

Sacrificed To A Man-Eating Plant

The Remarkable Experiences of a Distinguished Scientist in Madagascar and How Science Explains the Existence of the Monstrous Growths Upon Which He Has Made Official Report

By Dr. E. H. William.

The Distinguished American Botanist.

DR. KARL LECHE, the noted German explorer and scientist, has brought back from the wilds of Madagascar one of the most amazing stories that has ever come from the African island. He has described in the *Carlsruhe Scientific Journal* a plant which seems to be an extraordinary development of a certain curious form of vegetable life to which the famous Venus flytrap, or pitcher plant, and other insect catching and eating vegetation belong. This plant, or tree, which he calls *Crinoida Darjeensis*, attains, according to Dr. Leche, a size of ten feet, and is powerful enough to enmesh and destroy a human being. The *Mkodos*, the tribe in whose territory it is found, reveres it as a fetish and sacrifice maidens of their tribe to it, says Leche.

A quarter of a century ago American Consul in Madagascar mentioned this tree and sacrifices to it by natives in their reports.

Before discussing the plant from the botanical standpoint, I quote almost in full his narrative as it appears in the *Scientific Journal*, which is a publication of irreproachable conservatism and authority.

"I had gone," he writes, "to Madagascar, the land of the lemur, the lace plant, the eye-eye, and also of the man-eating tree, to visit Queen Ravalana II, and was persuaded to visit the *Mkodos* by a native who had heard that besides generous daily pay I was accustomed to reward liberally anyone who showed me something strange or out of the way.

In his company I journeyed to the southeastern part of the island, inland among the hills covered with thick virgin forest, where there is a district practically unknown, whose white visitors can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. This is the region inhabited by the *Mkodos*.

"It was while among these natives that I was witness to what was probably the most horrible sight I have ever seen. Their religion consists in the worship of their sacred tree, one of the most wonderful freaks of nature. To this tree they offer human sacrifice. Once upon a time, as each was consummated, it had been their custom to burn each tree. This, however, they had been forced to give up on discovering that the trees were getting to be very scarce. When I arrived they were practically extinct, and it was with difficulty that my guide, whose wild stories had attracted me to the place, could find one to show me.

"The sacred tree is most remarkable in appearance. Its trunk, which rarely rises ten feet above the ground, is of a strange, barrel-like shape, covered with a quaint mosaic sort of bark, looking like nothing so much as a gigantic pineapple. At the top of this trunk it is between eight and nine feet in circumference, and upon it is fixed a remarkable growth very much resembling a huge plate. From the top of the trunk there hung eight leaves. They were of extraordinary size, ten to twelve feet long, a foot wide where they were hinged to the tree, widening to about two feet, and finally tapering down to a point as sharp as a needle. They were plentifully strewn with huge venomous looking thorns.

"These leaves could not have been less than fifteen inches thick in the centre, and hung down inertly along the trunk, their point trailing in the earth. Above these there stretched, rigidly and horizontally, a number of branches several feet in length. Finally, from underneath the plate-like arrangement, there grew, point-

ing upward, half a dozen frail looking stamens—palpi would be a better name, I believe—that shivered constantly, as if agitated by some strong wind.

"It seems the plate-like affair on top of the trunk contained some thick sweet juice. This liquid, which is a product of the tree and was probably originally intended to attract birds, is highly intoxicating, and even a very small quantity very soon produces coma. When sacrifices take place a woman is forced to climb into the tree and drink. If the devil inside is in good humor, then the girl will be allowed to get down again in safety. If he was feeling ugly, however, then the poor girl was out of luck. Exactly how the tree was going to prevent her jumping down I could not make out, but I was to learn eventually.

"I desired to draw closer and examine the tree carefully, but my guide begged me not to, warning me that the tree god would certainly be angered at my sacrilege and would take my life in revenge, explaining that the leaves would rise up and crush me. Of course, I did not pay much attention to this, but, nevertheless, left the tree alone, for it has always been my habit to respect native superstitions and customs.

"One evening my guide presented himself to me and told me that what he had been waiting for would take place that night.

"That night, having made the chief a present to insure that I would be welcome to witness their ceremony, I followed the tribe into the forest. They made their way to the sacred tree, and round it built twelve fires, so that the whole surroundings were lit up brightly. Then they disposed themselves about them and made themselves at home, some eating, but most of them drinking huge gourdfuls of native ferment. Very soon they were all of them more or less intoxicated, both the men and the women, with the exception of a young girl nearby, who neither spoke nor moved, but glanced about her as if she were terrified out of her wits.

"Suddenly without warning the yelling ceased and they scattered away like frightened deer. The crucial point had arrived. For a moment there was complete silence, but for the crackling of the fires. Intuition told me that the girl I had noted before was the one that was to be the sacrifice. I looked at her and saw mortal terror imprinted on her features. Yet for the life of me I could not imagine why, and put down her fear to imagination.

"By now the first group of dancers had somewhat recovered, and, suddenly springing up, rushed upon the poor girl with unearthly shrieks and yells. They surrounded her, and with shouts and gestures ordered her to climb the tree. Terrified she shrank back, apparently begging for mercy. At that the whole crowd joined in, furiously howling at her to obey. Once more the dancers gave out their orders; then,

as she still refused and struggled, they armed themselves with spears, and stabbing at her forced her to retreat in the direction of the devil-god. For a while she resisted, seeking to hold their spears with her hands, and only getting wounded as a reward for her plucky defence.

"At last, seeing it was useless to fight further, she turned and faced the tree. For a moment she stood still, gathering herself up for a supreme effort, then quickly she sprang toward the tree. Like a monkey she scrambled up, and reaching the top knelt and drank of the holy liquid. Quickly she jumped up again, and I expected to see her jump down, thinking all was over, in that dim light not noticing instantly what caused her so to shriek with terror.

"Suddenly I realized what was happening, and I seemed to be paralyzed with

horror. The tree, seemingly so dead and motionless a moment before, had come to life. The palpi, so frail looking, had suddenly ceased to quiver, and had coiled themselves about the girl's head and shoulders, holding her so firmly that all her efforts to free herself remained absolutely useless.

"The green branches so rigid before began to writhe, and coiled themselves round and round like snakes. Then as that mass struggled there arose a horrible sight I shall never forget—the great leaves began to rise, slowly, very slowly. Those evil-looking thorns were now on the inside, pointing toward the victim and closing on her with the force of a hydraulic press.

"As they came together tightly there trickled down the trunk a pinkish mixture,

which the maddened natives fought and trod each other down to get one mouthful of—the intoxicating fluid from the tree and the blood of the human sacrifice.

"Then the feasting began again amid much rejoicing. The devil was appeased."

The plant described by Dr. Leche has more points in common, perhaps, with the Venus flytrap than any other. This peculiar specimen is found nowhere in the world except in the swampy districts of North Carolina, and even there is quite rare. It subsists by catching and eating flies and other insects. Dr. George W. Crile, professor of surgery in the Western Reserve University and our greatest war surgeon in France and author of surgical books on the war, is authority upon the habits and anatomy of this plant.

It is an inconspicuous, low-growing plant, peculiar to boggy places. All day long its trap-leaves stand asap, waiting for prey. On the inside surfaces of each bivalve-like leaf is some sticky sweetish stuff, attractive to insects. Along comes an unlucky fly. Unsuspecting he steps into one of the traps. Instantly it closes upon him with a snap and he is a "gooner."

Close examination of any one of the trap-leaves reveals the fact that three very minute hairs spring from the middle of the inside of each of its gaping valves. A touch upon one of these hairs (which are sensitive nerve-ends) makes the plant aware of the presence of the fly, and the "clam shell" snaps shut.

If one of the hairs be touched lightly with the point of a lead pencil the trap will instantly close. The plant does not know the difference; it simply reacts mechanically to the irritation. But the touch of the pencil must not be too light or too heavy; it must be just enough to imitate the contact of a fly or other small insect. If a smart blow be struck the trap will not respond at all; it stays open.

Suppose, however, that it is a real fly. The trap closes, its marginal spikes interlocking to prevent escape of the prey.

Follows then a remarkable phenomenon. The trap becomes a miniature stomach, which at once begins to secrete a fluid for the digestion of the captured insect.

The process of digestion requires a number of days, during which the trap remains shut. This being finally accomplished, it opens, drops out the refuse of the meal—another fly. It is hungry again.

Dr. Crile says that the plant exhibits almost as much power of perception and discrimination as a frog—a creature that undeniably possesses a mind. It catches flies, eats and digests them, and ejects the non-nutritious part—and is ready for another fly. It is hungry again.

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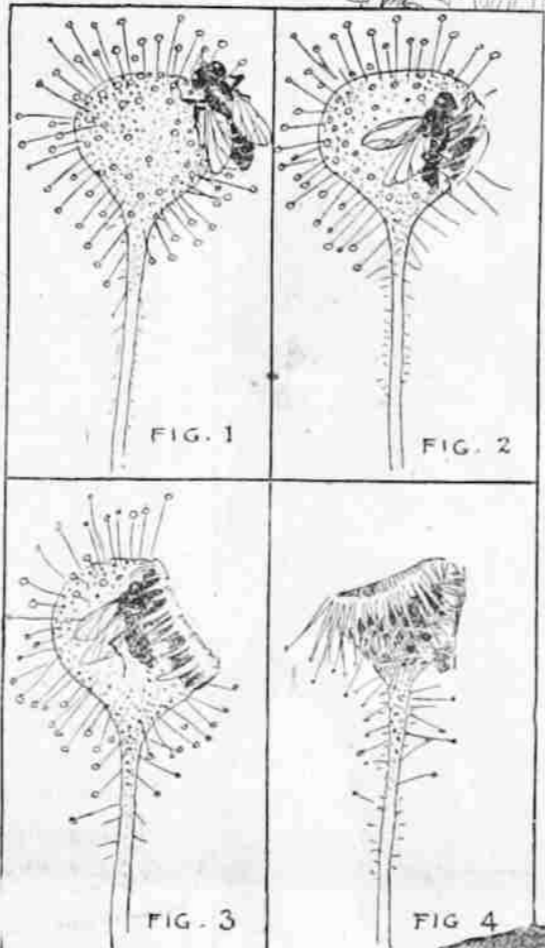
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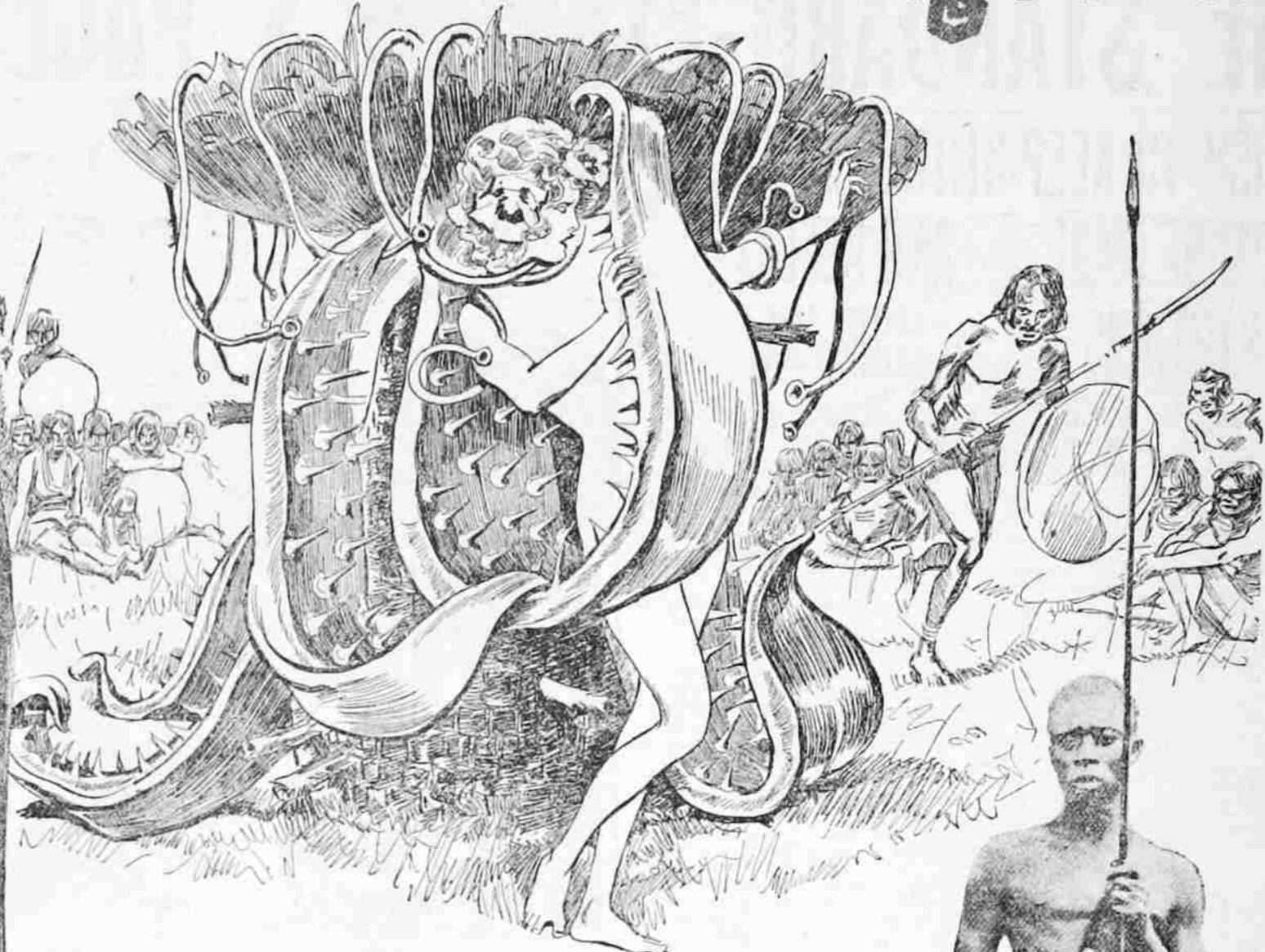
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How the Venus Flytrap Captures Insects: (1) The Fly Alighting Upon the Leaf; (2) the Fly Is Struck Fast Upon the Viscous Substance with Which It Is Covered and the Leaf Begins to Curl About It; (3) the Leaf Holding the Fly Now Securely in Place, and (4) the Fly Plant Digesting the Insect. After It Has Digested, the Carcass of the Fly Is Dropped and the Leaf Is Opened for Another Victim.



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A Warrior of the *Mkodos*, the Tribe That Sacrifices Women, According to Dr. Leche, to the Extraordinary Madagascar Plant.

A Remarkable Photograph of a Rat That Has Been Caught and Killed by a Giant Species of the Pitcher Plant. In the Cup of This Plant Is Secreted a Sweet But Stupefying Liquid. The Rat Has Drunk of This and the Plant Has Closed Upon It and Smothered It, the Flanges Holding the Body Tightly in Place.



Photograph of the Peculiar Leaves of the Venus Flytrap Opened and Closed.

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