quickly, now—we have little time."

M'Tombu went down the trail without further question, Kit at his heels. Behind them, Manalendi, the long one, rustled the leaves; but when Kit turned to look for him, the python was not in sight. The realization gave him a chill. Manalendi had at long last deserted them, and there was little doubt where he was headed.

Manalendi was seeking out the Valley of Dragons, where the ancients of his tribe churned the swamps, fought titanically, or plucked the white fruits from the

lianas and thought of things which had happened before there was such a creature as man . . .

IN THE HUT of N'Mnota there was a peculiar, ineradicable stench, compounded of smoke, blood, scorched flesh, and a variety of aromatic herbs—the smell of the fetish. Also, it was dark, but not dark enough to conceal the fat ugliness of N'Mnota.

Kit had few enemies, but witch-doctors seldom loved him. That *juju* existed was a matter Kit did not doubt, but in his experience few of the local devil-dancers knew any more about it than the rest of the natives; they were simply parasites, preying upon the fears of their fellows. Kit had had deadly curses placed upon him by more of these leeches than he could remember, and had survived without any more effort than a shrug required. There was an old man to the southwest, now, who might make a bad enemy . . .

The tubby sorcerer bent a black look upon M'Tombu. "Thine omens are evil, great chief," he said sonorously. "This day I have read thy fate in the entrails of a pure-white rooster; thou bringest thy people to bad ends with overmuch hearkening to strangers."

"There are no messages writ in such messes," M'Tombu said, using the infinitely insulting *dju*, a grammatical construction ordinarily reserved for animals and children. "Thy chicken bespeaks thine own jealousy; K'Tendi is no stranger to any but thyself. Leave off thy prattling and be silent; there is man's work afoot."

N'Mnota grumbled, but subsided; M'Tombu was his chief. "If you speak of the government safari, N'Mnota was warned by the spirits long ere this."

Kit stepped forward; now that the tribal business was settled, he could take part without breaching courtesy. "Then perhaps N'Mnota can advise K'Tendi, who must learn what little he knows from the drums. Did the spirits happen to report that the safari sought the Valley of Dragons?"

Judging by the way N'Mnota's eyes bulged, the spirits hadn't thought that aspect of the matter important enough to

mention; but the wizard made a quick recovery. "Let them seek," he said. "If they should find it, there will be nothing left for the Wassabi to clean up."

"N'Mnota dissembles," Kit said. "His people fear the Valley, and with reason; it is not good that the whites should violate it. More: this country is virtually unknown to the whites—it belongs to us. If the whites find the Valley, the Gundu lands will be overrun with them before two years have passed—expeditions will come by the hundreds to snare the great beasts, settlements will go up, there will be shooting and trampling of corn and spoilage of women and property. If this safari is destroyed by the great reptiles, others will be sent, bigger and stronger ones, until the Valley is conquered."

"K'Tendi has forbidden that the Wassabi attack this safari," N'Mnota said. "Soon it will be known that he fears only for his own safety, and his fine words mean only that his brothers might take his gold. The Wassabi need not gold; they will protect their own *kraals*, and will know K'Tendi's cravements for what it is. I have spoken; enough."

"As have I," Kit said, rising. He stared down at the plump charlatan. "I will not have these whites here. Inevitably they will consult N'Mnota, since they will think he knows better than we others where the Valley might be. N'Mnota will keep his own counsel, or K'Tendi will see him sent naked into the Valley. Is it not so, M'Tombu?"

"It is so," the warrior said. There was no love lost between the wizard and M'Tombu, for among the Wassabi as among all Congo peoples the witch-doctor and the chief were constant rivals for power. N'Mnota spat disgustedly into the dust, but offered no further comment; the two went out into the sunlight, leaving him glumly regarding his bare toes.

"You will keep a close eye on the tribe, M'Tombu?" Kit asked in French.

"Yes, *bwana*, but I cannot promise silence of N'Mnota. He has long sought to return us to our old cannibal customs and our law that whites must be killed on sight; this affair will give him fuel and

tinder among our people."

"I understand that. I must leave it in your hands; I have other spears to harden in the south. Remember that it is important to head off any attack upon the safari—silence and stealth are our only hopes."

The big Bantu nodded. "Life, *bwana*." "A thousand years."

Kit strode toward the thorn gate. A thousand years—it was a long time, the equivalent of eternity for men; but now they had to deal with creatures who had been in Africa a minimum of thirty million years. The blacks had no word for "million," for they had never seen that many things alike. Well, the whites had the word, but they did not know the jungle.

The jungle had been around for a long time, too, and there were no words for some of the things it hid . . .

AT THE BEGINNING of the second day's travel, Kit took to the trees. The drums throbbed incessantly, keeping the jungle informed of the movements of the safari, and their sound was becoming angry and warlike. K'Tendi hath forbidden that these whites be molested, yet they seek the Valley of Dragons—the whites approach—K'Tendi hath forbidden—they are daily closer to the Valley—

Kit kept moving, south and west, roughly in the direction of Lake Leopold III. By nightfall the drums were very dim, and no new hides picked up their messages. Here what was urgent to the Gundu tribes was matter of no moment. The land which was the land of King L'Gondelu granted no allegiance to K'Tendi or to the whites.

Kit waited until the jungle was blanket-ed in blackness, and crept toward the *boma* within which L'Gondelu slept. He waited until the cooking fires died, and the murmuring of voices dwindled and became blended with the whispering of the jungle.

Then he lifted his head and screamed.

It was a long, thin, rasping wail—a sound that should not have come from the throat of a man, or, better still, should never have been sounded at all. It was the scream of a panther.

Again Kit waited. Through most of

the village, he knew, Bantu women would be huddling their infants closer, and black warriors crouching tensely inside the woven mats which were the doors of their huts. That scream must have emptied the alleys and the big compound in a hurry.

And in one hut, a very old man would be waiting as Kit was waiting . . .

Kit found the hut without difficulty and scrambled at the reed mat, whining like a curious cat. A quavering voice said, "Welcome."

It was pitch black inside, and there was no odor but the smell of earth, and a faint, musty tang that suggested age. The quavering voice said, "It is K'Tendi. This matter of the Valley is very serious, then."

"Deadly," Kit said. "Otherwise I would not trouble you, old one."

"I know that. K'Tendi knows of the limits of my power. Within those limits, I may help; not beyond. What would he have me do?"

Kit sat down and said tensely. "I am unable to order any attack on these whites; yet they cannot be allowed to reach the Valley. My desire that the safari be unmolested will quickly make my people suspect me; they may not do the important thing I must ask of them, when the time comes to ask it. There is only one way."

"Speak."

"L'Gondelu hates you, but he fears more than he hates; it is widely known that you are a true sorcerer, and no leech. It must be said here in the village that K'Tendi has deserted his people for the whites, and that the tribe of M'Tombu is weak and frightened."

The old voice said, "L'Gondelu will make war on M'Tombu if this is said."

"Even so. This is what I wish. Within two days the people of L'Gondelu must go north, painted and armed, to war upon M'Tombu. The drums must cry war with great voices. L'Gondelu will ask omens of you; say him nay; he will be sure to go if you prophesy defeat." Kit paused, but the old man said nothing. Kit said, "This will be true prophecy, that you may make in all good faith."

"The word that K'Tendi has betrayed M'Tombu will reach M'Tombu."

"No matter, M'Tombu will not believe

it. N'Mnota will, which will be for the best. But there is more. There must be magic; this K'Tendi cannot make."

"I make small magics. Speak."

Kit took a deep breath. "There must be a large magic. There must be lightnings in the Valley of Serpents. There must be lightnings—and fire."

For a long time it was silent in the dark hut. For the first time since he had come to live in the jungle, Kit felt a nervous urge to make some useless motion—pull at his earlobe, shift his feet, anything to relieve the tension. If he had asked too much—

"That is great magic," the old man said. "Would K'Tendi drive the monsters from their home? This must not be; the jungle would be very terrible if these serpents were abroad in it. The whites would drive them out; but we must not."

"We must," Kit said, his voice deepening with conviction. "We must do more; we must drive the monsters directly over the camp of the whites. And then—we must drive them back into the Valley again. Look you, my friend: we can bring no force to bear on the whites ourselves, or we shall feel the whips on our backs before the year is out, and the Gundu country will ring with gunfire. Our sole hope is to convince the safari that the great reptiles have been driven out of their valley and are scattered all over the face of Africa. There is no way to do that but to do it. And—of course the monsters must be driven back to the valley again."

"And K'Tendi means to muster the people of L'Gondelu and of M'Tombu at the rim of the fire, to herd the beasts to the valley again—with the threat of war between the two tribes?"

"Yes," Kit said. "The flying things will return of their own accord when the fire is over, but the thunderers who walk must be herded. It will take us all to get them back, and there is no way but war to bring us together. Can the lightnings be asked this favor?"

Once more there was a long silence. Then the old man said, "The jungle is dry; but the season of rains is moons away. I will ask the favor, K'Tendi—"

but it is a large magic for an old man. If I am refused, there will be slaughter between the tribes, and the whites will reach the Valley all the same."

"And K'Tendi," Kit said wryly, "will go in the pot. My people have not forgotten the crisp crackle of long-pig, for all that they have not tasted it since I came to them. It would be fitting that they broke my law with me!"

"I will ask that there be fire in the Valley of Dragons," the old voice said. "And a south wind to fan it. But this is a very large magic for an old man, K'Tendi."

Kit stood up. "I would not ask it," he said soberly, "of any other."

TWO days, and dusk again, and the trees purring with an invisible river of wind. Kit paused in the crotch of a shea tree and listened. The safari had last been reported travelling the Ikatta, and he knew that it would have to leave that swampy river before getting very deep into Gundu country.

A distant sound fought upwind. Singing! For a moment Kit would not believe it. He wriggled higher in the tree and lay still along a thick, corded branch. So the bearers still had spirit enough to sing? It didn't jibe with the stories of whippings and desertions—

The deep bass voices drew nearer, and after a while Kit could make out the language, and then the words:

"I die in the desert, a thing
accursed,

That saw thee, yet never pos-
sessed thee . . ."

No such song had ever been sung before in the Congo, for there were no deserts in the Belgian protectorate; only a very few patches of grassy veldt in the northern highlands. Kit racked his memory. The dialect was very strange.

After a moment he had the answer. Upper Kenya—that was desert land, and the language fitted. The deserters, then, had been the local boys; these Kenya bearers could be expected to stick with the whites. The Valley of Dragons would be only a name to them.

That was bad. There was both money

and brains behind this raid on the jungle's oldest secret.

The rhythmic crashing of machetes had barely reached Kit's ears when it was cut off. There was shouting, and a vicious *crack!* which almost made him wince. The headmen had whips, all right, and no reluctance to use them. A gleam of orange showed that fires were being lit, and camp made for the night.

Kit slithered forward, grasped the tough lianas, and went hand over hand to the next tree. From here he could see the encampment. Almost directly below him, a tent was being pegged out, and before it three white men stood, arguing in subdued voices. One of them held the whip, doubled under his arm. Off to one side, an incredibly thin, tall Negro was patiently having his back taped by another white—evidently the victim of the whip, getting a doctor's attention. The black confirmed Kit's guess: the man was obviously a Turkana, a member of that small, conflictless tribe which ranged the boundaries of the Kenya colony.

One of the white men raised his voice angrily. "You're a fool," he said shrilly, in French. "They'll take it from one of their own kind, but from a white man they won't. Haven't we lost enough bearers?"

"I know what I'm doing," the man with the whip growled. "France is full of niggers. If you allow them an inch, they take an ell."

The doctor finished and gave the tall Turkana a slap on the shoulder; he went off surly, and the fourth white man joined the group. "At least," he said, "try to take it a little easy, des Grioux. A welt is one thing, that doesn't cripple; but if you lose your temper and flay the man, he'll be useless for weeks; maybe for good."

"All right," the one called des Grioux said in a sour voice. "But I'm tiring of all this malingering. Listen to those damned drums! By the time we find the Valley at this rate, the whole country'll be up in arms."

"Those aren't war drums," the fourth man said. "Just the usual information bureau. If you hear the war-call, you'll have whipped it into being."

Kit decided that it was time he took a hand in this conversation. Swinging his light boots over the edge of the branch, he slid away and dropped.

The men were still arguing when he struck, and the matted grasses took up most of the sound of his landing. The little doctor started visibly when he turned in Kit's direction.

"What—who's that?"

The others spun. Kit kept his thumbs in his belt. Even in the dusk it was plain to see that he carried no rifle or spear. He said, "Good evening."

"My goodness," the doctor said, gasping. "A white man—what a turn you gave me! Did you spring up out of the ground, man?"

"No matter," Kit said. "I've had word of your safari. I've some advice for you, if you're interested."

"Hardly," des Grioux growled. The one called Dunstan put a hand on his arm.

"Just a minute; I think I know this man." He looked Kit over carefully. "Unless I'm sadly mistaken, we have here the legendary K'Tendi—Son of Wisdom, King of the Wassabi, Master of Serpents, and half a million other titles. Or are you just a stray hunter?"

"I'm Kit Kennedy," Kit said, "Called K'Tendi by the Wassabi."

"And what of it?" des Grioux demanded. "I'm not interested in operatic heroes. State your business, m'sieu, and get back to your savages—we've no time to nurse strangers."

"I don't need nursing, thank you. I'm here on your behalf. This is dangerous country you're entering. I'd advise you to turn back."

"Is that a threat?"

"Not at all. You are in no danger yet. But the blacks fear *juju* more than they do guns. The Valley of Dragons is held in great dread by all the Gundu tribes; if you persist in searching for it, you'll have a full-fledged revolt on your hands."

Des Grioux sniffed. "A real excuse to come in and civilize this morass, I'd say. You're a white man; you don't believe this kind of story. What's your own interest in the Valley?"

"Personal."

"Naturally. What is it?"

Dunstan said, "As-the story goes, this man's an American who's taken to jungle living. Maybe he doesn't want us trespassing on his territory. That right, Mr. Kennedy?"

"Partially."

"His territory?" Des Grioux laughed harshly, strode forward, and shoved his face to within six inches of Kit's. "Listen, m'sieu. This is the King's territory. We have no regard for savages, no matter what their color. I'm a hard-headed man—hard enough to believe the unbelievable when the evidence is good. There are dinosaurs here. I want drawings and specimens. I mean to get them. If the niggers fear magic more than guns, that is a very sad error on their part; do you understand me?"

Kit calmly took des Grioux' nose between steel-hard fingers and brought the astonished man to his knees with a merciless wrench. Des Grioux tried to grab at his legs, and the whip fell to the ground. Kit put a foot on it and flung the man away from him.

"Your manners," he said, "need improving. I don't like people who puff in my face." He scooped up the whip. Des Grioux scrambled to his feet, raging, but if he had any intention of charging Kit, the sight of the lash changed his mind.

Kit's eyes flicked over the guarded faces of the white men. In the brief silence, a pounding of drums came through. Dunstan stiffened.

"That's it," he said softly. "We're in it now. That's a war drum, or I've never heard one."

The wild throbbing came from the north, where the lands of M'Tombu lay. Kit cocked his head.

K'Tendi hath betrayed the folk of M'Tombu! K'Tendi hath given the Gundu lands to L'Gondelu! K'Tendi hath promised the Valley to the Whites! K'Tendi hath betrayed—

And then:

Spears to the south, or death! Spears to the south!

"Take warning, gentlemen," Kit said softly. "The blacks war among themselves. Only the Valley of Dragons is tabu. If

you turn back now, you will be safe—otherwise, you'll die. The Valley is not a cozy zoo. It is a place where old and horrible things still live, things that your world cannot meet, things that we know better than you. If you fight your way through the tribes to the Valley—you'll wish you hadn't!"

As the last word left Kit's lips, there was a flutter of movement over his head, and three tough, massive strands of cold power lashed about his waist, tightened, lifted—

Manalendi!

The foliage closed about him. Below, the four faces looked after him, white as milk.

THE FIRES dwindled behind them and blinked out. Kit clung rigidly to the python's body for a moment, then hit it twice with his fist. The coils loosed him delicately, and Kit crawled free and swung away. Below, there was a sudden hysterical shouting, and then a volley of shots through the tree they had just quit, whipping the leaves like heavy rain.

Kit kept moving. Only when he was sure that the camp would not be able to hit him from where it lay did he stop and catch his breath. The python glided to a stop near his head.

"You're a melodramatic old sinner," Kit murmured. "What was the big idea, anyhow?"

The snake moved uneasily; the sound of Kit's voice seemed to disturb it.

"What's the matter? Fighting somewhere?"

"Tsss," Manalendi said. He began to slide away. Kit waited curiously until the snake came back and drove a horny snout between his shoulder blades, nearly knocking him sprawling from the branch. Kit clutched at the vines and caught in a mouthful of air.

"All right, I'll come along. Don't be so damned persuasive."

"Tsssss!" the snake said, nudging him urgently, and began to travel again. Kit clambered after him as fast as he could. The war drums boomed implacably; the very air seemed to shudder. It was very dark. After a while Kit worked his way

up to the top of a giant baobab to get a look at the stars. Manalendi travelled in a broad, impatient spiral of steel around him, shaking the branches gently.

"We're going the wrong way," Kit muttered. "And it's eluding up. Look, handsome, damned if I'll stop to steal you a chicken at this stage of the game. You'll get me lost, and I've got business—oof!"

The snake's huge head had thudded into his ribs again. Kit decided to call a moratorium on his plans. Pythons normally slept between meals—usually two weeks at a time. But Manalendi had something extraordinary on his cold little mind tonight, that was certain.

A distant flicker caught Kit's eye. For a moment he thought he had imagined it. Then it came again. A chill went up Kit's backbone. It was several months too early for the rainy season, but that flash could be only one thing. An old man in L'Gondelu's *kraal* had asked certain Powers a favor—and had gotten it.

Kit clambered down and began to work south again. After a few moments the snake followed; Kit was afraid it would be disposed to interfere, but this time it made no protest.

He skirted the camp, listening wryly to the sounds of frightened preparation that the drums were stirring up in it, and backtracked the safari. It seemed several hours later that he came upon the spoor of a large war party, but the stars were now completely overcast and it might have taken less time. Already Kit was beginning to wonder if the night would ever end.

The party, when he reached it, was still on the move. They were going south; therefore, probably M'Tombu's people. Not that it made much difference—Kit knew that neither side would be exactly glad to see him now. He passed on over them without making any sign.

A dim haze of yellow and pink was glowing on the far, dark horizon. Whispers moved the air above the tree-tops, the flight of thousands of small, dark bodies. Some of them were birds; Kit was glad he could not see the others.

The Valley was on fire.

Kit pressed forward. The encampment

of L'Gondelu was not hard to find; the warriors had lit fires. Kit descended and walked straight into it. Even a fallen king, he thought wryly, has a little prestige left—one can never tell when he might regain his throne. Besides, Manalendi was following him—a spectacle to give the most bloodthirsty enemy a sober second thought.

L'Gondelu came to meet him, tall and horrible in paint and feathers. His greeting was very simple. He said, "Go!" three syllables in Swahilli, and three times as unfriendly.

"I have grave news," Kit said, without giving any sign that he had heard. "M'Tombu's party is near."

L'Gondelu gestured imperiously with his spear. A black nearly as tall as himself stepped to his side. "Make ready," L'Gondelu said. "The Wassabi approach. Then to Kit again, "Go. You are not welcome here."

"That is not the only word I bring," Kit said evenly. "It is now far too late to make war upon the Wassabi. Do you not hear the jungle?"

L'Gondelu lifted his head. The jungle was rustling. While he listened, a small, vivid green snake shot through the dust at his feet and vanished again, leaving a zig-zag trail.

"The small ones first," Kit said softly. "Then the big constrictors, like Manalendi here. The birds have already gone over; and then——"

The chief's eyes bulged with realization. "Fire!" he said hoarsely. "K'Tendi hath fired the jungle!"

"The fire is far from K'Tendi," Kit said. "It began beyond the villages of the Wassabi. It is——"

A medley of triumphant howls drowned him out. The brush shook, and erupted black men. L'Gondelu's warriors snatched up their spears.

"The Wassabi!" L'Gondelu cried. He brushed past Kit. Arrows began to thrum from the trees around the clearing. On the north side men were already down. Shields thudded against each other.

At the same instant the trees were swarming with screaming monkeys, pushing at each other, biting, jumping wildly

from branch to branch, dropping like the ripe baobab-gourds that bore their name. The din was terrible, but above it a greater sound came rolling in, a rising clamor of terror and death. The warriors hesitated, turned from each other to look up.

A herd of antelope stampeded through the undergrowth, on hooves as light as the footfalls of spirits. The glow on the sky was plainly visible now. The roaring and howling became still louder, and Kit thought he could hear the faint crackling of the flames themselves behind it.

The black men forgot their war. "The trees!" L'Gondelu screamed. The ranks melted like clods in a flood, making for the thick trunks——

But it was already too late. There was terror up there among the leaves. A black and sinuous thing looked down at them from the nearest crotch, its eyes glowing green fury. L'Gondelu stabbed at it, and it answered with a sound like the death-agonies of a devil. It was mad with fright and hatred, and sprang upon the instant, the sabers of its claws spread wide.

Man and cat hit the ground simultaneously, but the cat did not stop to fight. It fled, a bolt of black lightning. In the tossing branches more pairs of green slits flashed down. The men slid back down the trunks again in a hurry.

"M'Tombu!" Kit shouted.

"Here." The Wassabi chieftain, almost unrecognizable in his war paint, gestured from the other side of the clearing, but made no move to come closer. If he had, his own men would have put a spear in his back.

"The Valley has been burned out!" Kit said, at the top of his voice. Even in the din he was sure every black could hear him. "The great beasts are coming this way! They must be driven back!"

For an instant the shock froze them all. The sky was bright enough to cast faint shadows. The ground shook with the passage of heavy bodies somewhere nearby; hippos, probably.

Then, slowly, M'Tombu approached. With him came two or three others, and L'Gondelu. "Is this your doing, K'Tendi?"

M'Tombu said somberly.

"No matter. This disposes of the whites; the monsters will go right over their camp; they will be lucky if they live, and will report that the great beasts have been scattered beyond hope of capture. But—they *must not stay scattered.*"

Both chieftains nodded. It went without question. Pinned in the Valley, the great reptiles lived out their lives without impinging upon the rest of the jungle folk; but roaming abroad—

"I have three hundred men," L'Gondelu said.

M'Tombu grinned mirthlessly. "So many? It is well this war was stopped. I have half that many, K'Tendi. Is it enough?"

"It will have to be. Fan out. The forest folk will not molest you unless you try to halt them; let them by." Kit moistened a finger. The fire seemed to be moving a little to the east of them, under the urging of a steady, inexplicably cold wind. "Herd the monsters around to the west—it will be impossible to make them go back into the blaze."

There was a new thunder, agitating the trees like the pebbles in a witch-doctor's rattle. The night rang with the trumpeting of elephants.

It began to rain. It was impossible, but it was so.

On the yellow-lit loam, *things* came lumbering. Branches snapped with their approach. The first one came through, a thirty-foot horror with a wide-fanged head, blundering like a kangaroo upon its hind legs. For an instant Kit froze, his muscles congealed with panic. Then the thing moved forward, and Kit forced himself to shout at it. It stopped, and glittering, mindless eyes looked down at the puny figure with the brand.

Brand: fire. The thing was stupid, however terrible. After a while its walnut-sized brain turned it aside and sent it loping away toward the west.

There were more. The world became an endless nightmare. There were four-legged monsters twice the size of hippos, with ridges of flat spear-blades along their

spines. Screaming, eighty-foot nightmares with necks and tails as long as Manalendi, legs like tree-trunks, bodies that would dwarf a bull elephant.

There were wide scarlet maws, lashing tails that bore batteries of spikes, great turtle-like carapaces, grasping webbed paws with pointed horny thumbs, pads that mashed five inches into the loam at every step. Above, bat-shapes wheeled in the columns of rain, things eighteen feet from wing-tip to wing-tip, and called to each other hoarsely, eagerly.

And there were things for which no words existed, things older than words, older than the walking apes who had invented words—

The men were Johnny-come-latelies. But they had spears and arrows, and fire. Also, they had brains.

Something stirred under the overhanging lip of the cliff. A huge, heavy head wove up and looked at them. Bowstrings twanged and a black flight of arrows whined around the thing. It hissed and lumbered away into the Valley.

"That's the last," Kit said, his smoke-roughened throat rasping. "Too bad we had to kill so many, but the jackels will clean them up. Anybody got a brand left?"

There were several. One was passed from hand to hand until it reached Kit. He took it and went forward into the pass, looking up at the great overhang, feeling a sick regret for what must be done.

The three little white sticks slipped neatly into the crevice. Kit wound the fuses together, lit the longest one, and ran. At the count of eight he threw himself on his face.

The blast sent fragments of rock and burned wood whoo-whooping wildly through the mist. The overhang tottered. Then, majestically, it came down, and an avalanche of rubble came after it. The rain beat the dust down.

A leathery flapping went over their heads. Nobody watched it. It went over the brim of the sealed pass and was gone. It would never come out again.

Nothing would ever again come out of the Valley of Dragons.