

The Jungle Within

I will always remember him on that last day, sitting on the sagging verandah rail of our lopsided bamboo and palm-frond house, staring at dark, sullen wind-squalls as they drove egrets up-river in wheeling, cawing snowstorms that disappeared from time to time against a background of sheet lightning.

In faded khaki and scuffed mosquito boots, it seemed that he'd made no special arrangements for his departure, but I had seen the bedroll and canvas holdall on his bed and knew that he would not be coming back. As the first fat drops fell, he fetched his few things and walked down the creaking jetty to meet the nondescript launch when it came to get him. As the afternoon deluge set in, it backed away from the mooring and he was gone from sight. It was as though he had never been.

I went into his room and sat on his bed. There was nothing left to suggest that he had ever occupied this place - except the lingering fragrance of bay rum. Strange, in a man of his taciturn strength, that he should have a weakness for something one might associate with the gaming rooms and brothels of the delta. It contradicted what I had come to know and love beyond all other things in life.

From the first time our hands brushed, quite by chance, I sensed that this was to be something very different from the rituals of my tribe. Those strange, pale eyes rested on me for just a moment before he murmured something and went on with the interview in his clipped accent.

Weeks later, the howler monkey we were doctoring revived enough to expose the pale underside of its eyelids and deliver a half-hearted bite to his hand before lapsing back into drugged sleep. He did not cry out or curse at the stream of blood that coursed freely down his arm. I grabbed a dressing and covered the two punctures. And that would have been that, if it were not for the infection that set in. For an herbivore, that monkey harboured some very bad bacteria in its fighting fangs and Muller was sick for a very long time.

A very long time in which I never left his side for longer than it took to fill one bucket or empty the other. Manuel or Tapas brought me food and water - when they could. It was a full time job for just the two of them, cleaning out the cages and fetching food from the surrounding jungle for the varied needs of the animals.

But perhaps the men suffered less during this period, because they were away for many of Muller's bouts of delirium and did not have to endure his shouted threats and weak struggles to escape my restraining grasp.

At these times, Muller recognised nobody. He called me "the witch" and alternated between childish cowering from me, and towering, threatening rages that scared me

badly, even though I believed that my love would protect me. And the terrifying confessions – in English that I could understand. I knew that they could never be true.

When he recovered, it was as it had been before, and obvious that he remembered nothing. We went on with the collection, building or repairing cages into the night to accommodate the next wave of indignant captives, Manuel and Tapas, as always, grumbling somewhere in the background.

My people are great hunters, at one with the forest. Muller could never have anticipated the ease with which they produced specimens of every type possible. Nor could he have foreseen their puzzlement at his rejection of those that his books declared to be foreign to the area. They accepted his payment without expression, whether it was Bolivian dollars or trading store essentials and those whose offerings did not find favour simply walked to the edge of the compound and released them, to scamper or slither away into the surrounding jungle.

It was a modest advertisement on the La Paz campus noticeboards that attracted my attention in the first place. There was no illustration - no picture of Muller to prepare me for the physical attraction of him. A Jivaro-speaking assistant and guide was needed for a zoological expedition down the headwaters of the Tapajos. The Matto Grosso had been overdone, he said, in that short, informal interview in the Jorges Lopes library.

I saw the other applicants - weathered men in unfamiliar, ill-fitting suits that they had borrowed for the occasion. I knew that they saw me as no challenge, and so it was a surprise to all of them when Muller announced that he had chosen my youth above their experience. Somehow, from the way his eyes held mine for just a moment longer than one would expect, I knew that my two years of zoology studies had not influenced his decision. By keeping me away from boys, the convent at Los Perdidas had not prepared me for the world of men – and Muller. Surrounded daily by male students was no comparison to one hour in his company.

We became lovers on the last night before we left La Paz. By evening, the equipment had been loaded, the lorries fuelled and the drivers threatened with their lives if they were not behind the wheel at sun-up.

Muller took my arm and walked me through the quietening streets to a little restaurant near the hotel. He ordered for me and poured the bad wine he had selected. We spoke very little, but it didn't seem awkward, sitting there listening to the crickets and watching geckos dart out of the shadows to snap at moths. A male appeared on the backrest of one of the vacant chairs, gulping and blinking in the lamplight.

Muller fished out a pen and drew a horizontal line on his left fingertip and then a large black dot either side, before stretching it gently across to the little lizard. He made a high chirping noise, and the gecko's eyes dilated in outrage, before, open-mouthed, it

rushed forward to engage the intruder. Locked in combat, the gecko surged back and forth along the chair-back, striving to twist its opponent from its perch.

After a moment, Muller chuckled quietly and carefully disengaged his finger. The gecko backed off, disappearing into the darkness. Muller took another sip of wine and fixed his colourless eyes on me.

“Males.... it’s a male thing.” he said simply. I nodded, silently, looking away.

When Muller called for hot water in huge quantities, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to allow him to bathe and dry me and wash my hair, taking care and time, gently and leisurely towelling me with rough, but clean towels produced by a yawning night manager.

Some time later, I awoke with a start, sensing he was no longer beside me. Naked and dimly silhouetted against the drawn curtains, he was staring down into the darkened streets. I watched him standing there, unmoving, for what seemed like an hour until sleep claimed me again. Many times, in the weeks we were together, I was to see him like that but we never spoke of it.

Muller was never talkative. He said and did what had to be said or done. He had a way of turning on his heel and walking away, clearly expecting one to follow to something or somewhere that he had determined. My upbringing had prepared me for this and the university taught me to follow those who knew more than I did, so I followed – and learned. I learned things beyond the forest lore and customs and campus curriculum that had been my life before Muller.

I’d wondered about the women before me. There seemed no doubt that there would have been others but I was far more curious than jealous. I could never bring myself to ask him and he made no reference to them. So it remained until the time the police arrived.

Every week, the riverboat came to drop basic supplies, but it had brought no letters from the coast and I was glad of that. We remained unchanged by the world beyond the jungle. The clearing beside the river was all there was, and Muller and I ruled our small kingdom of cages and leaking huts, making our own times and conditions.

In all this, Manuel and Tapas kept to themselves, relegated to the level of the dumb creatures they tended. The forest people were different. Muller seemed to have begun to regard them with increasing scientific interest, studying and photographing them at rest or in motion – most specifically the unselfconscious women, whose near-nakedness a few simple tribal adornments failed to conceal. Secure in my love, I chose to ignore it.

Now that he was gone, there was nothing left to do but cable Muller's agents and make arrangements to ship the collection out. To zoos and menageries of the world that I would never see – other than as illustrations in my books. By the light of a hissing pressure lamp, I set about making sense of the notes and papers he had left.

It took me two days to piece it all together. Two days, in which I ate nothing, consumed by the need to connect the Muller I knew with the notes, drawings and photographs. With sickening realisation, I was taken back to the awful ravings of his delirium as I sat back on my heels and surveyed the proof spread out on the floor before me.

No, they had not sent word of their coming, said the young lieutenant of police, watching his men swarm through the encampment, their impressive, smartly appointed launch idling in mid-stream, too deep in the draft to approach closer.

Nor, in the circumstances, were they likely to have done so, he said. He was suspicious, but polite, and gathered up the evidence and the Polaroid horrors I had not tried to hide, each plastic bag sealed and carefully labelled - relieved that at least he was in the right place, although his quarry had long been spirited away.

When there was nothing left to do but accept his failure, the lieutenant questioned me for another hour, scribbling as he did so. At last, he sighed, and closed his notebook, then regarded me gravely.

"Perhaps, unlike me, you can be thankful that he was warned. And that you did not end up one of them. You could never have known, Senora - I wish you would reconsider and return with us. But,...well.... have a care in the world outside – perhaps..... umm, opportunities in some other country?" Studying my face, he nodded once, saluted and left, signalling to the little inflatable tender bobbing in the shallows.

Watching him go, I wondered what he would have said if he knew about the instruments and other things I had thrown into the river on the night we first arrived at the clearing.