

FICTION

Mystic Torrent Creek is veiled by the tropical rainforests of North Queensland, and by a dozen contradictory rumours. Lured by the promise implicit in its name, many people have attempted to follow the water to its source. While none are known to have succeeded, it is certain that some have failed to return.

If you wish to avoid their fate, you must go alone. This is the primary rule. In recent months, I have tried to unravel the mystery of Mystic Torrent Creek. I have sought out and listened to many of those who returned from the rainforest; I have hunted through libraries and archives for the diaries and maps of the old explorers. All my sources agreed on this one point: you must go alone. Every party which violated this rule has met with disaster.

The headwaters of the creek are a hard day's march from the nearest track. The trail begins where the four-wheel-drive must be abandoned. Initially, the path is obvious, but it quickly disappears in a skirmish of lawyer vines. It is marked by a series of notches blazed low on the trees. These marks are your only guide. The trees are as elaborately buttressed as Gothic cathedrals, and green with moss. Absolute concentration is required if you are to reach the falls by sunset.

The rainforest offers many distractions. The brittle tremor of an azure kingfisher; palms arrayed in a patch of sunlight; the rustle of an amethystine python in the high canopy. These you must ignore. By the end of the day, you should have reached the base of the falls. If you have not, camp for the night where you are, and return to your vehicle quickly the next day. You have no business in the forest, and the powers which inhabit the night will destroy you if you attempt to continue.

The falls are one hundred feet high, perfectly vertical, pouring into a deep rock pool, from which the creek descends into rapids. There is a hut perched on the edge of the pool. It is provided as a courtesy to the traveller, although no one can say who built it. It is tiny, eight feet square, with a steeply-pitched shingle roof in the shape of a pyramid. The timber is native mahogany, cut from the rainforest nearby, and

skillfully adzed. Large stained-glass windows have been let into three of the walls, the fourth side being open, protected by a verandah roof, and facing the pool.

On the back wall is a depiction of the waterfall which you may eventually climb. The glass is coloured aqua, green, and white. Its thickness and irregularity of grain give it the vitality of living water. On each of the side walls, abstract designs have been worked into the glass. To some, they represent the Mystic Torrent Frog, which lives exclusively in this creek; to others, they are just patterns of glass, the same colours as the waterfall. Those who have intuited the frogs in the glass have variously described them as 'apos-

the sound. No one can tell you what you will experience; afterwards, you will not be able to tell yourself. At first light, the rain retreats, and you are left with a morning of exceptional clarity.

You may only stay for three nights. If it rains the first night, you are assured that it will rain for the following two, and that each night your experience will be compounded. If it does not rain until the second night, you will probably be disappointed, and learn little from the chorus of the frogs. Those who wait until the third night for rain receive the most intense revelations of them all, but their experience is likely to be terrifying.

If you spend three nights and it

none of its members come to any harm. The forest recognises their purpose, and holds its powers in abeyance.

Those who are given three nights of rain return to the world confident and refreshed. They report that on the third morning they leave as soon as the rain ceases, and that their footsteps follow the trail without any conscious effort. Those who wait until the third night for rain return in a state of agitation. They tell of an impulse which draws them towards the falls, of breaking away, and of returning through the forest along a trail which continually eludes them. It is thought that many of those who have failed to return waited until the third night for rain, and climbed the falls fervently, intoxicated by their experience.

While I have spoken to many people about Mystic Torrent Creek, my conclusions have been heavily influenced by one man. Last year, my research took me to Townsville. Many of my contacts mentioned Father Michael Daltziel, an Anglican priest and lay anthropologist, as an authority on the subject. Intrigued, I phoned him to arrange a meeting, and received a dinner invitation instead. That evening, he greeted me at the door of his rectory. He was heavily built with a neatly greying beard, and a handshake more muscular than is expected in a priest.

After dinner, we retired to his study, a narrow room lined with bookcases. He poured me a glass of port, and we sat in companionable silence as I read through his unpublished monograph on Mystic Torrent Creek. I was impressed by his energy and erudition. He had interviewed twenty-three of those who returned from the rainforest, and glossed their experiences with quotes from the most arcane mystic texts. His treatment of the matter was definitive, and I have merely summarised his findings.

As I read, I was tempted to ask him why he had not made the pilgrimage himself. While he was in his late forties, his eyes were clear and vital, his handshake determined. Older men than he had made the journey. The question was too provocative to ask, and made me feel uneasy. Had he asked the same of me, I would have had no answer.

When I had finished reading, he handed me an envelope of photographs. 'These may interest you,' he said. Curious, I looked

MYSTIC TORRENT CREEK



by Ian Demack

tolic', 'as serene as Buddha', and 'self-possessed'. They are the people who listened, and who have heard what the creek has to say.

It frequently rains at night. Early in the morning, at one, perhaps, or two (the hour is not important), you may be woken by the insistent murmur of rain on the shingles. You are concerned, but the roof is weathertight, and the open wall of the hut is in the lee of the rain. The sound of the rain dancing on the pool lures you out onto the verandah. Gradually, the rain becomes torrential, as though the hut has been moved under the waterfall. The surface of the pool ceases to be visible, and a chorus of frogs rises out of the rain. Their voices surround you. You sit and listen to the frogs and the rain, and everything else diminishes until you merge with

does not rain, you must leave quickly in the morning, and be out of the forest by nightfall, or else your life may be endangered. You have come to the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong intentions. Many who experience two successive dry nights leave on the second morning, rather than endure the suspense of waiting for the third night.

You are not compelled to leave the rainforest. Some choose to follow the stream to its source, climbing the rock face beside the waterfall, but in so doing cross an invisible line which separates them from those who return. They are never seen again.

Each time someone goes missing, a search party scours the rainforest. Nothing is ever found. A search party may occupy the area for a week or longer, but

through the photos. The first few were rainforest studies: palm fronds refracting the sunlight, a gecko camouflaged on a patch of lichen. While they had obviously been composed with great care, there was nothing unusual about them. The seventh photograph, though, startled me. My hands trembled in the presence of a heresy. I recognised, from the descriptions I had been given, the pool, and the hut to the left of the waterfall. The photograph had been taken from the far side of the pool, and there was a shadow in the hut which might have been a person, looking out across the water.

With each succeeding photograph, the camera moved closer to the hut. In the ninth, the shadow became a man, sitting in the lotus position. In the tenth, I could tell that his eyes were closed. He filled the frame of the eleventh, a warmly dressed man in his mid-thirties, calmly meditating. The twelfth and final photograph was a close-up of his head. His cheeks, his lips, and his eyelids were as smooth and possessed as a death mask.

'You are forbidden', Father Dalziel commented, 'To take a camera into the rainforest. This man was a German tourist, who was lost three years ago. Strangely, his camera was found on the bonnet of his hired Landcruiser. When the film inside was developed, these photographs were discovered.'

I remarked that I would not have been surprised if the twelfth photograph had shown him awakened, his face distorted with terror. Father Dalziel nodded carefully.

'I agree,' he said. 'The camera creates suspense by its approach. It was equipped with a zoom lens, so a logical explanation is possible.' He paused, and reshuffled the photographs. 'The searchers, though, found only one trail: from his car to the waterfall. It ended there. He had not returned.

He reached for the bottle of port. As he refilled my glass, I reread the quote from Saint Mark which concludes the monograph. Distinctly uncharitable, this verse worries those who have created in their minds a Jesus meeker than Saint Mark's. It presents a terrible enigma, and the rhythm of the words is the rhythm of rain on a still pool.

For to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

DRAWING BY DALIAN PUGH



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