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Whaddya Mean Romance?

By Barney Wiggins, '27

Editor's Note: Through Barney Wiggins is reflected the versatility and adventurous spirit of many a forester.

Shortly after graduating from Iowa State in 1927, Barney set out to do missionary work in Africa, where he remained for four years. His first year was spent at Cape Palmas as acting president of a college for young men. Then followed a year at a boys' school at Cape Mount, where he was in charge of courses in manual arts. The rest of the tour was spent in the far interior at Holy Cross Mission School for boys. During the last period of service, he took charge of a dispensary, treating hundreds of patients daily for all the ills common to the tropics. He claims this to have been by far the most interesting work.

At present, he is taking courses in the divinity school at Yale University, and by the end of the year, will be ready to enter the foreign mission field. However, due to the scarcity of funds available by the sponsors of his work, the mission board of the Episcopal Church, he doubts very much as to whether he'll be going out again soon.

We admire him highly for what he has done, and wish him further luck in his noble undertakings.

Did you ever read the glamorous advertisements of the tropical steamer excursions? The wonder and beauty of the tropics? Lazy days in the Caribbean!

And those romantic tropical names—Santo Domingo, the Bay of Benin, the Virgin Islands!

And that gibbous moon that always manages to find an entry into tropical stories! And those glorious waving palms! And those perfect bathing beaches!

Well, strange as it may seem, there's another side of the story that hasn't been mentioned so seductively. In fact, it's seldom mentioned at all!

Carbolic soap is not romantic. But it is a necessity! You have to use it copiously and daily if you want to be free from infections. The air is full of disease germs, the "bush" is alive with infections and the ground is a veritable incubator for poisonous insects and tropical itch.

If you lead an active outdoor existence you are oozing perspiration at every pore and likewise you are in a receptive condition for all the disease germs that are abroad in the air, the soil and in the vegetation.

The slightest scratch, abrasion or insect bite requires careful medical attention and may take days or weeks to heal. Carbolic soap is the standby of everyone as a mild antiseptic with which you use your own pet brand of ointment or unguent.

As cigarettes are advertised in the United States, so is "Zambuk, the cure-all salve," advertised in Africa. It's recommended
for all skin disorders from dandruff to athlete’s foot! My own pet remedy was Vick’s Vapo-Rub. It burns like blazes but relieves the itch.

That scent of carbolic soap was my constant companion. It was so insistent I could taste it in my tea and even in my cigarettes! I should imagine you could get the effect by carrying a cake of the blasted stuff around in your shirt pocket. You might try it for a week if you have a hankering for the tropics!

Another thing you might try is quinine. Start with five grains each day and after a week increase to ten grains. If you still feel the pull of the palm tree lands after a week of daily ten grain doses keep on increasing the size of your slug until you’re taking thirty-five grain daily—then decrease gradually to five.

Perhaps you have taken one or two grains at some time for a bad cold and if so the taste will easily be remembered. Nothing very romantic about quinine—in fact it’s the origin of that old simile about “a bitter pill.” I’ll say it’s bitter! Not only that but the darn stuff makes your eyes go blinky and your hands trembly and boy, oh boy, how your ears do ring! You may be miles and miles from any kind of a bell but you’ll hear bells for hours after each dose. It’s the best known preventive treatment against malaria fever and unless you have a natural immunity you will doubtless take your five to thirty-five grains as the others do. I’ve never quite made up my mind whether I’d rather take the quinine or have the fever. One is about as disagreeable as the other and the unfair thing is that you very probably will have the malaria in spite of taking the abominable quinine! One thing is certain—there’s no romance in taking quinine nor having malaria!

The Anopheles mosquito is the baby that carries malaria, and to avoid being exposed to the pest at night you must sleep under a net. This particular mosquito is nocturnal and small enough to make her way through ordinary screen wire so these nets are of particularly fine mesh. So fine in fact, that along with the mosquito they exclude fresh air. It’s like sleeping with your head under the covers on a warm night; it soon becomes uncomfortable. Then it becomes almost unbearable but you have to get accustomed to it unless you want to risk malaria.

Isn’t it romantic?

And haven’t you often envied those movie guys who appear in tropical scenes wearing solar topees (sun helmets to you) and white suits? Well, an ordinary drawing board might be slightly heavier but it couldn’t give any more discomfort if you tried to carry one around from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon!
For dry weather you have a helmet of pith and for the rainy season one of cork and rubber. You must wear one on cloudy days as well as on the bright days because that deadly actinic ray of the sun is effective even though the clouds cover the sky. You will understand the effect of that actinic ray when you hear folks refer to all erratic or eccentric remarks as being the result of "too much sun." It is after all a bit more charitable to excuse and overlook the foibles of your friends with "too much sun" than "Nertz." Pathologically speaking, the first symptom is a headache which develops into a beautiful fever and then you wake up and the doctor is saying, "Drink this!" Perhaps you have been out of the picture for a day or two but if for only a few hours it means you must be more careful than ever. You may even have to carry (and use) one of those cumbersome double umbrellas and personally I'd just as soon be bothered with a Dumpy level or a transit for a constant companion.

In Haine's "Poems of the African Trail" there's a bit of verse entitled "Heat."

"Lost in an ice-water reverie,
Deep in a shower-bath dream,
With the mercury showing a hundred and ten
I come to the edge of a stream.
"Then a curse for my schooling in caution,
That holds me in check at the brink—
But fever and chills and a parcel of pills
Is too much to pay for a drink."

As I recall, there was a drinking fountain on each floor in Ag. Hall. Even out in the nursery there was a water tap and the South Side was all cluttered up with places where you could pause and refresh yourself.

Now take a good long hop step and jump and try and picture three years with never a cool drink to alleviate a thirst that can be generated only in the tropics with the mercury at a hundred and ten!

You boil all your drinking water in Africa. Then you filter it. Then as there's no taste to it and as it is entirely devoid of thirst-quenching qualities you make tea of it and try not to think of the drinking fountains in Ag. Hall or the Coca Colas at the Campus Drug Store! January (in Liberia) is the hottest, driest month in the year with a constant northeast wind coming straight from the Sahara and fine sand filling the air to such an extent that the sun at midday looks like a big orange—just as it often looks at sunset there at home on a hazy Indian summer evening. Then did I ever wish I was back at Iowa State with a chance to plow through the snow? I could just imagine myself out along Squaw Creek scooping up handsfull of snow to quench
my feverish thirst! It took me over two years to get over being thirsty. Then I just settled down to a state of resignation and thought no more of cooling beverages. Just another case of becoming accustomed to doing without things that are considered essentials there at home, like the Chicago Tribune or the Des Moines Register.

But to turn from things-that-you-want-but-can’t-have to things-you-have-but-don’t-want and the first up is bananas! How I loathe ’em! They are a staple in the tropics. Raw for breakfast, fried for lunch and baked for dinner, or supper. Then for a change we had banana custards! I had a banana plantation as part of a mission agricultural project; had at least three hundred trees or plants at all times and if they were not watched and thinned regularly, I’d find fifteen hundred trying to enter the competition.

As soon as the plant produced it’s bunch of bananas, it was hacked down and the best looking sprout was permitted to develop a new plant. The prevailing native practice allowed all of the sprouts to develop with a usual result of hundreds of plants so busy competing for life and developing foliage that bananas were produced on very few of the plants. In my banana farm a plant either produced the goods or was hacked down to make room for another sprout. It was an interesting project even though I soon became fed up on the fruit of the endeavor. After all, you can get too much of nearly any good thing—especially bananas.

Coming up the West African coast on the way home my steamer called at Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, one of the largest banana ports in the world. Ships of fourteen nations (I counted that many different flags), were loading crates of the accursed fruit. The wife of a home-going British colonial officer standing next to me at the rail said, “Did you ever see so many bananas before?” And I answered, “Lady, I’ve eaten that many while I’ve been in Africa!”

Some of the other staples consumed in quantities are rice, sweet potatoes, peanuts and peppers. And as a technical advisor in agriculture it fell to my lot to increase the quantity and quality of their rice, potatoes, peanuts and peppers!

Well, there wasn’t much I could do about the rice except try and demonstrate a method of handling the product or harvest that would eliminate some of the gravel. And that was a self-defense measure. After I’d broken a perfectly good molar on a piece of gravel in my helping of rice one evening at supper, I decided there must be a way of caring for the harvest that would prevent gravel from being included in that particular portion of the evening meal.
Ordinarily the rice harvest is dried or cured in the village streets. I provided woven mats on which to dry the rice destined for our own consumption and the gravel bothered no more.

Potatoes, peanuts and peppers had been sown rather haphazard and allowed to develop the same way. I arranged sample plots and practiced a sort of selection cutting system with the peanuts and peppers and rather a severe system of thinning in the case of the potato vines.

Then, too, I saved only the best peppers and peanuts for seed. Previously they had consumed the best and obtained their seed from the remainder. I tried the same thing with sugar cane, selecting the largest, longest canes for planting, to the utter amazement (and disgust) of the natives.

Of course, sugar cane is an unimportant feature in their agricultural program as it is used only as a sweet—something to take the place of candy bars and chewing gum. They have not advanced far enough in civilized methods and practices to know that the juice from sugar cane can be made into rum. (The poor heathens!)

Having mentioned the various agricultural products I should, of course give you some idea of how they are assembled to make a meal.

The rice is soaked in water for a few minutes, then the water is poured off and the rice pot is put over the fire. The rice swells and when the water has finally been driven off in steam the main bulk of the meal is ready.

The peanuts after being scorched (supposedly roasted) over the fire are ground into meal. This peanut meal or flour is made into gravy or sauce by adding water. Peppers, potatoes, cold boiled eggs, bacon, tomatoes and meat (if any) are introduced into this sauce and there’s your supper!

The first time this particular style of meal was served for me, I thought it was wonderful! (I must have been awfully hungry.) After the same meal every other night for a year I was ready to commit murder every time the cook mentioned rice or peanuts!

I had the glorious experience of eating regular food on my vacation in Europe but the steamer which carried me back to the west coast of Africa at the end of my holiday put in at the port of Dakar which is the peanut capital of the world. What a shock! There they were—mountains of peanuts awaiting shipment to all parts of the world! More than enough peanuts to completely bury Ag. Hall with enough left over to fill the Armory!

But then—that’s the tropics! After all it might be romantic if one had to spend only a couple of weeks out there but three years of bananas, rice, sweet potatoes and peppers is stretching romance way beyond its elastic limit!