

THE TOY
By Kris Neville

Neju did not hate the God-men, but he did hate the metal demons they used to destroy his people. So he prayed to the Old Gods for aid....

"I hate to leave."

"... But the time has come."

"I suppose so ... but momma?"

"Yes?"

"May we leave them a present?"

"What, my child, what could they want for?"

"... I don't know: surely there's something. One of my toys or something. I'd like to leave them something."

"That's very thoughtful, but...."

"Please, momma."

"Perhaps we could."

"They might find use for a toy, someday."

"Might they, child? Well.... Who knows? Perhaps they might."

The night, starry, cold, clear, was around them, unfriendly. The natives huddled at the edge of the clearing and stared out at the

stockade. There was movement there—two sentries, abreast, threading their way in and out of shadows. The moonlight was pale and uncertain, blending away harshness, distorting, enlarging. The night was still. One of the natives let himself down until he lay flat upon the ground. A twig crackled sharply, and the other four held their breath, but the sound did not carry to the sentries. Another and another and another lay down near the first, and then all of them began to inch their way slowly through the tall swift growing grasses toward the stockade.

Their progress was slow; every few minutes they paused until their breathing returned to normal. The light, sunset shower had not softened the ground, for it was in the middle of the dry season when the rain fell sparingly. After tedious, hard gained feet, sweat stood glistening on their nearly naked bodies and grass shoots, saw edged, itched and stung their skins. Rough top roots and sharp, brutal rocks reddened them in welts and bruises.

Still they went forward, slowly, doggedly. The moon fell away toward the horizon, and the shadows unhoodled from trees and the stockade wall and stretched out on the grasses.

With clock-like precision the sentries passed along the narrow walk atop the wall. The wall was made of *conje* trunks, sheered of limbs, driven upright into the ground, pressed so closely together that between logs there was scarcely a chink. For the people inside the stockade, aided by a howling demon of steel that uprooted and stripped trees effortlessly, it had been scarcely the work of a day; for the natives outside, depending for power upon their own muscles it would represent the year's work of a village.

Each time the sentries passed the spot nearest the natives, they pressed hard to the ground and held their breath for fear some tiny, artificial movement would reveal them.

The moon hovered on the far tree tops and then vanished from sight, leaving a curtain of night, faintly star-dotted.

The five natives were at the edge of the grasses. Beyond them, to the stockade wall, there was no protection. As one they straightened and ran fleetly to the *conje* trunks. Under their feet, a few pebbles crunched and rattled. They pressed in against the wall, merging with the darker shadow of it, waiting for the sentries to pass. The heavy booted footfalls became louder and louder, until they came from directly overhead. The natives hugged the wall, praying silently to their alien Gods, and the footfalls slowly emptied into silence.

One of the five sent exploring hands over the wooden surface. It was rough enough for his purpose, and awkwardly, hesitantly, he began to work his way upward. Once bark peeled from under his foot and fell away, but it was caught and silenced by one of those below. He drew himself over the top of the wall with a swift, sure movement, and dropped the two feet to the walk on the other side. He crouched there, fumbling with the coil of rope at his waist.

It was a slender, moist rope, and, as he cast the end over the wall, it slithered through his hand like a line of liquid. He could hear the muffled approach of feet, and his heart beat faster. Hurriedly he expanded the slip loop in the end of the rope. He placed the loop over one of the trunks and forced it down between those on each side. It was a tight fit, and he had to jerk it savagely once. That

done, he pulled it tight and slipped over the wall, looping the rope in his hand to support himself. Almost immediately the sentries were overhead.

The rope began to slip down the pole; it slipped an inch and jerked; two inches. His muscles stood out, bulging the skin. He closed his eyes.

There were voices above. The rope slipped again, and then the knot began to peel. In another moment, the rope would give way and the native would crash loudly to the ground. The footsteps began again, but only one pair now. Somewhere above in the silence a sentry was waiting. The sentry, unconcerned, lit his pipe and the match flare made those below catch their breaths. The rope slipped again.

In desperation, the native threw one arm over the wall. He glanced down fearfully. Then cautiously he drew himself up. In the pale star shine he could see that the sentry was not facing him. He dropped to the inside walk. The sentry half-turned.

Reluctantly, the native leaped the few intervening feet and hit him. There was a brittle snap and the native lowered the sentry gently to the walk. Then he turned, relooped the rope, pulled it more securely around the trunk. Up came the four who had been waiting below.

In a whispery hiss, he explained what had happened. The leader of the group shook his head in the darkness. "If we go inside, now," he said, "the other will discover this one and then warn the demon before we can destroy it. We must silence the other one too."

They nodded.

One of the group bent and removed the fallen sentry's weapon. He turned it over and over in his hands, curiously.

"Hey! Hey!" the other sentry called, suddenly, from out of the darkness along the wall. "Hey, Ed!" Receiving no answer, he fumbled his weapon into his hand. "Hey! Ed! Answer me!"

"Too late," the leader of the natives hissed. "He will wake the demon. Run!"

They vaulted the wall, striking the ground and scattered toward the tall grasses and the forest beyond. One dragged a broken leg painfully.

The body of Ed, the limp sentry, teetered for a moment on the walk and then slipped awkwardly over the side. It struck a wall buttress and bent over it like a horseshoe.

The other sentry rushed to the corner. One glance was enough to tell him what had happened. He grabbed the huge spotlamp at the juncture of the two walls and tripped the button. Inside the stockade a generator whined and the arc of the lamp flared its sunbright blue.

The beam was temporarily blinding, and the sentry cursed. Then his field of vision came clear, and all the details of the grassy stretch were etched sharply. He saw two running figures, each at the outer edge of the beam. He swiveled the light until it focused upon the nearest one.

It was the leader—the one with the broken leg—and he froze in the light. He did not even attempt to fall to the ground.

The sentry stared for a fraction of a second before he could bring his gun to eye level and fire it.

The leader of the natives waited, blinking his faceted orange eyes in the cruel blinding glare. The eyes glistened brightly. The four arms hung motionless, relaxed at his side.

The sentry shuddered involuntarily as the leader came within his sights. He squeezed the trigger and a burst of hissing flame came from the muzzle. The flame died in the air and the gun jumped in recoil.

The projectile struck and the leader screamed in pain. He twitched but he did not fall. One hand shot out to support himself, but still his eyes blinked into the light and still he remained upright, a perfect target.

The sentry fired twice more, one projectile kicking up a tiny shower of rocks and moaning away, almost spent; the other, scoring in the target.

The native in the field whined. But still he did not fall.

Shuddering, the sentry fired time after time at him, and finally, very slowly, the native crumpled to the ground. Once or twice the tip of the tail twitched and then the body was absolutely motionless.

The sentry swung the light again. The other natives were gone. He shuddered again and spat out toward the body.

Lights in the stockade began to come on, sucking at the tiny generator. They were dim lights.

Looking down, the sentry saw his companion lying across the buttress.

The sentry began to curse nervously. Then, with fumbling fingers, he shut off the arc lamp and the lights inside the stockade brightened.

The sentry glanced out at the vast alien darkness beyond the wall. He whimpered in sudden, childish fear.

Within the forest, beyond the terrifying brilliance of the stockade light, the natives stopped running. After the light went off, they called to each other with piping, night bird whistles. Slowly they came together, forming a silent lonely group.

"We must leave him there," one said, in the shrill, chattering native language.

Reluctantly they turned their backs on the stockade. Leaves crackled under their feet. Branches whipped at their faces, bringing sharp tears. They hurried, and dry things rustled and startled animals fled. From time to time they grunted at each other, more for encouragement, more as protest against the tangle of vines than for communication. Neju carried the stolen stockade weapon pressed tightly to his chest.

On they went, and finally the sun came up, penetrating the forest here and there, sending sharp rays of new light mottling the ground. Once they stopped to rest, but only for a short time.

After two hours of sun they came to the natural clearing and the tribal village.

The village was a crude thing by stockade standards. It was a cluster of mud and stick houses around the central more

pretentious Chieftain's lodge. Before the lodge there was the large fireplace where the community roasted the hunters' kills on three huge spits. The ground around the fireplace was smooth and covered with white sand taken from the bottom of the fast running creek that at the far left of the clearing threaded its way off into the tangle of trees. Bones and other refuse were carried in reed baskets to a pit well back in the forest away from the clearing. The whole of the village was clean and orderly, and, in back of the lodge, there was a patch of flower-like plants most of which were dead with autumn and frost.

Several meat animals were staked out near the stream and two tiny domesticated arboreal animals called *corlieu* sat before their owners' huts, in the sunshine.

When the four natives stepped into the clearing, all other activity ceased. Children broke off their cries, and adults turned from their labors. A great silence fell upon the village. Natives appeared at doors.

Slowly the four walked toward the lodge; one limped slightly from a thorn in his naked foot. All eyes turned to mark their progress.

The Chieftain sat at the door of his lodge. Upon their funeral-like approach, he rose. He stared at each one in turn as if trying to believe one of them were someone else. Then he shifted his eyes over their heads to the spot in the forest where they had emerged.

Neju shook his head slowly and the Chieftain seemed to retreat as if from an invisible blow; then he stood erect, gestured that they should enter, and followed them in.

Slowly, outside, movement began again. There was a floating whisper of soft words and the children moved gravely about. Even the *corlieus* seemed to sense the change and did not try to attract attention. Overhead, a great bird flapped by.

Inside the lodge the four arranged themselves differentially at their Chieftain's feet.

The Chieftain was old. His arms were loose shells of skin over bone and his face was pinched with wrinkles; even the eyes were misty and bluish with age. And his voice, when he broke the silence, was thin and querulous.

"You have returned," he said.

The four remained quiet, sitting with their legs coiled under them as pillows. After a while, Neju answered, "Yes, we have returned."

The ritual question and answer gave the old Chieftain time to get his emotions under control; his eyes were clouded with grief, and his head bobbed loosely on his skinny neck. And then: he was unsure as to why there were tears in his eyes.

"He will not join us," Neju said quietly.

The old one sighed and rubbed a wrinkled hand over his face.

Outside, the mourners began their chant, slow, terrifying. A distant drum picked up the beat and throbbed out the heart-rhythm.

"We took one of the weapons," Neju said. "But we were prevented from entering their village."

The old one nodded. He closed his eyes and turned his face toward the ceiling of the lodge. He was tired; it was odd, how suddenly

tired. Yesterday there had been ... no, that was not yesterday. His son coming up from the stream with his first catch. The air had been bright (it was no longer bright any more) and he had laughed, saying.... But now there was something about a demon somewhere, wasn't there? A fearsome thing. It was hard to believe in demons; yes, and in Gods, too. That summer when *his* father pointed to the moon being eaten by shadow, he had believed in Gods, then. He must tell his grandson about that. It was very strange. And there was an old ritual one should make when the drought came....

"Here, their weapon...."

The old one opened his eyes once more. His young friend, Neju, was handing him a strange thing. He marveled at it, thinking that perhaps the Gods had left it when they went away.

"It is dangerous."

The old one was trying to think. There was something about the new Gods who had come down from the sky; but they brought demons with them, so perhaps they were not Gods at all and it was quite confusing, being old. He must remember to ask his grandson to tell him all about it. They placed the weapon before him and rose, making their bows, and left him in peace.

He stared at the weapon for many minutes. His grandson, Zoon—no, Zoon had been his son—his grandson's name was—was—ah—Zoe, yes. A little child.

An odd thing, what weapon, and perhaps.... No, it was not for spring planting. And winters used to be longer: we plant earlier—a moon earlier, now, at least. And Zoe was a grown man, and Zoon was dead. Or was it the other way around?

He blinked his eyes, and strangely, it seemed that they were *both* dead. They were playing the funeral dirge out there in the sunshine.

The old one stirred uneasily.

Neju sat on the white sand before the fire place. Two of his hands plucked nervously at the sliver of wood. A group of hunters formed a semicircle around him.

"The old Father is ill with sorrow," he said, after a while. "And with time."

The others nodded, and again the hunters' council fell silent. The rest of the village was muted, and the women went about gathering funeral offerings for their Chieftain.

Neju studied the splinter, trying to focus his thoughts on it. Finally he said, "We did not destroy the demon."

"We must try again," one of the hunters said, and like a tired sigh, agreement ran from mouth to mouth.

Neju flipped the splinter into the ashes and sat with eyes downcast.

"The demon must be destroyed," the hunter repeated. "Or it will kill again and again."

Neju stared across the fireplace at the forest beyond. His eyes clouded.

On his right, a young hunter who had been with him the previous night at the wall cleared his throat nervously. "They come from the sky, but they are not Gods." He wrinkled his brow as if this were difficult to understand. "It is strange," he said. "They come like

Gods, but they are not. Gods are kind." He looked appealing at Neju.

Neju smiled wearily and touched the young hunter on the shoulder. "They are not Gods."

"They are servants of the demon," another hunter insisted. "I was there," he said monotonously. "After they came."

The others stirred uneasily.

"We watched the demon," the hunter said, his voice still flat, as if (although he knew them to be true) he could not quite believe the words himself. "I was with Mela. We watched the demon go to the forest and rip out a standing tree by the roots. Then trembling, Mela stepped out to greet it with a friendship offering. And the demon turned on her and roared down on her and mashed her body lifeless under it, and the god-man who was astride the demon became so terrified that he seemed to laugh. I fled."

There was silence for a moment.

"The Old Gods," one hunter began, but he did not finish the sentence.

The hunters shuffled.

"I saw the demon kill Mela," the hunter said with finality. "We must kill the demon."

The young hunter cleared his throat again. "They are not Gods, but still I should not have harmed the god-man, last night, at the wall. We do not mean them any harm." He paused. "Only the demon."

The hunters nodded.

"They will thank us for destroying the demon."

"The god-men, themselves, have killed four of us," Neju said suddenly.

"They cannot help themselves," the young hunter insisted. "They must do the demon's will." He paused again. "They cannot be gods, to obey the demon, but we should not harm them."

Suddenly the funeral drum ceased in mid-note.

The village began to stir uncertainly, and a native burst, running, upon the clearing. He was crying something in an excited voice. A wail went up from those nearest him, and each ran off toward his house. A young lad sped toward the seated hunters.

When he arrived, he was panting. "A demon comes! *It is in the air like a bird!*"

The hunters glanced at Neju for leadership. Then, from a great distance, they heard a whirring like the beat of giant wings.

"Run!" Neju cried, and they scrambled to their feet.

"Separate and run!" Neju cried.

The other villagers were scattering toward the forest in all directions. Neju glanced around him. He saw a female stop, rush back, scoop up a child who had been playing with a polished bone. Then, almost as if by magic, the village was empty. The staked animals began to whine, and one of the *corlieu* at the far edge of the clearing gave a gigantic leap and disappeared into the tightly woven branches.

Then Neju turned to run and the sound of the air demon was nearer. But he had taken only two or three steps before he stopped, frozen, for a single instant. Then he turned and sped toward the Chieftain's lodge.

No one had warned the old Father.

At the moment he reached the door of the lodge, the helicopter burst upon the clearing. Neju darted it one frightened glance and then ducked through the doorway.

The old one still sat as Neju had left him, motionless, staring at the strange weapon before him. He did not even look up when Neju entered.

"Come, Father," Neju said very gently.

"Eh?"

Neju glanced over his shoulder. The sky demon was heading straight for the lodge.

Very tenderly, Neju drew the old one to his feet. He wrapped two arms around his body, protectively. "We must hurry, Father."

The old one blinked, but he moved as Neju urged, and the two of them stepped from the back entrance of the lodge. The helicopter was flying low, and it seemed almost on top of them.

It was then that the Chieftain saw it. There was fear and wonder in his eyes.

"We must run!" Neju said.

Together they trampled across the dying garden, their feet moving rapidly, and the old one's breath came in sharp rasps.

Then the very edge of the helicopter's shadow touched them.

And there was a blinding light and a great wave of air that threw them to the ground like a giant hand, and there was a roar greater than the northern cataracts. And the sound and light was gone, but still their ears rang with the thunder of it and their eyes pained.

Ahead of them there was another roar. And a group of huts seemed to come apart from quick flashes inside of them. Bits of the lodge plopped down on their backs, and one huge piece of timber embedded in the earth only a foot from Neju's body.

Neju threw himself over the old Chieftain to protect him; he felt dirt and sticks and dust shower over him and the air smelled sharp and bitter and stifling.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

The earth jarred with explosions, one after another, measured, methodical. Neju gritted his teeth and closed his eyes tightly.

And the world was light and noise and flying debris.

Then it was over. Neju was holding his breath. For several minutes, he did not dare lift his head; his ears rang and his head was weighted. He brushed at it, and his hand came away wet with blood.

He looked up, and the air demon was gone.

The lodge was no more—only a smoking crater, and, except for two huts, miraculously intact, all of the village was mashed flat as though a giant hammer had worked it over carefully.

Neju bent to the Chieftain. The old one moaned.

They constructed a crude shelter for the Chieftain back of the clearing, fast in the forest, where the old one could not see the scene of destruction. All that night, almost fearfully, the villagers crouched near him. When the moon first dropped its rays across his face they all tensed, hushed, waiting, and when his breathing continued they sighed in relief (for he would live another day: a Chieftain's spirit always goes up the first moon path to the stars, or else it will not leave until the moon path comes again).

The night was long and cold, and toward dawn, they drew in upon each other and the fire for warmth.

When the sun was an hour high and the hasty meal was over, the young hunters surrounded Neju, looking to him for leadership since the last of the royal line lay in a coma.

"You will be our leader until our Chieftain Father is well again," they told Neju, one after another.

Neju sat for a long time in thought and silence. At last he said, almost sadly, "I will serve until the old Father is well again."

There was a relieved sigh from the listeners.

Again there was a long silence.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

