



A CREEPING TERROR

By Douglas M. Dold

GARRY LLOYD lurched into the open, staggered and fell. He was aware that the Terror crept up behind him. He got to his feet, grasping the thorny branch of an acacia for support. He must reach higher ground before it caught up.

His bony, mask-like face set. The flat black mustache bristled stubbornly, his brown eyes grew glassy as the pain pounded and pulsed. He longed to take time to cut the “jigger” from its sac under his toenail. Objects swayed distorted before his eyes; he hoped that it was not the walking fever. Never had he felt such heat. The sky was pale, parched blue. The sun blazed formless and white-hot.

A steamy shroud-like haze gnawed at the horizon. Back of the mist lay safety and the hills. Far to the southwest was the forest beyond the Bahr el Ghazal. To the south where the Mountains of the Moon should have been, was a sooty cloud fading into yellow. Was this the cause of the flood? Could the Mufumbiro volcanoes be at it again? No chance to reach Kota or Wadeli.

About him, vast in its solemn desolation, was the swamp. To his right flowed the saffron flood of the river, lapping, gurgling as it slid silently into its backwaters. From *under* the haze it slipped, coiling, and beyond it slid into the haze, a shape of fear. There was no peace or quiet here, not even when one listened. And death—death was in the air, the morass breathed decay. It flew on harp-like wings,

it crawled, it pounced. It was the home of death—this swamp.

Beyond, mile upon mile, the apple-green mop-headed papyrus quivered, its bifid filaments glistening, broken here and there by stagnant pools. Lilies of blue, red, and white grew here. Here the razor-billed stork with its red beak and bronzy-green, black and white plumage stood a silent sentinel. It was in such a pool of silence that Lloyd had lost both his Somali gun bearers; the only survivors of the rapids.

His mouth set stubbornly, his eyes glowed with dull fury to destroy, his hands clutched at the hot barrels of his Holland. He pulled the battered green Topi further down to protect his neck, shifted the pack on his galled shoulders. There was little time, for the Terror crept higher with dirty little tongues at his very boots.

A flock of cowherons hovering over a matted patch of elephant grass spoke of danger. Probably a herd of buffalo, but it might be elephants.

Lloyd plunged once more into the game trail. The papyrus met over his head. After the glare the shadows seemed purple-black and the air stank, freighted with hot steamy decay. His boot splashed. Snails slimed the black mud. He slapped at the “booma” fly, killed it. To the cloud of mosquitoes that rose he paid no attention. Again he slapped, this time examining the dead fly. It was a tsetse. He prayed to God it was not infected with sleeping sickness.

God! How he hated Africa!

Again he emerged into glare and white heat. A flock of egrets froze into immobility. Beyond them, very still, sprawled five crocodiles, jaws agape, eyes cold and baleful. The sand spit on which they lay was yellow; about its ends curled the yellow current.

The egrets rose with a sighing rustle and floated off like the petals of a white flower. Warily Lloyd crossed the spit. From high overhead floated down the wail of a kite. And never ceasing rustled the papyrus, furtive and sly with hidden life. Never ceasing churred and croaked the frogs, and never ceasing shrilled and buzzed the insects.

Ahead of him, now so near he could see the scarlet midriff of the raphia palm fronds, rose the kana or island of higher ground. Again he paused. A hippopotamus squealed. Hollow, mysterious, the pulsing notes beat into his ears. The shenzi drums beat out their message, boom, boom, boomaroom, boom! From afar beyond the horizon followed silence. Then from the west, nearer, he heard the answer. Boom-a-ranga, boom, boom!

He could almost see the naked black men squatting beside the yellow tree trunks, beating their message. They might be laughing at him—at him—

“Another white man dead. Mjuba, we are glad. It served him right. The river gods were angry. They ate his canoes, his servants, all his belongings, in the rapids it had taken place. The crocodiles were many. Eya, they feasted on those swakilis. He is a great man, but the gods of the river they ate him. Ha! ha! He was a great hunter—oh, yes, he was a great hunter. The linghas have said it. It was to shoot the white rhinoceros—he of the square lip. Yes, it was so. But he will shoot no more—and we are glad, eya, Mjuba.”

The Terror had grown bolder. It lapped at Lloyd's feet, hungry. Suddenly he gasped. Beyond his vision he heard the notes of a launch engine. It would mean rescue. He forgot caution and began to run at a stumbling trot.

Once he all but fell on a crocodile. He *must* reach a vantage point where he could signal the launch. The wooded island in the swamp loomed. There was no mistaking, it was a launch, but the trees and thick bush hid all the sight of it. He waded waist-deep. So far as he could see, the ground was at least sixty acres in extent, and it was now surrounded by water. He had been just in time.

He stumbled onto dry ground, but was forced to use his heavy kukri knife, as the jungle was thick. He shouted, wild with anxiety lest the launch should leave. He was about to fire the elephant gun when an explosion louder than a hundred rifles shook the air. Followed splashing sounds, then silence.

Panting and sweating, Lloyd cut his way toward the east side of the island. Here the main river ran close and it was from this direction he had heard the sound of the explosion.

The going was easier. He forgot thirst, fatigue, tortured body. Of the launch he could see nothing. An agony of doubt and fear assailed him. He cried out from beyond a clump of flowering acacias.

He heard a shriek. What in God's name might that mean?

From behind massed yellow blossoms fled a white woman! A girl in battered pith helmet, her skirts clinging to her, torn and muddy.

“Hurry, oh, hurry, it's taking Uncle John!” In her hand she held an automatic. “I don't know how to fire it. Oh, God! Hurry!”

Lloyd said nothing, but rushed behind the screen of blossoms. There, littering a sandy beach, was strewn the remains of a steam launch. He arrived just in time to see an old man's face, bloody in death, vanish beneath the swirling saffron flood . . . for a moment above the swirl there was a serrated tail that lashed the water.

Despair seized Lloyd. Was it worthwhile fighting? What was the use? The girl joined him, sobbing. Lloyd snorted. What was a woman doing out here? No sensible *man* would venture into this country.

“Sit down,” he said, clumsily patting the heavy shoulders, “here on this crate.”

Lloyd saw the river rising with terrible rapidity. It might be the sudd damming up things.

“Let's chin, this isn't so bad. Six feet of land yet before the flood gets up—then there are the trees. You need not worry, your uncle was dead before the crocodiles got his body.”

Lloyd told her of his predicament, of his misfortunes. She was a weak, helpless little thing, but somehow she gave him courage. Her pale little face with the velvety, soft brown eyes held a poignant appeal. The drooping scarlet lips, the clenched little hands, the dented helmet all touched his manhood.

Watching him as he deliberately cut the jigger from his toe she spoke haltingly:

"I'm Myrtle Tabor, a missionary. We came in a launch from below Lado, on our way to Kota. Mr. Gleason was my uncle. We had to come in here for wood, fuel, you know. We hit something. The *Mercy*," nodding toward the launch, "began to sink. We were getting our things out, she was near shore. I was carrying some kerosene up there by the palm and then the boat blew up and the two Uganda boys—were gone. I pulled Uncle John up, he was all bloody, and ran for the bandages, then a crocodile poked its head out of the water and got his foot. I screamed."

"We must get ready for—anything," he replied. "We aren't the only refugees on this—er—I suppose it's an island now. First we must make a fire and boil some water. I'm dry as the 'Gobi.' Watch out for the flies with crossed wings; they look like small house flies. Don't let them bite you. Put gloves on if you've got them."

Lloyd gathered wood. Never had he seen so many insects. The woods were alive with scorpions and centipedes, driven there by the floods. Cicadas and great blue and red butterflies patched the wild datewood palm fronds; ants swarmed. Myrtle Tabor watched the man work and shuddered at the great gray scorpions.

Soon they had water to drink, and both ate, for Lloyd had insisted on this. The Terror was all about them now, eating away at the bank; a great mapoli tree like an English elm fell splashing mightily into the flood.

Carefully choosing the highest point on which grew a tall borassus palm, Lloyd cleared away the ground. A bloated puff adder lividly chevroned black and white struck from its lurking place beneath the fleshy-mottled aloe leaf. Around the palm bole Lloyd built a strong boma of thorn limbs. The fire was built in there; all the cases that might prove useful he carried here, the girl obeying him mechanically as he directed.

The girl sobbed and often shuddered. The afternoon wore on. Always the creeping Terror licked higher. Always the horror was nearer. Lloyd shuddered at the thought of the night they faced. Hour by hour the island grew smaller as the river rose, only the mop-headed tops of the papyrus rose above the water. Of the shore they could catch no glimpse. Only a swirling, polished saffron flood that lapped and whispered.

Back of them in the gloomy, moving bush there came sound of many living things, restless and

afraid. About the island in gathering numbers floated dark objects patiently waiting for the gift of the creeping Terror. Back in the purple-mottled gloom the restless sounds were growing louder, more fearful. A dreadful menace was gathering; these dumb things felt it first. Ever increasing, the crocodiles swam about the doomed island. Slowly, inch by inch, the land was swallowed by the river.

The heat was less tormenting. The insects, however, grew more and more numerous. Life of all kinds was gathering, packed closer and closer by the Terror that crept. Now even the elephant-grass tops only showed here and there. A great sea slid by almost silently. As it touched the haze the sun grew scarlet. It lit the river in a deep, blood color, while the little waves were tinkling, dancing flames. Only ten acres remained above water. The girl moaned; he saw that she gazed at the red-headed, red-tailed lizards that moved restless, at the hordes of beetles and insects of all kinds that wove about on the ground. Above them the slate-gray bats hung feasting with twitching ears. The crocodiles had moved closer, circling.

Lloyd put more wood on the fire and prepared to climb the palm. There was plenty of rope; he thanked God for that fact. Tying his feet together and making a loop, he began to climb. Bracing himself, he hitched jerkily up the trunk. At the top he had to dislodge a horde of ants, who attacked him savagely, until he was able to drive them out with kerosene. Here amid the dark green, fan-shaped fronds would be safety if anywhere.

Never would he forget the girl's cry as he began to lift her by means of the rope to the palm top. She turned and saw the lions! There were three of them, all males. Even as he heaved and strained, he watched their nervously twitching tails, heard the angry snarls. Again and again she shrieked. Now she was up gasping and clinging to him; he tied her so she could not fall. He laced lianas amongst the fronds.

The lions had vanished and in spite of her pleadings he descended to the ground. In place of the lions he saw a monitor lizard and two warthogs grunting and snuffing. A darting mongoose ran hither and thither, barking, strangely excited. Then he saw snakes everywhere. Cobras for the most part, gliding restlessly about, twined in all the lower growth. Around the branch of a Euphorbia which was in the sunset light, he counted six big snakes; one of the largest was almost lemon

yellow. Two slim, green mambas, three of the dreaded ringhals breed.

Article after article they pulled into the palm top. As the darkness crept on, the animal life more and more crowded, became articulate as the Terror seized and held them. The huge fig tree branches swayed and trembled with its many refugees. Now the island crawled with life. Once more he was in the palm top. Myrtle's hand sought his and held it. Below them the island slowly changed shape as the river rose. More and more numerous were the black oblong patches. They looked like floating coffins. A myriad of cliff swallows flitted about.

Lloyd endeavored to cheer the girl. "Like Noah's Ark or—or a menagerie, isn't it?" He was surprised at the high, cracked tone in which he spoke. The Terror that crept had now got him in its power. It was terrible to think of that slow, slow rise with those saurian guardians to drag one down, deep down into the mud. It had grown almost dark amongst the trees; so dark that many eyes glowed and winked out; eyes of all shapes and sizes, but all lit with the same Terror.

There was something very unnatural in seeing so many wild things crowded together. Amongst a grove of hyphaene palms Lloyd saw the restless swaying hulks of a herd of elephants; further away at the far end of the shrinking land, a ring of buffaloes pawing and snorting, their bossed horns clicking sharply as their heads met. Along the water line, moving restlessly and gazing toward the hidden hills, stood Kobs hartebeeste, bush buck, oribi and other antelope, and looming larger were a pair of giant elands.

On the top of the raphia palm nearest was perched two marabou storks, hideous heads tucked down into hunched-up shoulders. Over all other tones came an insistent, seething gnawing. A mimosa limb, which shook and trembled like a live thing with the ague, had lost its actual outlines.

Ants by the million were everywhere. Near them they saw a group of scorpions impotently jabbing and striking with their fanged tails, but the ants swarmed over them.

A big hairy spider met the same fate, that of being eaten alive!

Where the light still fell, the ground crawled with insects. Cane rats, hedgehogs and smaller things of all kinds ran hither and thither, covered by the biting plague. Once a hyena moaned. Jackals yapped and howled, furtive shapes snapped at the

insects all over them. . . . The antelopes had begun milling. The buffaloes still stood in circular formation, heads and horns forming a barrier.

Now and then they bellowed, stamping to shake off the ants; their protests held a leathery, creaky note. The two in the palm tops gasped as they breathed; there was something frightful in this scene of destruction, something fascinating, too. Below them a warthog barked, screamed and ran amuck. They saw a mamba, its hood spread flat, sway before the warthog's muzzle and strike. They heard the squeals, almost articulate.

All about the crocodile had begun bellowing, long gong-like sounds that had a quality of brainless cruelty. They were triumphant; it was their hour; they would feed well. Above all in a spiraling funnel soared kites and vultures. Then with a spectacular suddenness it was dark. The two tied up in the borassus palm could see nothing, yet they knew the Terror crept up, eating at their safety. The clamor from below became louder, edged with ferocity and all but articulate with the Terror. Pungent, acrid scents permeated the air about them. The odor of crushed insects, the fragrance of mimosa and acacia, the mud and musky reek of crocodiles, civets, and servals all added to the mingled stench. From the trees about came the agonized chatter and squeak of monkeys; the barking of baboons; the occasional whistling trumpet of elephants; the snarling of cats, and filling in the clamor the crepitating, crawling insect horde . . . killing and being killed, but seeking safety.

The moon rose out of a bed of thin ghastly mist. . . . It was immense and crimson in color. All about them was water. Water that glimmered black with silver lacquer. Mist floated about them. From below through a pall of mist arose terrific sounds of combat. Here and there a treetop emerged into the brilliant light of the moon. Their refuge, thought Lloyd, must be awash. Sharp staccato shrieks. Bubbling, gurgling moans, loud splashes, told the end of many creatures. How much longer would their palm stand? Occasionally it shook at the impact of some animal's body. The clamor grew louder; sometimes there was individuality of note as when the lions roared, not low and satisfied as after a kill, but high, snarling, shrieking roars. Or when a leopard coughed and spat from the limb of the fig tree near them. Below them was lust . . . unthinkable slaughter. Once the girl went limp.

Lloyd's face was mask-like. Fear gripped him, for he knew the Terror was creeping up!

Beyond them, monkeys danced and chattered; blood dripping from them. Ants were everywhere, hiding in the leaves. A python, lashing and twisting, crashed down, ants raining from its body. Cobras clung to the constrictor like ribbons. The reek of musk and mud grew stronger. Again the mist parted. On limbs of a gambach tree danced and hopped a group of lean baboons. Their white teeth gleamed as they grimaced. Below them in the water were crocodiles that snapped at them with an audible click. It was to avoid the gaping, saw-like jaws that the apes leaped in their dance of death.

Now the clamor had grown into a tortured babel, made up of squeals; the crack of breaking bones; bellowing, hissing, panting breaths; dull, thudding splashes; snapping, tearing limbs; grunting, coughing, roaring, shrieking and monotonously reiterated splashing. Lloyd shuddered and groped protectively for the girl.

Each splash meant another death. Again he caught sight of the scene below.

Almost all of the land was underwater. All the smaller living things had disappeared. Many antelopes were missing, the remainder fought in a frenzy of berserker rage, full to the last with their wish to survive. Always ready, always waiting lay the great lizards, fang-studded, jaws agape at the creeping Terror's edge, their rough bodies lapped by the silver-lacquered flood.

Still the river rose. Tight-packed and jammed the animals fought. Eyes that gleamed red in the moonlight; lolling scarlet tongues; horns wet with blood; teeth that gleamed from foam-flecked lips, drawn back. The herd of buffaloes slowly pushed their way forward as the water drove them back. Their blue-black, hairless hulks gleamed wet. A bull charged at a palm tree, catapulting its monkey refugee out into the water together with the reddish palm fruit. It was terrible to see them sink, for none rose. The elephants, too, had moved nearer to the great fig tree whose denizens, tortured to madness by the ants, were dropping off already half-eaten by the savage insatiable insects. Now the smell of blood rose sickeningly sweet. The mist had thinned. Through its gauzelike veil crocodile eyes ringed the doomed land. Crocodile tails flayed the rising river into yellow foam.

Only an oryx and three elands remained from all the antelopes. These were soon dragged into the

flood in spite of their utmost resistance. The buffaloes stood knee-deep in water. Lloyd peered from between two fronds; below there was nothing of their boma left. Not once had he fired his gun. From the water a small shape crawled. Slowly it climbed, tediously and pausing often. The water was not more than forty feet below. The borassus palm vibrated now continually. Lloyd looked down again; the little thing was close, it raised a terrified little face. It was only a small black monkey!

"Save it, oh, the mite," the girl breathed. Lloyd had not seen that she had noticed.

He reached down and grasped the little furry thing. It made no attempt to bite. Myrtle Tabor took the baby simian with a gulping sob and held it close; it cuddled, trembling in the girl's arm.

A splash followed by a roar made Lloyd look down. A porcupine, bristly black and white, had tumbled out of the fig tree; pierced by his quills was a long black mamba. The porcupine had fallen on a lion's haunches. The big cat had been hunched on a fast crumbling anthill near to the fig tree. Rolling off the lion the porcupine spun bobbing in the current; all about it, like a shower of sawdust, floated ants. The lion, maddened by the long, sharp quills, leaped into the midst of the buffalo herd. Here he clawed and bit his way over the blue backs, his tawny body and black-manged head gored by heavy horns till it jetted blood.

The crocodiles, taking advantage of the fight, crawled in and took a heavy toll. The second lion ran amuck, then the third, at the same time joined by the leopard, who sprang clawing at a crocodile, ripping the saurian wide open. Still the reptile turned and crunched the leopard's head. The two sank beneath the water, bubbles and smothered screams arose as a fighting muddy mass reappeared to sink again.

Only the six elephants were left. These huge creatures moved restlessly about, stamping at the enemies who evidently did their best to attack them from beneath the water. With ears cocked out straight and small tails vertical, the little herd trumpeted again and again. Their trunks waved and curled with increasing menace; their wrinkled, gray bodies smeared with debris and blood. Two cows from the herd began butting and pushing the remaining three, as if by this deed they might protect themselves. One palm after another was uprooted in this way, all their unhappy occupants falling into five feet of water which now covered

what had been the highest elevation.

Lloyd loaded and sighted his double-barrel crocodile rifle.

"I've got to shoot those two elephants or they will get us."

Myrtle looked at him with wide, almost unseeing eyes. . . . He took careful aim, shot and killed the first cow immediately; she sank to be tugged off by the water fiends.

Still the river rose, but now more slowly. Again the booming thunder of the rifle spoke. The recoil jerked his shoulder back. The cow fell at the smashing impact of the heavy bullet, got up again, bright, arterial blood welling out of the wound. She screamed a terrible note. Lloyd reloaded. He had eighteen cartridges left. . . . If the remaining four elephants charged their palm it meant certain death. Trumpeting shrilly, mouth open, the mortally wounded cow had fallen, recovering, got slowly and ponderously to her knees, fumbled with her trunk under water, grasped something, lifted it out of the water. A twelve-foot crocodile! She swung at the reptile—it clawed futilely at her trunk—Lloyd saw the crocodile's jaws open and close, heard the wet snapping click; saw the crocodile hurled into the fig tree; the shower of insects that fell like hail into the water; heard the cow splash as she slowly toppled; saw the crocodile fall, a broken-headed, lashing cripple, saw them both dragged under water, the four other elephants, one huge bull with curling tusks, charge the fig tree; saw them belly-deep attack its branches, heard the branches snap and tear; saw the tree topple, for the river had undermined its roots; it swayed and began to fall. It made a mighty crash. . . .

The moon had nearly set. . . . Its glancing rays gilded the insect snow that followed the great tree as it bobbed and gyrated slowly down the river.

Now there were the three elephants. All about them floated in a ring, the crocodiles, their eyes growing green by the moon's last light. Lloyd waited with cocked rifle. The girl, with bent head low, talked in whispers to the little monkey that whimpered and clung with arms about her neck. Only three palms besides their own topped the current; all swayed alarmingly. The end must be near!

The elephants made no more hostile moves. They stood trumpeting shrilly and stamping at the unseen attackers as they swayed.

Now it was dark again. Centuries of awful

suspense seemed to pass. Lloyd waited. Once there was a great splashing, gurgling scream and a terrific pounding thumping, a something that rained water on them as it hurtled over. Again, silence.

Lloyd thought the Terror no longer crept, the current slackened. Dawn broke gray over the ghastly, yellow flood, mist-shrouded. Only one palm was left standing besides their own, only one elephant; the great bull stood swaying and lashing a bloody trunk, now not belly-deep. Suddenly the sun appeared a blazing, scarlet, fiery flower. There were not so many crocodiles, yet the big bull elephant was being attacked. Lloyd admired the lone survivor. What courage! What strength! The elephant stood bathed in ruddy sunrise glory; his trunk felt about and probed where something pulled and tugged at the hind leg. With a jerk the bull grappled and tore his tormentor from the water. It was the largest crocodile that Lloyd had ever seen. The monster was over twenty feet in length, his belly was yellow and scabrous with moss. The creature's jaws were wide, its mouth looked white inside. The bull elephant lifted it, inspected it long, then—pushed it under the water.

With slow, deliberate hate it stabbed with its tusks again and again. Once more it lifted the saurian—its wounds were hideous—this time he lowered it, and putting his ponderous front foot down, pushed. He saw the elephant straining with its tusks. Even at that distance he could see its wild little eyes were lit with the killing hunger. Slowly, with a ripping, hideous note, the big lizard broke and tore. Its great jaws in their death agony had set and cut the big bull's trunk. The bull stood slowly swaying, then with a bubbling trumpet-note of mingled torture and triumph, he turned, trunk curled over his head, ears wide, back deluged by his own blood, and began to walk into the deep water. Over him flew a wailing escort of kites, beside him swam the crocodiles. Now only his back and head showed, soon only the head, finally alone the blood-spurting stump of the trunk rose above the crimson surface of the falling flood. Then it was gone. . . .

SLOWLY the water fell. Hours of agony passed. Thirst and heat sickened the two in the palm tree. It seemed to them the sun's rays were javelins of fire that quivered bolt-like from the burnished, brassy sky or danced, gauzelike, over the river.

Lloyd grew delirious. Far off he distinguished

something black that moved. "Delusions. More carnage," he muttered. a monkey with him."

The girl stirred and moaned. . . .

For a moment his mind grew clearer. Long, long he looked. It was a launch! He fired his gun. The monkey trembled and the girl shrieked. Again and again until the eighteen cartridges were gone, he fired. From over the water the approaching launch-engine puffed.

To Lloyd's fevered senses it was like the drums. He sprang up, gesticulating and shouting curses.

"My God! It's Garry Lloyd! He's raving!" said the D.C., "and if I ain't blind there's a woman and

LATER, as the journey upriver was resumed, the men listened in awed silence to Myrtle Tabor's story. Her face still wore the look of terror, yet her eyes were very tender as they fell on Lloyd who lay on a mat breathing hard. Sitting up suddenly and staring, he said in a hard, cracked voice: "A monkey . . . a girl . . . a man and a couple of palms . . . survival of the fittest. Island, trees, Noah's Ark . . . all gone . . . crocs and creeping terror got 'em. . . . It's Africa's way. . . ."

