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Africa for Foresters

By E. L. Vinton

I sailed for Liberia, as the average American, with my head full of wild ideas that were equal in foundation to the Stork, Santa Claus, and Paul Bunyan. I was much comforted by seeing no bands of blacks in quest of a white man’s heart. They don’t even make it a practice of killing whites, let alone eating them. I awaited in trembling anticipation to see long, slimy serpents hanging from the many boughs that overhang the rivers—but not a one (I was sober). The terrible heat that is supposed to poach one’s brain and make life unbearable only affected the mercury to the extent of 93 degrees. The ferocious lion does not inhabit the deep jungle and the stealthy leopard, whose tail I nearly trod upon, ran like the family tabby that has been caught drinking out of the cream pitcher.

The associates whom I had and folks whom I met in the tropics were no different than those in California, New York, or Iowa. The “beach combers” and whites that “go native” are great material for movies but a very rare species indeed. The only members of the Firestone staff who were not college graduates were the few mechanics and carpenters. This is also the general condition among all other companies that have interests in that country.

The health conditions in the tropics are a major consideration and, being recognized as such, there has been a constant drive for improvement. During the past four years that Firestone has been in Liberia there have been several hundred whites employed. There have been three deaths. One woman, whose religion kept her from taking quinine, died of malaria; the other two were accidents. The man-days lost, due to sickness among the whites, are but a small percentage greater than the average for this country.

What are the chances of advancement? A very common and vital question. My experience has led me to believe that the qualified forester has a better chance for advancement in tropical work than in the States. In the first place, the organizations are not too large to watch their junior members and give recognition to value received. Men who follow up tropical work are able to retire at a relatively early age, thus giving their place to the one below. Work in the tropics is expanding which also gives greater opportunities for advancement. Perhaps, the greatest reason is because of the relatively rapid turnover of the white staff. This may be caused by several factors; a man who may marry a woman who does not like the remote regions, one’s folks may be greatly upset by his being in such
“unheard of” places, or the man himself may prefer more civilized life. Along with these will follow the same reasons that cause people to change around in our every day life.

The “Lure of the Tropics” is that indefinite something that keeps beckoning to one as he sits with his evening pipe on the moon-flooded veranda and tries to come to a decision between Polaris or the Southern Cross. This lure is built up by the quaint customs of the native tribes. Their dress, dances, music, laws, superstitions, art and harmony with nature are a constant source of interest. The deep notes of the signal drum may be relayed from one end of the country to the other; the “bush telegraph” of the aborigines. Different notes of the drum will indicate a birth, a death, a battle or a marriage. To magnify this lure we have the varied denizens of the jungle. The monks and chimps swing, play and chatter throughout the jungle, undaunted by fences, chains, or red hats, and unattracted by the proverbial peanut. Their cousin, the three-toed sloth, is amusing through his lack of agility. This creature is known as the “softly-softly” (slowly-slowly) and well deserves the title as its movements are quite similar to a slowed-up motion picture.

The “no savvy” bird with the big head and small sense holds a unique position in bird life. A beating of drums will so excite this bird that it forgets to fly and falls like a crippled airplane. Wild life to no end, beautiful, interesting and strange. And then the climate that is warm and moist and very uniform is a great attraction. A range of 30 F degrees for two years as my observation. This would seem to be monotonous to one who has been accustomed to looking at the mercury before deciding on his daily attire, but it is generally accepted as a rare treat. It is a very easy monotony to withstand and soon develops the “manyana” or “softly-softly” spirit.

Of course, there are disadvantages to offset the pleasures and advantages of tropical work. In the first place the “manyana” spirit, so necessary while in the tropics, is something that must be lived down before one can return to the rapid swing of civilized life. One becomes mentally lazy as well as physically and has to overcome this before he will “be a fit” in any organization. The experience one has will be of a different kind than he can use to good advantage in temperate climates. My administrative work in Liberia may have been a success though it was carried out with a “male fist” policy that would not avail me in this country. There is also the disadvantage of getting decidedly out of touch with the forestry profession and having to start in as a beginner because one has missed out on things that have changed since the last contact.

In general, it is a great experience as well as a profitable adventure.