The Forest of Happy Thoughts

or, The Forest of Happy Dreams

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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Illustration

…He kissed her—her lips, her eyes, her dear hair.

BAILMAN made things snug for the night in his own characteristic fashion: walked round the tent; saw to the guide ropes; put his lantern over the strands of barbed-wire pegged firmly into the ground; carefully inspected his mosquito-net for signs of a stray musca; then turned his attention to the boys. They were squatting round their fire—a voluble, light-hearted assembly.

„Last night your noise disturbed me," he said, as he passed them. „To-night, when the lo-koli sounds, you will sleep, and, if I be awakened, I will come with my whip, and you will feel great shame."

He spoke in the sonorous tongue of the Bo-mongo people, and, despite the awfulness of his threat, a titter of amusement ran round the circle. Bailman himself grinned into the darkness as he made his way down to the river, not that he would hesitate to use his chicotte upon a disobedient servant. He had too full an acquaintance with the Congo folk to be overmuch exercised at the necessity for employing the stick; but he grinned because twelve months in the wilds had made him half a savage, and he appreciated the humours of pain.

By the river side the little steamer was moored. There was a tiny bay here, and the swift currents of the river were broken to a gentle flow; none the less, he inspected the shore-ends of the wire hawsers before he crossed the narrow plank that led to the deck of the ZAIRE. The wood was stacked on the deck, ready for tomorrow's run. The new water-gauge had been put in by N'kema, the engineer, as he had ordered; the engines had been cleaned, and Bailman nodded approvingly. He stepped lightly over two or three sleeping forms curled up on the deck, and gained the shore. „Now I think I'll turn in," he muttered, and looked at his watch. It was nine o'clock. He stood for a moment on the crest of the steep bank, and stared back across the river. The night was black; but he saw the outlines of the forest on the other side. He saw the jewelled sky, and the pale reflection of stars in the water. Then he went to his tent, and leisurely got into his pyjamas. He jerked two tabloids from a tiny bottle, swallowed them, drank a glass of water, and thrust his head through the tent opening. „Ho, Sokani!" he called, speaking in the vernacular, „let the lo-koli sound!"

He went to bed.

He heard the rustle of men moving, the gurgles of laughter as his threat was repeated, and then the penetrating rattle of sticks on the native drum—a hollow tree trunk. Fiercely it beat—furiously, breathlessly, with now and then a deeper note as the drummer, using all his art, sent the message of sleep to the camp.

In one wild crescendo the lo-koli ceased, and Bailman turned with a sigh of content and closed his eyes… he sat up suddenly. He must have dozed; but he was wide awake now.

He listened, then slipped out of bed, pulling on his mosquito boots. Into the darkness of the night he stepped, and found N'kema, the engineer, waiting.

„You heard, master?" said the native.

„I heard," said Bailman with a puzzled face, „yet we are nowhere near a village."

He listened.

From the night came a hundred whispering noises, but above all these, unmistakable, the faint clatter of an answering drum. The white man frowned in his perplexity. „No village is nearer than the Bongindanga," he muttered, „not even a fishing village; the woods are deserted—"

The native held up a warning finger, and bent his head, listening. He was reading the message that the drum sent. Bailman waited; he knew the wonderful fact of this native telegraph, how it sent news through the trackless wilds. He could not understand it, no European could, but he had respect for its mystery.

„A white man is here," read the native; „he has the sickness."

„A white man!“

In the darkness Bailman‘s eyebrows rose incredulously.

„He is a foolish one,“ N'kema read; „he sits in the Forest of Happy Thoughts and will not move.“

Bailman clicked his lips impatiently. "No white man would sit in the Forest of Happy Thoughts,“ he said, half to himself, „unless he were mad.“

But the distant drum monotonously repeated the outrageous news. Here, indeed, in the heart of that loveliest glade in all Africa, encamped in the very centre of the Green Path of Death, was a white man, a sick white man… in the Forest of Happy Thoughts… a sick white man…

So the drum went on and on, till Bailman, rousing his own lo-koli man, sent an answer crashing along the river, and began to dress hurriedly.

In the forest lay a very sick man. He had chosen the site for the camp himself. It was in a clearing, near a little creek that wound between high elephant-grass to the river. Mainward chose it, just before the sickness came, because it was pretty. This was altogether an inadequate reason, but Mainward was a sentimentalist, and his life was a long record of choosing pretty camping places, irrespective of danger. "He was," said a newspaper, commenting on the crowning disaster which sent him a fugitive from justice to the wild lands of Africa, „overburdened with imagination.“ Mainward was cursed with ill-timed confidence; this was one of the reasons he chose to linger in that deadly strip of the Ituri which is clumsily named by the natives „The Lands-where-all-bad-thoughts-become-good-thoughts,“ and poetically adapted by explorers, and daring traders, as „The Forest of Happy Dreams.“ Over-confidence had generally been Mainward‘s undoing—over-confidence in the ability of his horses to win races; over-confidence in his own ability to secure money to hide his defalcations—he was a director of the Welshire County Bank once—over confidence in securing the love of a woman who, when the crash came, looked at him blankly and said she was sorry, but she had had no idea that he felt towards her like that…

Now Mainward lifted his aching head from the pillow and cursed aloud at the din. He was endowed with the smattering of pigeon-English which a man may acquire from a three months‘ sojourn, divided between Sierra Leone and Grand Bassam.

„Why for they make ‘em cursed noise, eh?“ he fretted. „You plenty fool-man, Abiboo.“

„Si, senor,“ agreed the Kano boy calmly.

„Stop it, d‘ye hear; stop it!“ raved the man on the tumbled bed; „this noise is driving me mad—tell them to stop the drum.“

The lo-koli stopped of its own accord, for the listeners in the sick man‘s camp had heard the faint answer from Bailman‘s.

„Come here, Abiboo—I want some milk: open a fresh tin; and tell the cook I want some soup, too.“

The servant left him muttering and tossing from side to side on the creaking camp bedstead. Mainward had many things to think about. It was strange how they all clamoured for immediate attention; strange how they elbowed and fought one another in their noisy claims to his notice. Of course there was the bankruptcy and the discovery at the bank—it was very decent of that inspector fellow to give him the tip to clear out—and Ethel, and the horses, and—and…

The Valley of Happy Dreams! That would make a good story if Mainward could write, only, unfortunately, he could not write. He could sign things, sign his name „Three months after date pay to the order of—“ he could sign other people‘s names… he groaned and winced at the thought.

But here was a forest where bad thoughts became good, and, God knows, his mind was ill-furnished. He wanted peace and sleep and happiness—he greatly desired happiness. Now suppose „Fairy Lane“ had won the Wokingham Stakes? It did not, of course (he winced again at the bad memory), but suppose it had? Suppose he could have found a friend who would have lent him £16,000, or even if Ethel…

„Master,“ said Abiboo‘s voice „dem puck-a-puck, him lib for come.“

„Eh, what‘s that?“

Mainward turned almost savagely on the man.

„Puck-a-puck—you hear ‘um?“

But the sick man could not hear the smack of the ZAIRE‘s stern wheel, as the little boat breasted the downward rush of the river; he was surprised to see that it was dawn, and grudgingly admitted to himself that he had slept. He closed his eyes again and had a strange dream. The principal figure was a tall, tanned, clean-shaven man in a white helmet, who wore a dingy yellow overcoat over his pyjamas.

„How are you feeling?“ said the stranger.

„Rotten bad,“ growled Mainward, „especially about Ethel; don‘t you think it was pretty low down of her to lead me on to believe that she was awfully fond of me, and then at the last minute to chuck me?“

„Shocking,“ said the strange white man gravely; „but put her out of your mind just now: she isn‘t worth troubling about What do you say to this?“

He held up a small greenish pellet between his forefinger and thumb, and Mainward laughed weakly.

„Oh, rot!“ he chuckled faintly, „you‘re one of those Forest of the Happy Dreams johnnies; what‘s that? a love philter?“ He was hysterically amused at the witticism.

Bailman nodded.

„Love or life, it‘s all one,“ he said, but apparently unamused, „swallow it.“

Mainward giggled and obeyed.

„And now,“ said the stranger—this was six hours later—„the best thing you can do is to let my boys put you on my steamer and take you down river.“

Mainward shook his head. He had awakened irritable and lamentably weak. „My dear chap, it‘s awfully kind of you to have come—by the way, I suppose you are a doctor?“

Bailman shook his head.

„On the contrary, I am a journalist,“ he said flippantly, „I‘m Bailman, the special correspondent, of *The Megaphone*. I‘ve been doing atrocities for a year—you know the stuff that is associated with the Congo—but you were saying?“

„I want to stay here—it‘s devilish pretty.“

„Devilish is the very adjective I should have used—my dear man, this is the plague spot of the Congo; it‘s the home of every death-dealing fly and bug in Congo Land.“

He waved his hand to the glorious vista of fresh green glades, of gorgeous creepers that hung their garlands from tree to tree.

„Look at the grass," he said; „it's homeland grass—that's the seductive part of it; I nearly camped here myself—come my friend, let me take you to my camp."

Mainward shook his head obstinately.

„I'm obliged, but I'll stay here for a day or so. I want to try the supernatural effects of this pleasant place," he said with a little smile. „I've got so many thoughts that need treatment."

„Look here," said Bailman roughly, „you know jolly well how this forest got its name; it is called Happy Dreams because it's impregnated with fever, and with every disease from beri-beri to sleeping sickness. You don't wake from the dreams that you dream here. Man, I know this country, and you're a new comer; you've trekked here because you wanted to get away from life and start all over again."

„I beg your pardon." Mainward's face flushed and he spoke a little stiffly.

„Oh, I know all about you—didn't I tell you I was a journalist? I was in England when things were going rocky with you, and I've read the rest in the papers I get from time to time. But all that is nothing to do with me. I'm here to help you to start fair. If you had wanted to commit suicide, why come to Africa to do it? Be sensible and shift your camp; I'll send my steamer back for your men—will you come?"

„No," said Mainward sulkily. „I don't want to, I'm not keen; besides, I'm not fit to travel."

Here was an argument which Bailman could not answer. He was none too sure upon that point himself, and he hesitated before he spoke again.

„Very well," he said at length, „suppose you stay another day to give you a chance to pull yourself together. I'll come along to-morrow with a tip top invalid chair for you—is it a bet?"

Mainward held out his shaking hand, and the ghost of a smile puckered the corners of his eyes. „It's a bet," he said.

He watched the journalist walk through the camp, speaking to one man after another in a strange tongue. A singular, masterful man this, thought Mainward. Would he have mastered Ethel? He watched the stranger with curious eyes, and noted how his own lazy devils of carriers jumped at his word…

„Good-night," said Bailman's voice, and Mainward looked up. „You must take another of these pellets, and tomorrow you'll be as fit as a donkey-engine. I've got to get back to my camp tonight, or I shall find half my stores stolen in the morning; but if you'd rather I stopped?"

„No, no," replied the other hastily. He wanted to be alone. He had lots of matters to settle with himself. There was the question of Ethel, for instance.

„You won't forget to take the tabloid?"

„No. I say, I'm awfully obliged to you for coming. You've been a good white citizen."

Bailman smiled. „Don't talk nonsense," he said, good-humouredly. „This is all brotherly love. White to white, and kin to kin, don't you know? We're all alone here, and there isn't a man of our colour within five hundred miles. Goodnight, and please take the tabloid—"

Mainward lay listening to the noise of the departure. He thought he heard a little bell tingle. That must be for the engines. Then he heard the puck-a-puck of the wheel—so that was how the steamer got its name.

Abiboo came with some milk. „You take um medicine, master?" he inquired.

„I take um," murmured Mainward; but the green tabloid was underneath his pillow.

Then there began to steal over him a curious sensation of content. He did not analyse it down to its first cause. He had had sufficient introspective exercise for one day. It came to him as a pleasing shock to realise that he was happy.

He opened his eyes and looked round. His bed was laid in the open, and he drew aside the curtains of his net to get a better view.

A little man was walking briskly toward him along the velvet stretch of grass that sloped down from the glade, and Mainward whistled.

„Atty," he gasped. „By all that's wonderful."

Atty, indeed, it was: the same wizened Atty as of yore; but no longer pulling the long face to which Mainward had been accustomed. The little man was in his white riding-breeches, his diminutive top-boots were splashed with mud, and on the crimson of his silk jacket there was evidence of a hard race. He touched his cap jerkily with his whip, and shifted the burden of the racing saddle he carried to his other arm,

„Why, Atty," said Mainward, with a smile, „what on earth are you doing here?"

„It's a short way to the jockeys' room, sir," said the little man. „I've just weighed in. I thought the Fairy would do it, sir, and she did."

Mainward nodded wisely. „I knew she would too," he said. „Did she give you a smooth ride?"

The jockey grinned again. „She never does that," he said, „but she ran gamely enough. Coming up out of the Dip, she hung a little, but I showed her the whip, and she came on as straight as a die. I thought once The Stalk would beat us—I got shut in, but I pulled her round, and we were never in difficulties. I could have won by ten lengths," said Atty.

„You could have won by ten lengths," repeated Mainward in wonder. „Well, you've done me a good turn, Atty. This win will get me out of one of the biggest holes that ever a reckless man tumbled into—I shall not forget you, Atty."

„I'm sure you won't, sir," said the little jockey gratefully; „if you'll excuse me now, sir?"

Mainward nodded and watched him as he moved quickly through the trees.

There were several figures in the glade now, and Mainward looked down ruefully at his soiled duck suit. „What an ass I was to come like this," he muttered in his annoyance. „I might have known that I should have met all these people."

There was one he did not wish to see; and as soon as he sighted Venn, with his shy eyes and his big nose, Mainward endeavoured to slip back out of observation. But Venn saw him, and came tumbling through the trees, with his big flabby hand extended and his dull eyes aglow,

„Hullo, hullo!" he grinned, „been looking for you."

Mainward muttered some inconsequent reply. „Rum place to find you, eh?" Venn removed his shining silk hat and mopped his brow with an awesome silk handkerchief.

„But look here, old feller—about that money."

„Don't worry, my dear man," Mainward interposed easily. „I can pay you now."

„That ain't what I mean," said the other impetuously; „a few hundred more or less docs not count. But you wanted a big sum—"

„And you told me you'd see me—"

„I know, I know," Venn put in hastily; but that was before Kaffirs started jumpin'. Old feller, you can have it!"

He said this with grotesque emphasis, standing with his legs wide apart, his hat perched on the back of his head, his plump hands dramatically outstretched, and Mainward laughed outright.

„Sixteen thousand?" he asked.

„Or twenty," said the other impressively. „I want to show you—"

Somebody called him, and with a hurried apology he went blundering up the green slope, stopping and turning back to indulge in a little dumb show illustrative of his confidence in Mainward and his willingness to oblige.

Mainward was laughing, a low, gurgling laugh of pure enjoyment. Venn of all people! Venn, with his cursed questions and talk of securities. Well! well! Then his merriment ceased, and he winced again, and his heart beat faster and faster, and a curious weakness came over him.

How splendidly cool she looked.

She walked in the clearing, a white, slim figure: he heard the swish of her skirt as she came through the long grass... white, with a green belt all encrusted with dull gold embroidery. He took in every detail hungrily—the dangling gold ornaments that hung from her belt, the lace collar at her throat, the...

She did not hurry to him: that was not her way.

But her eyes dawned a gradual tenderness—those dear eyes that dropped before his shyly.

„Ethel!" he whispered, and dared to take her hand.

„Aren't you wonderfully surprised?" she said.

„Ethel! here!"

„I—I had to come."

She would not look at him, but he saw the pink in her cheek and heard the faltering voice with a wild hope. „I behaved so badly dear—so very badly."

She hung her head.

„Dear! dear!" he muttered, and groped toward her like a blind man.

She was in his arms, crushed against his breast, the perfume of her presence in his brain.

„I had to come to you—" Her hot cheek was against his. „I love you so."

„Me—love me? Do you mean it?" He was tremulous with happiness, and his voice broke—„dearest."

Her face was upturned to his, her lips so near; he felt her heart beating as furiously as his own. He kissed her—her lips, her eyes, her dear hair...

„O God, I'm happy," he sobbed, „so—so happy..."

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Bailman sprang ashore just as the sun was rising, and came thoughtfully through the undergrowth to the camp. Abiboo, squatting by the curtained bed, did not rise. Bailman walked to the bed, pulled aside the mosquito netting and bent over the man who lay there.

Then he drew the curtains again, lit his pipe slowly, and looked down at Abiboo.

„When did he die?" he asked.

„In the dark of the morning, master," said the native.

Bailman nodded slowly. „Why did you not send for me?"

For a moment the squatting figure made no reply, then he rose and stretched himself.

„Master,“ he said, speaking in Swaheli—that is a language which allows of nice distinctions—„this white man was happy; he walked in the Forest of Happy Thoughts: why should I call him back to a land where there was neither sunshine nor happiness, but only night and the pain of sickness?“

„You‘re a philosopher,“ said Bailman irritably.

„I am a follower of the Prophet,“ said Abiboo, the Kano boy; „and all things are according to God‘s wisdom.“