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BAMBOO DEATH

By
Henry Kuttner

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Joan clutched at the arm of the broad-shouldered young man beside her as the scream came again, shrill with agony, lancing through the lush vegetation that fringed the narrow trail. Knife-edged with an ecstasy of pain, it rose higher and higher, until it died away at last in a choking sob. Lee Dean's mouth tightened as he put his arm protectively about the girl.

"That sounded human!" Joan whispered, her dark eyes wide, but Dean shook his head. He put down the suitcase he was carrying and wiped the sweat from his palm.

"No, it's an animal. I heard a dog scream that way once in the trenches when a bullet blew its hind legs off. That's a dog screaming, Joan."

The agonized cry came again, and a shudder racked Joan's slender body. Dean picked up the suitcase.

"Come on," he said briefly. "It's not far now, I guess. Nice trip, isn't it?"

Joan smiled bravely. "I don't mind. After all, if Uncle Wayne left me his money, the least I can do is visit his estate."

"But what an estate! Way back here in the Florida Everglades—no wonder he seldom visited it! We must have come nearly four miles from the bayou. I don't blame the guide for not coming along." He plucked at his tattered sleeve.

"That wasn't it," Joan said somberly. "He said Quentin was a devil."

Dean's chuckle died away as they came around a bend in the trail and saw a level path stretching before them to an old-fashioned, two-story frame house that loomed ominously against the flaming sunset. But it was not at the house that Dean was staring, his eyes wide.

The expanse of ground before them was covered with beds of bamboo, some of the plants twenty and thirty feet high, others just pushing their green, slim sprouts through the black loam. Over several of these beds were erected curious contrivances of woven bamboo that resembled nothing more than mesh cages set on stilts. The bamboo was growing lushly through the interstices in the little cages, and in one of them was an impaled, bloody carcass that alternately moaned and whined in agony.

"Ye gods!" Dean said tonelessly, and Joan shrank back, her face suddenly pale. The suitcase thudded to the ground as Dean sprang forward.

He stood beside the cage, staring down at the gory, dreadful thing that had been a dog. The bloodstained tips of several of the slender bamboo shoots had already grown entirely through the lacerated flesh, and were protruding from punctured wounds on the animal's back. The tips of the bamboo were covered by slender, needle-pointed metal caps.

Dean began to fumble with the cage, seeking a way to open it. There was a crude arrangement of hooks which he quickly unfastened, flinging the woven bamboo lid aside. And from Joan came a sudden cry of warning!

Dean snapped erect, but he was not quick enough. A pair of thick bare arms, corded with muscle and bristling with red stubble, were flung about his waist, pinning his arms to his sides. He felt himself swung off the ground, and as his ribs cracked under the agonizing pressure he kicked back desperately, feeling hard flesh grind under his heel. There was an inarticulate, growling oath, but the pressure did not relax. Through bulging eyes he saw Joan running towards him, a jagged stick of bamboo in her hands.

Choking for air, with a red haze swimming before his eyes, Dean twisted his foot about his captor's leg, seeking to trip him. It was impossible.

The man stood immovable as a rock, and Dean, although he was no weakling, felt cold terror surge through him. A scorching pain was stabbing through his chest, and he realized he was helpless as a child in the grasp of his opponent.

A shout came dimly to his ears above the thunder of racing blood. He felt the great binding arms relax, and, sick with pain, he collapsed on the ground. Joan came racing up, her bamboo splinter held menacingly, just as a stocky, bronzed man pounded up from the opposite direction.

Dean staggered to his feet, fell back against the bamboo cage. He felt the warm stickiness of blood against his hand, and the tortured dog moaned. Through pain-misted eyes he viewed his attacker.

The man was gigantic. Over six feet tall, thewed like a bull, his massive physique was plainly revealed by the cotton singlet that covered his torso. A bristling thatch of red hair stuck up defiantly, and piggish, bloodshot eyes glowered defiantly at Dean from little pits of gristle. The lower part of the man's face was entirely concealed by a black cloth mask.

The newcomer was panting from his run.

"Quentin!" he snapped, thrusting himself between the giant and Dean. "Get out! Quick!"

Quentin shook his head angrily. His voice was strangely indistinct, muffled by the mask and sounding almost as though the man had a split palate.

"He was trying to take the dog out," he rumbled, and Dean had to strain to make out the words. "He's spoiled the experiment. Look—the dog's dead!"

Callously the giant clutched the furry, blood-dripping carcass in one hamlike hand and dragged it from the impaling needle-points. He shook it angrily in Dean's face, and red drops spattered on the latter's coat.

"That'll do," the stocky man commanded sharply. "Take it away. Quick!"

Mumbling to himself, Quentin obeyed. His bulky figure swayed darkly against the red sky as he marched along the path to the house. The stocky one turned.

"I don't know what to say," he apologized. "You're Joan Masson, aren't you? And this is Lee Dean, your fiancé?"

Joan nodded, white-faced. "But we're not—"

The man broke in. "In that case, Quentin's all yours. I've been having a devil of a time. Old Wayne Masson let him pretty well run the place. I'm your cousin Jeff Kenton, by the way."

"Oh," Joan's voice shook a little. "But I—we—"

Kenton waved a bronzed hand. "Come on in the house. Can you make it, old man? Good. It's only a few steps."

Although a searing pain was throbbing in Dean's chest, he managed to accompany the others along the path. Kenton led them up the sagging, squeaking steps of the porch.

“It’s a dilapidated place,” he observed. “Must be over forty years old.”

Once settled in the musty, gloomy living room, they watched Kenton kindle a fire. Joan moved closer to Dean on the old-fashioned sofa, shivering a little. The flames hungrily licked up the bamboo Kenton used for fuel, but the fire could not dispel the odor of damp that pervaded the room. Kenton lit an oil lamp, and appreciatively accepted the cigarette Dean offered.

“You hardly expected to see me here, did you?” he asked after a time, his bronzed, craggy features wreathed in bluish smoke. “The last time I saw you you were a little kid in rompers. Well, I found out from Uncle Wayne’s lawyer that you intended to visit the place. And I thought I’d better be here, in case— Well, you saw what happened.”

Dean winced as he tentatively hunched his shoulders. Kenton nodded grimly. “Quentin’s a husky little playfellow, isn’t he? He’s all right, though, unless you interfere with his pet idea.”

“Idea? You mean—” A horrible surmise flashed through Joan’s mind. She brushed back her hair with a nervous gesture, tried to smooth down her dress, torn by the thorns of the trail.

Kenton’s eyes darkened. “He’s a bit crazy, you know. He was wounded at the Argonne—that was when he saved Uncle Wayne’s life, and the old fellow kept him on as caretaker of this place. He hardly ever visited it, and Quentin could do pretty much as he wanted. Uncle Wayne had a soft spot in his heart for the fellow, and even imported bamboo when he begged for it—the swift-growing kind from tropical India. I don’t think he knew what Quentin wanted it for. I—rather hope not.”

Even Dean was a bit pale under his tan. “I’ve heard something about that kind of torture in the Orient. Don’t they—”

“They do.” Kenton shot an apologetic glance at Joan. “The natives tie a man down over a bamboo shoot, so he can’t move, and the bamboo grows right through his body. It grows—well, about an inch an hour, some varieties. The man dies—eventually. It’s about the nastiest death one can imagine.”

“And you let Quentin torture that dog!” Joan’s palms were pressed flat against her cheeks.

“I didn’t know it. I was back in the everglades when I heard the howling, and came back as quickly as I could.” He saw Dean’s sharp glance at his boots and smiled a little. “Yes, they’re clean. The everglades aren’t all muck, you know.”

His face grew grim. “About Quentin, though. He’s got some crack-brained idea he can cross plants and animals—interbreed them. His injury in the war put a kink in his brain, and it’s taken that—”

He paused as the doorknob rattled, and then Quentin’s huge figure came stamping into the room. He dropped the suitcase with a thud. “You forgot this,” he mumbled indistinctly through the mask. “I brought it in.”

“Thanks,” Dean said curtly, for his chest still pained. “Too bad you couldn’t have been as courteous before.”

Quentin growled something under his breath and retreated, slamming the door behind him. Dean turned to find Kenton’s eyebrows raised quizzically.

“You can’t do anything with a brute like that,” he observed, and Joan stood up suddenly.

“He ought to be put under medical care,” she snapped, an unusual fire in her dark eyes. Kenton watched her flushed cheeks and parted lips with unconcealed admiration.

“Don’t think he’d take to it,” he said. “It’d be better to shoot him.” His chuckle took the callousness out of the words, but his eyes still watched the girl. Abruptly she became

conscious that her blouse was torn, revealing a triangle of white, softly rounded flesh. She sat down hurriedly, pulling her coat about her.

There was a faint shuffling from beyond the door. Kenton started and his heavy eyebrows drew together.

“You shouldn’t have said that,” he frowned. “About putting him away. The man’s mad, you know. Dangerously mad.” He got up, paced back and forth, scowling. “I wish you hadn’t come, Joan,” he said presently. “You too, Dean. You see, Quentin is obsessed with what he calls his experiment. He’s got those cages all over the place. There are several big ones, large enough to hold a human body. And he’s always talking about the day when he can experiment on something worthwhile. He says the lower classes of life aren’t suitable.”

Dean had sprung to his feet, his jaw muscles tense. “Look here,” he snapped. “Do you mean Joan’s in danger—really in danger—from that brute?”

“Well, you saw what he did with the dog. I rather wish you two could get back along the trail tonight—but of course you can’t. It’s bad enough in daylight, what with quicksand and deep sloughs. And the alligators, too. I’ve been here two days myself,” he finished soberly. “And I’m afraid myself sometimes. But I knew if I hiked out before you came—” His glance at Joan was expressive, and she smiled gratefully.

Abruptly a sound came from beyond the door, a frightened, shrill cackling. Dean sprang up, reached it in a stride, and swung it open. Quentin, just outside in the hall, paused, obviously taken aback. He was wearing a long waterproof cape that shrouded his huge body, and a black rain-hat concealed his red hair. His piggish eyes were glowing malevolently above the mask, and from his hand dangled a fluttering, squawking chicken.

Dean became conscious that Joan and Kenton had come up behind him.

Kenton said quietly, “The ax is in the kitchen if you want to kill the bird, Quentin.”

The giant’s angry mumblings were almost unintelligible. “I don’t want it,” he growled. “This time I’ll do it. I know I will. My new bamboo—”

“Give me that chicken!” Dean snapped, making a snatch for the fluttering bird, but Quentin swung it behind him. His other hand flung up and clutched Dean’s shirt in a vise-like grip. The black mask fluttered as he spoke.

“No! You fool! What’s a chicken or a dog compared to my experiment? Less than nothing! I’ll succeed this time—then I’ll be rich! You’ll see.” His piggish eyes glittered with unconcealed greed.

“You’re not going to torture that bird!” Dean barked, twisting to free himself from the iron grip on his shirt. Kenton cut in coldly, “Put the chicken back in the coop. Do as I tell you!”

“You’re not my boss,” Quentin growled. “Captain Masson’s my boss. Anyway, I’ll do it tonight for sure—I’ve watered the bamboo for weeks with chicken’s blood.”

Dean felt Joan tremble as she pressed against him. “Look here,” he said desperately. “Just what do you expect to gain by this—this experiment?”

The bloodshot eyes grew cunning. “Money. It’s the Fountain of Youth—didn’t Ponce de Leon say it was in Florida? That’s what I’ll have—eternal life. People’ll pay for the secret. Look here!”

He swung up the squawking chicken, still clutching Dean’s shirt with his other hand. “People die, don’t they? Sure. But plants—the big ones, the trees—live for a long time. Some of the redwoods are nearly a thousand years old. That’s the chlorophyl in ’em—the stuff they

use for blood. And they don't move, either—they're rooted to the ground. It's when you move that you waste energy."

"Why not just inject chlorophyll into the bloodstream?" Kenton cut in ironically, but the giant glowered at him, a contemptuous chuckle shaking the big frame. "Think I don't know that? It'd kill you—I *know*! You've got to *grow* into a plant—but it's worth it! Eternal life—thousands of years, anyway. I've got it all worked out." His eyes flickered with insane cunning. "And this chicken will do the trick. You'll see."

Abruptly Dean wrenched himself free, his shirt ripping, and ducked under the big arm, reaching for the bird. With an inarticulate bellow of rage Quentin swung around, keeping the chicken behind him. His fingers closed on Dean's shoulder. Dean felt a ligament tear under the crushing grip, and desperately jabbed a sharp blow to the giant's black-masked face.

The result was surprising. Howling, Quentin let go of Dean and the chicken and fell back against the wall, pawing at his face. The bird, clucking frantically, fled into the darkness of the hallway. And still bellowing those inarticulate screams of pain, Quentin's clutching fingers tore the mask from his face, so that its full horror was revealed in the light from the open doorway.

Joan, suppressing a scream, fell back against Kenton.

For the giant had no face! Below the eyes it was a hideous, gaping wound of healed scar-tissue, a horrible cavity from which blood was dripping. Dean involuntarily fell back a step.

The reason for the giant's mumbling speech was hideously apparent now. The explosion at the Argonne that had warped Quentin's brain had made his face a mangled horror that had to be kept masked for sanity's sake. Now he stood mouthing obscene, half-intelligible oaths, blood dripping darkly on the black slicker.

Dean felt a clutch on his arm, and Kenton drew him through the doorway.

"Come on," he whispered, shutting the door and bolting it securely. "It'll be safer with a locked door between us for a while. I should have told you—"

Joan was sobbing hysterically. "That awful half-face," she gasped. "I'll dream about it forever! Oh, Lee."

Dean took her into his arms. Kenton, standing by the door, listened to the pain-racked moanings in the hall. Suddenly they ceased. There was an ominous hush. Then, without warning, a heavy body hurled itself against the door. The panel splintered.

Dean sprang away from Joan as another resounding blow came, and this time the door gave. A red-stubbed hand came thrusting through the splintered gap, fumbling for the bolt. A quick blow by Kenton would have stopped it, but he backed away, his face a sickly yellow. Dean sprang forward, but he was too late. The door clicked open, and he almost collided with the blood-smearred figure of the giant.

One glance at the bloodshot, glaring eyes told Dean that it was war to the hilt, and hesitation would be fatal. Without pausing he sent a sledgehammer blow to Quentin's stomach, and felt a swinging fist graze his head. Snarling, Quentin bent over, clutching at his midriff. Then he snapped erect, surprisingly agile for his bulk, and lunged for Dean, his face a horror of misshapen, bleeding flesh.

Dean sent another blow at the giant's face, but the deformed head rocked aside and the blow missed its mark. Instantly a great arm was clamped about Dean's waist, although he flung himself desperately aside, and a huge paw closed over his throat. Vicious fingers dug in remorselessly, and abruptly Dean's breath was cut off. He was borne to the floor by the weight

of his opponent, clawing frantically at the leering gargoyle face above him. Slim silk-clad legs came flashing into his range of vision, and he saw Joan fling herself on the berserk giant.

Roaring, Quentin flung up an arm and sent her flying across the room. Her head thudded against the wall, and she slid to the floor in a crumpled, unconscious heap.

Past Quentin's shoulder Dean saw Kenton, a heavy vase poised in his hand. Would the man never strike? A moment more, he knew, and it would be too late. Crimson-streaked darkness was swimming up to engulf him as he strained for breath, and suddenly the iron fingers clamped on his throat seemed to expand until they clutched his whole body. There was a soundless explosion within his head, and the room flared up and was gone in an incandescent blaze. Darkness took him . . .

He came back to life slowly, each breath a rasping effort, throbbing agony in his neck. His arms hurt, and he made a movement to ease them. The motion was arrested, and he opened his eyes and kept them open as he stared.

He was a prisoner. He was seated with his back against a clump of tall bamboo shoots, his arms tied behind him so that they embraced several of the tough plants, holding him captive. His legs, however, were free, and he dragged himself painfully to his feet. With bulging eyes he stared at the fantastic scene before him.

He had been unconscious for hours, for the sun was high, and its rays were beating down furiously upon the bamboo bed before him, and the coffinlike cage of woven bamboo that stood supported on poles waist-high above it. There were wide interstices between the narrow bamboo bars, and within the cage lay the nearly nude body of Joan, her disheveled dark hair veiling her bare shoulders. Her eyes were closed, but by the regular rise and fall of her breasts Dean knew that she was alive.

The cage held her tightly in a remorseless clutch, and Dean saw that her arms were bound to her sides with adhesive tape. Beneath the cage were dozens of tall, slender bamboo sprouts, some of them with their vicious tips, capped with needle-pointed metal, almost touching the girl's body.

A chuckle came from behind Dean, and a huge, lumbering figure shambled into view.

"Quentin!" Dean whispered through parched and cracking lips. "You devil!"

The man had not troubled to change his clothing, and still wore the shrouding, blood-smearred black slicker and hat, while the mask, again in place, fluttered as he breathed. He stood regarding the bound man malevolently.

"Do you think you can get away with this?" Dean asked, with an attempt at self-control. The other man chuckled. "You'll see," he mumbled. "If you're rich you can get away with anything. And *she'll* make me rich." He turned to regard the unconscious girl with a lascivious stare. "Wait till she's half plant," he gloated. "She'll thank me for it."

"You can't mean—" Dean gasped, straining forward against his bonds. "Let Joan out of there! We—we'll get you some animals for your experiments!"

The giant shook his head, his eyes glinting under the shadow of the hat-brim, not deigning to answer. As a sudden thought came to Dean he glanced around quickly. "Where's Kenton?" he asked. His captor shrugged.

"Maybe dead—I dunno. I left him in the house. I knocked his head against the floor." His voice trailed off as he bent to examine the cage in which the girl lay. He was apparently pleased, for his mumbling voice was jubilant as he went on. "Watch, now. If it doesn't work

with *her*, you'll be the next. I've got a cage ready for you." With a wave of his hand he indicated another bamboo frame on the ground beside him. "But it'll work—you'll see!"

Staring, horrified, Dean saw that the sharp metal caps that tipped the bamboo were prodding into the white flesh of Joan's back, stretching up hungrily with a dreadful, imperceptible growth. Abruptly Joan moaned, shuddered. Her eyes sprang open and she stared blankly at the bamboo bars of the cage within a few inches of her face. A little gasp escaped her, and Dean saw that a few drops of crimson were slowly creeping down one of the vicious bamboos.

Joan turned her head and saw Dean. A dawning apprehension and horror grew in her eyes. "Lee!" she cried, and her teeth clenched suddenly. Another tiny rill of blood began to crawl down one of the bamboo shoots. The black-garbed giant watched the girl with gloating, triumphant eyes.

As a hopeless, faint moan came from Joan a mad rage surged hotly within Dean, and he flung himself forward against his bonds. They held, and he was snapped back against the limber stems of the bamboo. If he could break them—

They were too tough. Although he strained and flung himself forward again and again he succeeded only in bruising his back and lacerating his wrists. He could not reach the knots of the ropes that bound him; they were tied too deftly for that. Doggedly he threw himself forward, feeling the bamboo creak and sway under the impact of his weight.

There was a splintering sound, faint enough to be unperceived by the giant, but a thrill of hope sprang into existence within Dean. He felt a sharp edge cut into his wrist, and by exploring with his fingers he discovered a dry bamboo stem among the limber green ones. It was this brittle bamboo that his frantic plunges had split.

Hastily he maneuvered his hands until the rope was rubbing against the sharp edge, keen as a knife blade. As he felt it cut through the strands Dean redoubled his efforts, then forced himself to pause as the giant glanced at him. But a stifled shriek came from Joan, and her captor stared down again to where she lay just above the waist-high bamboo.

Blood was trickling slowly down several of the slender stems now, and she tried to arch her body away from the vicious metal needles. But there was no room to move within the bamboo coffin, and she dropped back, sobbing with pain.

Dean could stand no more. He flung himself forward, his feet braced against the base of the bamboo, and put all his strength into one desperate surge. And the rope parted!

Already almost severed, it snapped and sent Dean plunging, head down, at the giant, who had swung about startled and alert. As Dean came rushing at him, off balance, the giant aimed a swift blow at his attacker's head—a blow that would have pulped Dean's face had it landed. But it didn't.

Dean, realizing he could not recover his balance, made a virtue of necessity and dived at his opponent's legs. The two went down together, amid a great crashing of splintered wood, on the bamboo cage which had been intended to imprison Dean. A knifelike point of bamboo dug into his arm, but he could not pause to pluck it out.

A vicious kick crashed against Dean's shoulder, and his grip relaxed momentarily. His opponent wriggled free and sprang to his feet, but Dean was almost as quick. The two men stood facing each other, breathing heavily. Joan cried out suddenly, and Dean's eyes flashed to where she lay in the cage.

That glance was almost his undoing. The giant aimed a kick at his groin, and Dean only saved himself by twisting his body desperately aside. Off balance, he whirled to face his opponent, but the giant was backing up, his hand fumbling in his pocket. Dean guessed his intention and plunged forward.

Sunlight flashed on bright metal, and as the gun roared Dean felt a hot agony sear his side. Then his fist came up powerfully with all the weight of his body behind it, and crashed home upon the black mask that shrouded the giant's face.

Under that vicious, sledgehammer blow the man spun half about, his knees buckling, and fell forward heavily upon the splintered wreckage of the bamboo cage. He did not move, and Dean leaped to rescue Joan.

Hurriedly he extricated the girl's nearly nude body from the cage. She sagged against him, her eyes dull with pain, as he pulled off the adhesive tape that bound her hands. Quickly his anxious fingers explored her back. Then he breathed an explosive sigh of relief.

"Joan! You're sure you're all right?"

She sobbed a little as she clung to him. "I think so, Lee. The bamboo didn't—didn't have time—"

"They're only flesh wounds," he said. "Here." He tore a few strips from his tattered shirt and made an effectual bandage. "The bleeding's stopped anyway. And his bullet only grazed me."

Joan's eyes lit on the supine body that lay face down among the broken cage. Her eyes went wide with apprehension. "Lee!" she said quickly. "Hadn't you better—"

There was a strange look on Dean's face. "I think we're in for a surprise," he said. "When I hit him, I felt—" He rolled the prostrate body over on its back and stripped away the mask. Joan gave a surprised little cry.

Dean, looking down at the bamboo splinter that protruded from the man's eye socket, said grimly, "Well, your cousin won't bother you again."

For it was the body of Jeff Kenton. . . .

"Padding did it," Lee explained as he dressed the wounds on Joan's back while she lay on the sofa in the old house's living room. "He padded his shoulders and arms to make himself look bigger, and the long slicker added to the illusion of height. And, of course, with the mask and the hat pulled over his eyes, and with Quentin's mumbling voice to imitate, he figured I'd never recognize him."

"But why, Lee, why?" Joan asked, wriggling. "Oh, that smarts."

"Just a minute, now. Money, of course. If you died, he'd get Uncle Wayne's money. The way I figure it, he knew about Quentin's experiments, and made his plans accordingly. It was you he wanted to kill—not me. After the bamboo had finished you, he'd have slipped back to the house and discarded his disguise. Then, as Jeff Kenton, he'd have come to my rescue, telling me a cock and bull story about just recovering from his knockout, and managing to stun Quentin and tie him. Of course Quentin was tied up in the cellar, where we found him, ever since Kenton knocked him out with the vase during the fight last night."

"But you said he'd intended the other cage for you," Joan objected.

"He just said that to help build up the case against Quentin. It was you he wanted to kill, remember. It was very important that I be left alive to testify against Quentin, who'd be convicted of the murder, while Kenton would inherit the estate."

"Quentin played right into his hands, didn't he?" Joan commented, shivering a little.

Dean nodded. “Yeah. Quentin isn’t homicidal, though, unless he’s in a rage. Kenton cleverly put that thought in our minds. But he’ll have to be put under medical care. It’ll be the best thing—for him and for the poor creatures he’s been torturing. The funny thing is,” Dean grinned, slipping an arm about Joan, “the funny thing is, even if Kenton’s plan had succeeded, he’d not have inherited the estate anyway.”

“Oh—oh, you mean—”

“Exactly. You tried to tell him twice, but he didn’t give you a chance. He didn’t know we were married in New York just before taking the train!”

[The end of *Bamboo Death* by Henry Kuttner]