

A Narrow Escape

Shortly after the war, my brother and I were invited to spend a few days' holiday with an uncle who had just returned from abroad. He had rented a cottage in the country, although he rarely spent much time there. We understood the reason for this after our arrival: the cottage had no comfortable furniture in it, many of the windows were broken and the roof leaked, making the whole house damp.

On our last evening, we sat around the fire after supper listening to the stories which our uncle had to tell of his many adventures in distant countries: from the lost cities of Peru to the mysterious Mekele Mbembe of the Congo basin. I was so tired after the long journey that I would have preferred to go to bed; but I could not bear to miss any of my uncle's mysterious, captivating tales. He was an eccentric man, with a child-like curiosity and a glint in his eye: he had seen things which many adults would not believe.

He was just in the middle of describing a rather terrifying experience he had once had when his small boat was overturned by the mysterious beast on the Congo river, when there was a loud crash from the bedroom above, the one where my brother and I were going to sleep.

"It sounds as if the roof has fallen in - I knew I should've tied it down!" exclaimed my uncle, with a loud laugh - his glasses slipping onto the end of his nose as he looked up.

When we got to the top of the stairs and opened the bedroom door we could see nothing at first because of the thick clouds of dust which filled the room. When the dust began to clear, a strange sight met our eyes. A large part of the ceiling had collapsed, falling right on to the pillow of my bed. I was glad *that I had stayed late to listen to my uncle's stories;* otherwise I should certainly have been seriously injured, perhaps killed.

That night we all slept on the floor of the sitting-room downstairs, not wishing to risk our lives by sleeping under a roof which might at any moment collapse on our heads. The London train was due to leave at ten, so we needed to be up early. Winding dark rivers filled my dreams, with strange calls of unknown beasts drifting through thickly entwined riverbanks of vines, and many times I was awoken by, what I thought, strange thumping steps encircling the house.