

*Cloudland Revisited:
Rock-a-Bye, Viscount, in the Treetop*

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A COUPLE OF MONTHS BACK, the firm of Bramhall & Rixey, Ltd., a shipping concern on lower Broadway operating a string of freighters to West African ports, received an unusual communication. It was inscribed in pencil on both sides of a sheet of lined yellow paper of the sort commonly employed in secondary schools, and its numerous erasures and interlineations attested to the care that had gone into its composition. The correspondent identified himself as a prominent New York sportsman and big-game hunter who was contemplating a safari into the heart of the Dark Continent (Africa, he explained in a helpful aside). Without going into wearisome detail, he was in a position to assure Bramhall & Rixey that the expedition would eclipse anything of the kind on record. Not only was he planning to bring back a number of gorillas, man-eating lions, and comparably gaudy fauna but, if time allowed, he proposed to search out King Solomon's mines and corroborate the existence of a mysterious white goddess ruling a vast empire of blacks in the Cameroons. Obviously, any wide-awake shipping company could appreciate what enormous publicity must accrue to it if chosen to transport such an enterprise. Should Bramhall & Rixey agree to carry the party—without charge, of course—the sportsman thought he might prevail on his associates to assent, though he warned that they rather favored a rival fleet. Stressing the need for an immediate decision, due to the impending monsoon rains (whether in Manhattan or Africa he did not specify), the writer enclosed a self-addressed postal for a speedy reply.

My first reaction when I came across a postal in my morning mail several days ago with the terse admonition “Wipe your nose, bub,” signed by Bramhall & Rixey, was one of spontaneous irritation. I caught up the phone, forgetting for the moment that my fourteen-year-old son had been enthralled this past summer by a book called “Tarzan of the Apes” and that he had been treating the family to a sustained panegyric on Africa.

"I'll teach you whose nose to wipe!" I shouted into it. "I've half a mind to come down and cane you people publicly in Beaver Street!" Fortunately, they were spared the humiliation, as, in my wrath, I forgot to dial their number, and by the time I tumbled to the probable culprit and documented his guilt, I was able to take a much more lenient view of the incident. The fact of the matter is that back in 1918, the year I myself first encountered Edgar Rice Burroughs' electrifying fable, it exercised a similarly hypnotic effect on me. Insofar as the topography of Rhode Island and my physique permitted, I modelled myself so closely on Tarzan that I drove the community to the brink of collapse. I flung spears at the neighbors' laundry, exacerbated their watchdogs, swung around their piazzas gibbering and thumping my chest, made reply only in half-human grunts interspersed with unearthly howls, and took great pains generally to qualify as a stench in the civic nostril. The hallucination passed as abruptly as it had set in; one morning I awoke with an overwhelming ennui for everything related to Africa, weak but lucid. My kinsfolk were distrustful for a while, but as soon as they saw me constructing a catamaran in which to explore the Everglades, they knew I was rational again.

Curious as to why Tarzan had enraptured two generations and begotten so many sequels, movie serials, and comics, I commandeered my son's copy of the novel and my wife's chaise longue and staged a reunion. Like most sentimental excursions into the past, it was faintly tinged with disillusion. Across the decades, Burroughs' erstwhile jaunty narrative had developed countless crow's-feet and wrinkles; passages that I remembered outracing Barney Oldfield now seemed to puff and wheeze like a donkey engine. The comparison was aided by a donkey engine puffing directly outside my window, and frequently, in all honesty, its rhythmic snoring was amplified by my own. Nevertheless, I got the gist of the story, and for gist-lovers who prefer to sniff the candy at long range, that little may suffice.

Strictly speaking, the saga begins in the African forest with the adoption by a female anthropoid ape of an English baby of lofty lineage, but to render this association feasible, if not palatable, some valiant exposition is required. Lord and Lady Greystoke, outward bound on the barkentine *Fuwalda* from

Freetown in the summer of 1888, are en route "to make a peculiarly delicate investigation of conditions" in a British West Coast colony when mutiny breaks out among the crew. Considering that the captain and his mates are forever emptying revolvers into the men and felling them with belaying pins, Burroughs' appraisal of the situation is dazzlingly understated: "There was in the whole atmosphere of the craft that undefinable something which presages disaster." The lid ultimately blows off, and a lamentable scene ensues: "Both sides were cursing and swearing in a frightful manner, which, together with the reports of the firearms and the screams and groans of the wounded, turned the deck of the *Fuwalda* to the likeness of a madhouse." Lord Greystoke, however, behaves with the sang-froid one expects of a British peer; through it all, he "stood leaning carelessly beside the companionway puffing meditatively upon his pipe as though he had been but watching an indifferent cricket match." After the mutineers have disposed of authority, the fate of the couple trembles briefly in the balance. Then Black Michael, the ringleader, intercedes for them and persuades his colleagues to maroon the Greystokes in a secluded spot. The speech transmitting this decision somehow recalls the rhetoric of Gilbert and Sullivan's magnanimous scalawags. "You may be all right," he explains kindly, "but it would be a hard matter to land you in civilization without a lot o' questions being asked, and none o' us here has any very convincin' answers up our sleeves."

To skim over the rest of the prologue, the blue bloods survive the immediate rigors of life in the bush; Greystoke, exhibiting a virtuosity rarely met with in castaways and almost never in the House of Lords, builds a stuccoed log cabin furnished with cozy appurtenances like bamboo curtains and bookcases, and his wife, materially aiding the story line, presents him with a male child. But all unbeknownst to the patrician pair, their hourglass is already running out. Her Ladyship, badly frightened by a marauding ape, expires on the boy's first birthday, and as her husband sits stricken at the deathbed, a band of apes bent on stealing his rifle invade the cabin and kill him. Among them is Kala, a female whose own babe has just been destroyed by the king of the tribe. Obeying what Burroughs reverently terms "the call of universal

motherhood within her wild breast,” and the even greater urgency for a gimmick to set the narrative rolling, she snatches up the English tot, deposits her lifeless one in its cradle, and streaks into the greenery. The blueprint is now technically complete, but the author, ever a man to pile Pelion upon Ossa, contrives an extra, masterly touch. Since the cabin contains the schoolbooks from which the lad will learn to read eventually, as well as his father’s diary—capriciously written in French—proving his identity, it must be preserved intact. The king ape, therefore, accidentally discharges Greystoke’s gun and, fleeing in terror, slams the door shut. Burroughs may fuzzle his prose on occasion, but when it comes to mortising a plot, he is Foxy Grandpa himself.

It would serve no useful purpose to retrace the arduous youthhood and adolescence of Tarzan (whose name, incidentally, means “White-Skin,” there being no equivalent for Greystoke in ape language), his sanguinary triumphs over a long roster of enemies like leopards, pythons, and boars, and his easy emergence as undisputed boss of the jungle. Superior heredity, of course, gives “the aristocratic scion of an old English house” a vast edge over his primitive associates. Thanks to the invaluable schoolbooks in the cabin, he instinctively learns to read and write—not without hardship, for, says Burroughs, “of the meaning and use of the articles and conjunctions, verbs and adverbs and pronouns, he had but the faintest and haziest conception.” But he perseveres, and along with literacy come further civilized attributes. He bathes assiduously, covers his nakedness with pelts, and, out of some dim recess of his consciousness, produces a really definitive method of distinguishing himself from brute creation: “Almost daily, he whetted his keen knife and scraped and whittled at his young beard to eradicate this degrading emblem of apehood. And so he learned to shave—rudely and painfully, it is true—but, nevertheless, effectively.” No reasonably astute reader needs to be told twice that when the hero of a popular novel, whether he is Willie Baxter or an ape man, starts shaving, a pair of mischievous blue eyes are right around the corner. However astute, though, no reader could possibly anticipate a simp of the proportions of Jane Porter, or the quartet of frowzy vaudeville stereotypes that now bumbles into the picture.

The newcomers, it appears, are a party of treasure-seekers hailing from Baltimore, headed by an absent-minded pedagogue called Professor Archimedes Q. Porter, complete with frock coat and shiny plug hat. In his retinue are Samuel T. Philander, an elderly fusspot secretary straight from the pages of *Puck*; Esmeralda, a corpulent Negro maid aquiver with fear and malapropisms; his daughter Jane, whose beauty ravishes the senses; and, finally, Charley-horsing the long arm of coincidence, Tarzan's own cousin and the incumbent Lord Greystoke, William Cecil Clayton. They, too, have just been embroiled in a ship's mutiny—Burroughs' favorite literary calamity, evidently—and are now marooned in Tarzan's very parish. Using these piquant ingredients for all they are worth, the author hereupon proceeds to stir up the most delirious chowder of larceny, homicide, aboriginal passion, and haphazard skulduggery ever assembled outside the Newgate calendar. In all this, Tarzan plays the role of the Admirable Crichton, snatching each of the characters, in turn, from the jaws of death and, inevitably, turning Jane Porter's head. The section in which she betrays her partiality for him is a sockdolager. Tarzan is putting the kayo on Terkoz, a bull ape who has abducted Jane: "As the great muscles of the man's back and shoulders knotted beneath the tension of his efforts, and the huge biceps and forearm held at bay those mighty tusks, the veil of centuries of civilization and culture was swept from the blurred vision of the Baltimore girl. When the long knife drank deep a dozen times of Terkoz' heart's blood, and the great carcass rolled lifeless upon the ground, it was a primeval woman who sprang forward with outstretched arms toward the primeval man who had fought for her and won her. And Tarzan? He did what no red-blooded man needs lessons in doing. He took his woman in his arms and smothered her upturned, panting lips with kisses. For a moment Jane Porter lay there with half-closed eyes. . . . But as suddenly as the veil had been withdrawn it dropped again, and an outraged conscience suffused her face with its scarlet mantle, and a mortified woman thrust Tarzan of the Apes from her and buried her face in her hands. . . . She turned upon him like a tigress, striking his great breast with her tiny hands. Tarzan could not understand it." If Tarzan, who was so intimately involved, was baffled, you can imagine

my own bewilderment, especially with a donkey engine puffing in my ear. Had the yarn not been so compelling and the chaise longue so comfortable, I would have abandoned both, bearded the Baltimore Chamber of Commerce, and given them my opinion of such a heartless flirt.

While one properly expects major characters as vital as Tarzan and Jane to dominate the canvas, it would be grossly unfair to ignore the figures in the background. Professor Archimedes Q. Porter and his secretary carry the burden of the comic relief, and their sidesplitting misadventures evoke chuckles galore. Herewith, for example, is the Professor's tart rejoinder when Philander nervously informs him they are being stalked by a lion: "Tut, tut, Mr. Philander," he chided. "How often must I ask you to seek that absolute concentration of your mental faculties which alone may permit you to bring to bear the highest powers of intellectuality upon the momentous problems which naturally fall to the lot of great minds? And now I find you guilty of a most flagrant breach of courtesy in interrupting my learned discourse to call attention to a mere quadruped of the genus *Felis*. . . . Never, Mr. Philander, never before have I known one of these animals to be permitted to roam at large from its cage. I shall most certainly report this outrageous breach of ethics to the directors of the adjacent zoological garden." Can you tie that? The poor boob's so absent-minded he doesn't even realize he's in *Africa*. An equally rich humorous conceit is Esmeralda, the maid, who is constantly "disgranulated" by all the "gorilephants" and "hipponocerouses" about her. I doubt if Amos 'n' Andy at their most inventive have ever surpassed her attempt to soothe Jane at a moment of crisis: "Yas'm, honey, now you-all go right to sleep. Yo' nerves am all on aidge. What wif all dese ripotamuses and man eaten geniuses dat Marse Philander been a-tellin' about—laws, it ain't no wonder we all get nervous prosecution."

Indeed it ain't, and while the subject of nerves is on the tapis, I suspect that at this point in the action Burroughs himself became a trifle discombobulated. With two-thirds of the piece behind him, he still had to unravel Tarzan's complex genealogy, resolve the love story, account for the Professor's treasure (lost and found half a dozen times throughout), and return his puppets intact to everyday life. Accordingly, he introduces

a French cruiser to rescue the Baltimoreans and Clayton, and, once they are safely over the horizon, begins untangling the labyrinthine threads that remain. An officer of the vessel, one D'Arnot, has fallen into the clutches of some local cannibals; Tarzan saves the captive and, in return, is taught French, an accomplishment that enables him to translate his father's diary and legally prove himself the real Lord Greystoke. Armed with the proofs, he hurries to America to claim his mate, but Burroughs is just ahead of him, piling up barriers faster than Tarzan can surmount them. Before he can clasp Jane in his arms, he is compelled to rescue her from a Wisconsin forest fire and eliminate her current fiancé, a Scrooge who financed her father's expedition. The minor matter of the treasure is washed up with a check for two hundred and forty-one thousand dollars, which, the ape man fluently explains to Professor Porter, is its market value. And then, as the lovers' last obstacle vanishes, the author, consummate magician that he is, yanks a final bunny from his hat. Jane jilts Tarzan for his cousin, William Cecil Clayton, and Tarzan, placing her happiness above all, deliberately conceals his true identity. There may be scenes of self-renunciation in Tolstoy that lacerate the heart, but none, I contend, as devastatingly bittersweet as the closing one between the two Greystoke cousins: "I say, old man," cried Clayton. "I haven't had a chance to thank you for all you've done for us. It seems as though you had your hands full saving our lives in Africa and here. . . . We must get better acquainted. . . . If it's any of my business, how the devil did you ever get into that bally jungle?" "I was born there," said Tarzan quietly. "My mother was an Ape, and of course, she couldn't tell me much about it. I never knew who my father was."

Ordinarily, my fleeting sojourn in such an equatorial mishmash might have had no worse consequences than myopia and a pronounced revulsion from all noble savages thereafter. As luck would have it, though, the Venetian blind above me slipped its moorings as I finished the romance, and, doubtless overstimulated by Tarzan's gymnastics, I climbed up to restore it. Halfway through the process, the cornice gave way and I was left hanging by my fingernails from the picture molding that encircles the room. At this juncture, a certain fourteen-year-old

busybody, who has no better means of employing his time than sending postals to shipowners, came snooping into the room. His pitiless gaze travelled slowly from my pendent form to his copy of "Tarzan of the Apes." "Watch out, Buster, you'll strain your milk!" he cautioned. "Better leave that stuff to Weissmuller." Yes, sir, it's pretty disheartening. You lie on your back all day worrying about the junk your children read, you hang from moldings, and that's the thanks you get. It's regusting.