FRANK AUBREY

THE DEVIL-TREE OF EL DORADO: A NOVEL

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Содержание

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PREFACE

SHALL RORAIMA[1] BE GIVEN UP TO VENEZUELA?

Shall Roraima be handed over to Venezuela? Shall the mysterious mountain long known to scientists as foremost among the wonders of our earth – regarded by many as the greatest marvel of the world – become definitely Venezuelan territory?

This is the question that hangs in the balance at the time these words are being written, that is inseparably associated – though many of the public know it not – with the dispute that has arisen about the boundaries of British Guiana.

Ever since Sir Robert Schomburgk first explored the colony at the expense of the Royal Geographical Society some sixty years ago, Roraima has remained an unsolved problem of romantic and fascinating interest, as attractive to the 'ordinary person' as to the man of science. And to those acquainted with the wondrous possibilities that lie behind the solution of the problem, the prospect of its being handed over to a country so little worthy of the trust as is Venezuela, cannot be contemplated without feelings of disappointment and dismay.

This is not the place in which to give a long description of Roraima. It will suffice here to say that its summit is a table-land which, it is believed, has been isolated from all the rest of the world for untold ages; no wilderness of ice and snow, but a fertile country of wood and stream, and, probably, lake. Consequently it holds out to the successful explorer the chance – the probability even – of finding there hitherto unknown animals, plants, fish. In this respect it exceeds in interest all other parts of the earth's surface, not excepting the polar regions; for the latter are but ice-bound wastes, while Roraima's mysterious table-land lies in the tropics but a few degrees north of the equator.

Why, then, it may be asked, have our scientific societies not exhibited more zeal in the solving of the problem presented by this strange mountain? Why is it that unlimited money can, apparently, be raised for expeditions to the poles, while no attempt has been made to explore Roraima? Yet, sixty years ago, the Royal Geographical Society could find the money to send Sir Robert Schomburgk out to explore British Guiana – indeed, it is to that fact that we owe the discovery of Roraima – but nothing has been done since. Had the good work thus begun been followed up, we should to-day have been able to show better reason for claiming Roraima as a British possession. But, as the writer of the article in the *Spectator* quoted on page 3 says, "we leave the mystery unsolved, the marvel uncared for." This article is commended to the perusal of those interested in the subject, as also are the following books, which give all the information at present available, viz. – Mr. Barrington Brown's 'Canoe and Camp Life in British Guiana,' and Mr. Boddam-Whetham's 'Roraima and British Guiana.' Mr. Im Thurn's 'Among the Indians of British Guiana' should also be mentioned, since it contains references to Roraima, though the author did not actually visit the mountain, as in the case of the first named.

As an illustration of the confusion and uncertainty that prevail as to the international status of this unique mountain, it may be mentioned that in the map of British Guiana which Sir Robert Schomburgk drew out for the British Government, it is placed within the British frontier. But in the map of the next Government explorer, Mr. Barrington Brown – 'based,' he says, 'upon Schomburgk's map' – it is placed just inside the Venezuelan boundary; and no explanation is given of the apparent

[1] The Indians of British Guiana pronounce this word Roreema.

contradiction. Again, another authority, Mr. Im Thurn (above referred to), Curator of the Museum at Georgetown (the capital of the colony), in his book says that Roraima "lies on the extreme edge of the colony, or perhaps on the other side of the *Brazilian* boundary." These references show the obscurity in which the whole matter is at present involved.

Apart, however, from the special interest that surrounds Roraima owing to the inaccessible character of its summit,[2] it is of very great geographical importance, from the fact that it is the highest mountain in all that part of South America, *i. e.*, in all the Guianas, in Venezuela, and in the north-east part of Brazil. Indeed, we must cross Brazil, that vast country of upwards of three million square miles, to find the nearest mountains that exceed in height Roraima. Consequently, it forms the apex of the water-shed of that part of South America; and it is, in fact, the source of several of the chief feeders of the great rivers Essequibo, Orinoco and Amazon. Schomburgk, in pointing this out, dwelt strongly upon the importance of the mountain to British Guiana, and insisted that its inclusion within the British boundary was a geographical necessity.

Finally, Sir Robert's brother, Richard Schomburgk, a skilled botanist, who had visited almost all parts of Asia and Africa in search of orchids and other rare botanical productions, tells us that the country around Roraima is, from a botanical point of view, one of the most wonderful in the world. "Not only the orchids," he says, "but the shrubs and low trees were unknown to me. Every shrub, herb and tree was new to me, if not as to family, yet as to species. I stood on the border of an unknown plant zone, full of wondrous forms which lay as if by magic before me… Every step revealed something new." ('Reissen in Britisch Guiana,' Leipzig, vol. ii., p. 216.)

Are our rulers, in their treatment of the question, bearing these facts sufficiently in mind? Are they as keenly alive as are the Venezuelans to the importance of Roraima? If they are, there is no sign of it; for while, in the Venezuelan statements of their case, there are lengthy, emphatic, and repeated references to the importance of Roraima, on the English side – in the English press even – there is scarcely a word about it.

From these observations it will be seen that there is reason to fear we may be on the point of allowing one of the most scientifically interesting and geographically important spots upon the surface of the globe to slip out of our possession into that of a miserable little state like Venezuela, where civil anarchy is chronic, and neither life nor property is secure.

One of the avowed objects of this book, therefore, is to stimulate public interest, and arouse public attention to the considerations that actually underlie the 'Venezuelan Question,' as well as to while away an idle hour for the lovers of romance.

It has been suggested that, if it is too late to retain the wonderful Roraima as exclusively British – and to effect this it would be well worth our while to barter away some other portion of the disputed territory – then an arrangement might be come to to make it neutral ground. Standing, as it does, in the corner where the three countries – Brazil, Venezuela and British Guiana – meet, it is of importance to all three, and, no doubt, in such an endeavour, we should have the support of Brazil as against Venezuela.

With regard to the oft-discussed question of the situation of the traditional city of Manoa, or El Dorado – as the Spaniards called it – most authorities, including Humboldt and Schomburgk, agree in giving British Guiana as its probable site. We are told that it stood on an island in the midst of a great lake called 'Parima'; but no such lake is now to be found in South America anywhere near the locality indicated. An explanation of the mystery, however, is afforded by the suggestion that such a great lake, or inland sea, almost certainly existed at one time in precisely this part of the continent; in that case what are now mountains in the country would then have been islands.

[2] Mr. Barrington Brown says the mountain can only be ascended by means of balloons (see article previously referred to on page 3); and Mr. Boddam-Whetham came to the same conclusion.

Indeed, most of British Guiana lies somewhat low, and it is estimated that if the *highlands* were to sink two thousand feet the whole country would be under water – the mountain summits excepted – and there would then be only 'a narrow strait' between the Roraima range and the Andes. In this great supposed ancient lake the group of islands now represented by mountain summits might well have been the home of a powerful and conquering race – as is to-day Japan with its group of more than three thousand islands – and Roraima, as the highest, and therefore the most easily defensible, may very well have been selected as their fastness, and the site of their capital city.

Schomburgk thus states his speculations upon the point, in his book on British Guiana, page 6: —

"The geological structure of this region leaves but little doubt that it was once the bed of an inland lake which, by one of those catastrophes of which even later times give us examples, broke its barriers, forcing for its waters a path to the Atlantic. May we not connect with the former existence of this inland sea the fable of the lake Parima and the El Dorado? Thousands of years may have elapsed; generations may have been buried and returned to dust; nations who once wandered on its banks may be extinct and exist no more in name; still, tradition of Parima and the El Dorado survived these changes of time; transmitted from father to son, its fame was carried across the Atlantic and kindled the romantic fire of the chivalric Raleigh."

As a natural sequence to the foregoing arises the inquiry, What sort of people were those who inhabited this island city, or who 'wandered on the banks' of the great lake? Here much is to be learned from the recent discoveries of the Government of the United States who, of late years, have devoted liberal sums to pre-historic research. The money so expended has been the means of unearthing evidence of a startling character – relics of a former civilisation that existed in America ages before the time of its discovery by Christopher Columbus. The Spaniards, as we know, found races that were white, or nearly so; but these later discoveries go to show that long anterior to these – at a time, in fact, probably coeval with what we call the Egyptian civilisation – America was peopled with a white race fully as cultured, as advanced in the sciences, and as powerful on their own ground as the ancient Egyptians; and as handsome in personal appearance – if some of the heads and faces on the specimens of pottery may be accepted as fair examples – as the ancient Greeks.

It has long been known that America possesses extraordinary relics of a former civilisation in what are known as the great 'earthworks,' which are still to be seen scattered about in many parts of the continent, and which, as vast engineering works, challenge comparison with the pyramids themselves. But now discovery has gone much further; bas-reliefs and pottery have been found that set forth with marvellous fidelity many minute details concerning this pre-historic people – their personal appearance, and their ornaments and habiliments; the style of wearing the hair and the beard; and other particulars that can be appreciated only by inspection and study of the reduced fac-similes lately printed and issued by the Government of the United States.

Many of them relate to the custom of human sacrifice which, as most people are probably aware, prevailed largely in America when the Spaniards first landed there; though few, perhaps, know the terrible extent to which it was carried. Prescott tells us that few writers have ventured to estimate the yearly number of victims at less than twenty thousand, while many put it as high as fifty thousand, in Mexico alone! If we consider that the lowest of these estimates represents an average of some four hundred a week, or nearly sixty a day, such figures are appalling! And now we learn, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that the same practices obtained in America in times that must have been ages before the Spanish conquest, and, judging by the frequency of the representations of such things in these old bas-reliefs, as extensively. In these sculptures we can see the very shape of the knives used; the form of the plates or platters on which severed heads of victims were placed, and other such details; and in a certain series we are enabled to note the curious point, that, while the officiating priests always wear full beards, the victims appear to have usually possessed no hirsute adornments, or to have 'shaved clean,' as we term it. It may be added that these ancient white people seem to have

been a totally different race from those the Spaniards found on the continent; and that between the two there is believed to have been a gap lasting for many ages, during which the country was overrun by Indian or other barbaric hordes; though how or why this came about is one of those mysteries that will probably never be unravelled.

In conclusion, I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to the writers whose books of travel I have named for the information I have made use of; as well as to express a hope that the writer of the review in the *Spectator* will regard with indulgence the liberties I have taken with his admirable article. I am sanguine enough to believe, however, that I shall have the sympathy and good wishes of all these in the endeavour here made to arouse public attention to the real meaning and importance of the 'Venezuelan Question'; and to add to the number of those who feel an interest in the future status and ultimate exploration of the mysterious Roraima. I wish also to express my thanks to Messrs. Leigh Ellis and Fred Hyland, the artists to whom the illustrations were entrusted, for the thought and care they have bestowed upon the work, and the successful manner in which they have carried out my conceptions.

For the rest – if objection be taken to the accounts of the mountain and what is to be found on its summit given by the characters in my story – I desire to claim the licence of the romance-writer to maintain their accuracy – till the contrary be proved. If this shall serve to stimulate to renewed efforts at exploration, so much the better, and another of my objects in writing the book will thereby have been attained.

FRANK AUBREY.

CHAPTER I
"WILL NO ONE EXPLORE RORAIMA?"[3]

Beneath the verandah of a handsome, comfortable-looking residence near Georgetown, the principal town of British Guiana, a young man sat one morning early in the year 1890, attentively studying a volume that lay open on a small table before him. It was easy to see that he was reading something that was, for him at least, of more than ordinary interest, something that seemed to carry his thoughts far away from the scene around him; for when, presently, he raised his eyes from the book, they looked out straight before him with a gaze that evidently saw nothing of that on which they rested.

He was a handsome young fellow of, perhaps, twenty-two years of age, rather tall, and well-made, with light wavy hair, and blue-grey eyes that had in them an introspective, somewhat dreamy expression, but that nevertheless could light up on occasion with an animated glance.

The house stood on a terrace that commanded a view of the sea, and, in the distance, white sails could be seen making their way across the blue water in the light breeze and the dazzling sunlight. Nearer at hand were waving palms, glowing flowers, humming insects and gaudily-coloured butterflies – all the beauties of a tropical garden. On one side of him was the open window of a sitting-room that, shaded, as it was, by the verandah, looked dark and cool compared with the glare of the scorching sun outside.

From this room came the sounds of a grand piano and of the sweet voice of a girl singing a simple and pathetic ballad.

At the moment the song ceased a brisk step was heard coming up the path through the garden, and a good-looking young fellow of tall figure and manly air made his way to where the other still sat with his eyes fixed on vacancy, as one who neither sees nor hears aught of what is going on about him.

"Ha, Leonard!" the new-comer exclaimed, with a light laugh, "caught you dreaming again, eh? In another of your reveries?"

The other roused himself with a start, and looked to see who was his visitor.

"Good-morning, Jack," he then answered with a slight flush. "Well, yes – I suppose I must have been dreaming a little, for I did not hear you coming."

"Bet I guess what you were dreaming about," said the one addressed as Jack. "Roraima, as usual, eh?"

Leonard looked a little conscious.

"Why, yes," he admitted, smiling. "But," he continued seriously, "I have just been reading something that set me thinking. It is about Roraima, and it is old; that is to say, it is in an old number of a paper bound up in this book that a friend has lent me. I should like to read it to you. Shall I?"

"All right; if I may smoke the while. I suppose I may?" And the speaker, anticipating consent, pulled out a pipe, filled and lighted it, and then, having seated himself on a chair, crossed one leg over the other, and added, "Now, then, I am ready. Fire away, old man."

And Leonard Elwood read the following extract from the book he had been studying: —

"Will no one explore Roraima, and bring us back the tidings which it has been waiting these thousands of years to give us? One of the greatest marvels and mysteries of the earth lies on the outskirt of one of our colonies, and we leave the mystery unsolved, the marvel uncared for. The description given of it (with a map and an illustrated sketch) in Mr. Barrington Brown's 'Canoe and Camp Life in British Guiana' (one of the most fascinating books of travel the present writer has read for a long time) is a thing to dream of by the hour. A great table of pink and white and red sandstone,

[3] The Indians of British Guiana pronounce this word Roreema.

'interbedded with red shale,' rises from a height of five thousand one hundred feet above the level of the sea, two thousand feet sheer into the sapphire tropical sky. A forest crowns it; the highest waterfall in the world – only one, it would seem, out of several – tumbles from its summit, two thousand feet at one leap, three thousand more on a slope of forty-five degrees to the bottom of the valley, broad enough to be seen thirty miles away. Only two parties of civilised explorers have reached the base of the table – Sir Robert Schomburgk many years ago, and Mr. Brown and a companion in 1869[4]– each at different spots. Even the length of the mass has not been determined – Mr. Brown says from eight to twelve miles. And he cannot help speculating whether the remains of a former creation may not be found at the top. At any rate, there is the forest on its summit; of what trees is it composed? They cannot well be the same as those at its base. At a distance of fifteen hundred feet above sea-level the mango-tree of the West Indies, which produces fruit in abundance below, ceases to bear. The change in vegetation must be far more decided where the difference is between five thousand and seven thousand feet. Thus for millenniums this island of sandstone in the South American continent must have had its own distinct flora. What may be its fauna? Very few birds probably ascend to a height of two thousand feet in the air, the vulture tribe excepted. Nearly the whole of its animated inhabitants are likely to be as distinct as its plants.

"Is it peopled with human beings? Who can tell? Why not? The climate must be temperate, delicious. There is abundance of water, very probably issuing from some lake on the summit. Have we here a group of unknown brothers cut off from all the rest of their kind?

"The summit, Mr. Brown says, is inaccessible except by means of balloons. Well, that is a question to be settled on the spot, between an engineer and a first-rate 'Alpine.' (What is the satisfaction of standing on the ice-ridge of the Matterhorn, or crossing the lava-wastes of the Vatna-Jökull, compared to what would be the sensation of reaching that aerial forest and gazing plumb down over the sea of tropical verdure beneath, within an horizon the limits of which are absolutely beyond guessing?)

"But put it that a balloon is required, surely it would be worth while for one of our learned societies to organise a balloon expedition for the purpose. No one can tell what problems in natural science might not be elucidated by the exploration. We have here an area of limited extent within which the secular variation of species, if any, must have gone on undisturbed, with only a limited number of conceivable exceptions, since at least the very beginning of the present age in the world's life. Can there be a fairer field for the testing of those theories which are occupying men's minds so much in our days? And if there be human beings on Roraima, what new data must not their language, their condition, contribute for the study of philologers, anthropologists, sociologists?

"One more wonder remains to be told. The traveller speaks of two other mountains in the same district which are of the same description as Roraima – tables of sand-stone rising up straight into the blue – one larger than (though not as high as) Roraima itself. It is only because of their existence, and because, for aught that appears, they may be equally inaccessible with Roraima, that one does not venture to call Roraima *the* greatest marvel and mystery of the earth!"

"What is that taken from?" asked Jack Templemore when the reader had put down the book.

"It is from the *Spectator*.[5] I say, Jack, what a chance for an explorer! Fancy people spending their money and risking their lives in exploring an icy, cold, miserable, desolate region, like the Arctic Circle, when there is a wondrous land here in the blue skies – yet no wilderness of ice and snow – waiting to be won; and no one seems to trouble about it! I do wish you would do as I have so often suggested – set out with me upon an expedition and let us see whether we cannot solve the secret of this mysterious mountain. You have the leisure now, and I have the money. Dr. Lorien and his son

[4] Since then Roraima has been visited by two or three other travellers; but their accounts have added little to our knowledge. They entirely confirm Mr. Brown's statements as to its inaccessibility. (See Preface.)

[5] This article appeared in the *Spectator* of April 1877.

are now on their way back from near there; if they can undertake the journey, so could we. Besides, it is not as though we were novices at this kind of travel; we have been on short trips to the interior times enough."

Jack Templemore looked dubious. He was, it is true, used to roughing it in the wild parts of South America. He had been trained as an engineer, and, for some years – he was now twenty-eight – had been engaged in surveying or pioneering for new railways in various places on the Continent. His father having lately died and left him and his mother very poorly off, he was now somewhat anxiously looking about for something that would give him permanent occupation, or the chance of making a little money. He and Leonard Elwood were great friends; though they were, in many respects, of very different characters. Elwood was, essentially, of a romantic, poetic temperament; while Templemore affected always a direct, practical, matter-of-fact way of looking at things, as became an engineer. He was dark, tall and sturdily built, with keen, steady grey eyes, and a straight-forward, good-humoured manner. Both were used to hunting, shooting, and out-door sports, and, as Elwood had just said, they had had many short hunting trips into the interior together. But these had been in previous years, since which, both had been away from Georgetown. Templemore, as above stated, had been engaged in railway enterprises, Elwood had gone to Europe, where, after some time spent in England, during which his father and mother had both died, he had travelled for a while 'to see the world,' and finally had come out again to Georgetown to look after some property his father had left him. On arrival he had gone at first to an hotel, but some old friends of his parents, who lived on an estate known as 'Meldona,' had insisted upon his staying with them for a while. Here he found that his old friend Jack Templemore was a frequent visitor, and it was an open secret that Maud Kingsford, elder of the two daughters of Leonard's host, was the real attraction that brought him there so constantly.

Now Jack Templemore, as has been said, was more practical-minded than Leonard. He had not shrunk from the hardships and privations of wild forest life when engaged upon railway-engineering work, when there had been something definite in view – money to be made, instruction to be gained, or promotion to be hoped for. But he did not view with enthusiasm the idea of leaving comfortable surroundings for the discomforts of rough travel, merely for travel's sake, or upon what he deemed a sort of wild-goose chase. He had carefully read up all the information that was obtainable concerning the mountain Roraima, and had seen no reason to doubt the conclusions that had been come to by those who ought to know – that it was inaccessible. Of what use then to spend time, trouble, money – perhaps health and strength – upon attempting the impossible?

So Jack Templemore argued, and, be it said, there was the other reason. Why should he go away and separate himself for an indefinite period from his only surviving parent and the girl he loved best in the world, with no better object than a vague idea of scrambling up a mountain that had been pronounced by practical men unclimbable?

Thus, when Leonard appealed to him on this particular morning, merely because he had come across something that had fired his enthusiasm afresh, Jack did not respond to the proposal with the cordiality that the other evidently wished for.

"I don't mind going a short trip with you, old man," Jack said presently, "for a little hunting, if you feel restless and are a-hungering after a spell of wandering – a few days, or a week or two, if you like – but a long expedition with nothing to go upon, as it were, seems to me only next door to midsummer madness."

Leonard turned away with an air of disappointment, and just then Maud Kingsford, who had been playing and singing inside the room, stepped out.

Leonard discreetly went into the house and left the two alone, and Maud greeted Jack with a rosy tell-tale flush that made her pretty face look still more charming. In appearance she was neither fair nor dark, her hair and eyebrows being brown and her eyes hazel. She was an unaffected, good-hearted girl, more thoughtful and serious, perhaps, than girls of her age usually are – she was twenty, while Stella, the younger sister, was between eighteen and nineteen – and had shown her capacity for

managing a home by her success in that line in their own home since her mother's death a few years before. The practical-minded Jack, who had duly noted this, saw in it additional cause for admiration; but, indeed, it was only a natural outcome of her innate good sense. She now asked what her lover and Leonard had been talking of.

"The usual thing," was Jack's reply. "He's mad to go upon an exploring expedition; thinks we could succeed where others have failed. It's so unlikely, you know. Now, if he would only look at the thing practically – "

Maud burst into a merry laugh.

"You do amuse me – you two," she exclaimed; at which Jack looked a little disconcerted. "*You* always insisting so upon being strictly non-speculative, and Leonard, with his romantic phantasies, and his dreams and visions, and vague aspirations after castles in the air. You are always hammering away at him, trying to instil practical ideas into him with the same praiseworthy perseverance, though you know that in all these years you have never made the least little bit of impression upon him. Your ideas and his are like oil and water, you know. They will never mix, shake them together as you will."

"But – don't you think I am right? Isn't it common sense?"

"Quite right, of course; and you *are* persevering; I'll say that for you."

"For the matter of that, so's Leonard," said Jack with a good-natured laugh. "He's as persevering with this fad of his as any man I ever met in my life. I do believe he's got a fixed idea that he has only to start upon this enterprise, and he will come back a made man with untold and undreamt-of wealth and – "

"And a princess for a bride – the fair maid of his dreams," Maud put in, still laughing. "We have not heard so much of her, by the bye, lately. He has been rather shy of those things since his return from Europe, and does not like to be spoken to about them. We began to think he had grown out of his youthful fancies."

The fact was, that, from his childhood, Leonard had been accustomed to strange dreams and fancies. These five – Leonard, Templemore, and Mr. Kingsford's son and two daughters – had been children together, and in those days Leonard had talked freely to his childish companions of all his imaginative ideas; and as they grew older, he had not varied much in this respect. Moreover, Leonard had had an Indian nurse, named Carenna, who had encouraged him in his fantastic dreamings, and who had, by her Indian folk-lore tales, early excited his imagination. Her son Matava, too, had been Leonard's constant companion almost so long as he could remember, first in all sorts of boyish games and amusements, and later in his hunting expeditions; and both Matava and Carenna had been always more devoted to Leonard than even to his father and mother.

But when Mr. and Mrs. Elwood left the estate they had been cultivating, to go to England, the two Indians had gone away into the interior to live at an Indian settlement with their own tribe. About twice a year, however – or even oftener, if there were occasion – Matava still came down to the coast upon some little trading expedition with other Indians; and at such times he never failed to come to see the Kingsfords and inquire after Leonard.

The Dr. Lorien, of whom mention had been made by Leonard, was a retired medical practitioner who had turned botanist and orchid-collector. He had been a ship's doctor, and in that capacity had voyaged pretty well all over the world. Since he had given that up he had travelled further still by land – in the tropical regions in the heart of Africa, in Siam, the Malay Peninsular and, latterly, in South America – in search of orchids and other rare floral and botanical specimens. The vicinity of Roraima being one of the most remarkable in the world for such things – though so difficult of access as to be but seldom visited by white men – it is not surprising that he had lately planned a journey thither.

From this journey the doctor and his son were now daily expected back. One of the Indians of their party had, indeed, already arrived, having been despatched in advance, a few days before, to announce their safe return.

Thus it came about that Templemore and Maud, while still talking, were not greatly surprised at the sudden appearance of Matava, who stated that he had come down with the doctor's party, who would follow very quickly on his heels.

Maud, who knew the Indian and his mother well, received him kindly; and, to his great delight, was able to inform him that his 'young master' – as he always called Leonard Elwood – had returned to Georgetown, and was at present with them.

Matava had, indeed, expected this, for he had heard of Leonard's intention at his last visit to the coast some six months before. He was greatly pleased to find he was not to be disappointed in his expectation. Moreover, the Indian declared, he had news for him – "news of the greatest importance" – and begged to be allowed to see him at once. So Maud sent him into the house – where he knew his way about perfectly – to find Leonard; and then, turning to Templemore, she said, laughing,

"I wonder what his 'important' intelligence can be? Some deeper secret than usual that his old nurse has to tell him, I suppose."

"I hope it's nothing likely to rouse a further desire to set off on this mad-cap expedition he has so long had in his mind," Templemore returned; "for," looking at her with a sigh, "if he *should* make up his mind to start, I am, in effect, pledged to go too, whether I wish or not."

"Why should you expect it? and how are you obliged to go?" Maud inquired with evident uneasiness.

"I know that Leonard saw Dr. Lorien in London before he came out last, and had a long talk with him. When he learned of the expedition upon which the doctor was then setting out, he was much annoyed at being unable to join him. He said, however, that he should be in Georgetown himself in a few months, and hoped to see the doctor on his return; and he particularly asked him to try to collect for him all the information and particulars he could concerning the best route by which to make the journey to Roraima. Dr. Lorien told me all this before he left us, adding that he felt certain Leonard's object in coming again to Georgetown was quite as much to arrange for an expedition as his ostensible one of looking after his property. And *I* know, too, from what I have seen since Leonard has been back, that his thoughts are full of the idea. You say he does not now talk much of it to you or to others?"

"No; and as I told you just now, we had begun rather to think he had given up his former romantic yearnings for adventure; and, when you have referred to them before him, I have thought that you were only teasing him a little about old times."

"Oh dear no; by no means. Whatever he may say, or leave unsaid to you and his general acquaintances, he is, in his heart, just as much set upon it as ever."

"It is odd, that," Maud observed thoughtfully, "because he used to be so fond of telling us about his dreams and visions and all the castles in the air and half-mystical imaginings he used to build upon them. But," she went on slowly, "I have noticed that, since his long absence from us, Leonard Elwood is very different from what he was as I remember him. He seems, at times, so reserved and distant, I almost feel inclined to call him 'Mr. Elwood' instead of 'Leonard.' And he is, in a manner, unsociable, too. He is so preoccupied always, so silent, and so wrapped up in himself, that you generally have to wait, if you speak to him, while he collects his thoughts – brings them back from the distant skies or wherever they have gone a-wandering – before he replies to you. Not that he is intentionally cool or distant, I think; and I am sure he is just as good-hearted as ever. Yet there *is* a change of some sort. Stella says the same. And, do you know, he sometimes gives me a sort of feeling as though he were not English at all, but of some other race, and that he feels half out-of-place amongst us, a fish out of water, as it were? I wonder whether he is in love!" And Maud gave a ringing little laugh.

Templemore shook his head.

"If he were, it would be with some young lady on the other side of the Atlantic," he returned. "And he would not be desirous of prolonging his stay on this side. No; *I* know what is the matter with him. He talks freely enough to me. And, now that he is expecting Dr. Lorien back, he is gradually

working himself up into a state of excitement and expectation. He has quite made up his mind for some news or information – Heaven only knows why – and that is what makes him by turns restless and preoccupied. If, therefore, what Matava has to tell has anything to do with what I know to be so much in his thoughts, it may be the means of deciding him to go; and then I should have to go too."

"But why? I don't see what it has to do with you, Jack."

"It has this to do with me, dear Maud," said Templemore, taking her hand; "Leonard, some time ago, made me a very handsome – to me a very tempting – offer if I would make up my mind to start with him on this vague expedition. He offered me £300 clear, he paying all expenses, and giving me, besides, half of whatever came out of it. Unfortunately for myself, I am not now in a position to say 'no' to such an offer. I have been, now, nearly a year waiting for something to 'turn up.' My mother has barely enough to live on, and depends upon me for ordinary comforts, to say nothing of little luxuries; and what I had saved up from former engagements is steadily getting less and less, and will shortly disappear. I do wish with all my heart I could get anything else, almost, rather than this wild-goose affair of Leonard's. Yet nothing has offered itself; so what am I to do? For your sake, for the hope of being able one day to provide a home for you – "

"Nay, Jack," Maud interposed, with a deep flush, "do not say for *my* sake. I would not have you set out on an enterprise of danger and difficulty for my sake. But I see clearly enough you must do it, if it be again offered, for your mother's sake. Yes, for hers, you must." The girl hesitated, and it was easy to see she found it hard to say the words, but she went on bravely, "So, I repeat, if it be again offered, you must accept it, Jack. And be sure I will look after your mother, and comfort her while you are away."

"That is spoken like my own dear girl," Templemore answered with emotion. "Yes, I cannot well refuse; and I know I may look to you to console my mother. You will comfort each other."

Just then they heard Leonard's voice calling out in excited tones for Templemore. A moment or two later he came rushing out of the house.

"Jack, Jack!" he cried. "Such a strange thing! Here is our opportunity! Matava has brought some extraordinary news!"

Leonard was so incoherent in his excitement, that it was some time before his hearers grasped his meaning.

His news amounted, in effect, to this. A white man had been staying for some time near the Indian village at which Carenna and her son Matava lived; and he had had many talks with both about a project for ascending the mountain of Roraima. It being an arduous undertaking, he sought the co-operation of one or two other white men; and Leonard's old nurse had urged him to communicate with her young master, who would shortly be in Georgetown, assuring him that he would be the very one – from the interest and enthusiasm he would feel – to join him and help him to achieve success if success were possible. Matava, who knew of Dr. Lorien's presence in the district, had suggested to the stranger to go to see him, and a meeting had thus been brought about. The doctor would tell him the result; but the main thing was that the stranger had sent an invitation to Leonard to join him and to bring, if he pleased, one other white man, but no more. The doctor was now at the Settlement, near the mouth of the Essequibo, transferring to the steamer, from the Indian canoes in which they had been brought down the river, his botanical treasures and other trophies of his journey. If Leonard wished to go back with the canoes and the Indians who were with them, he would have to let them know at once, and they would wait. Otherwise they would be on their way back in a day or two; which would involve the organising of a fresh expedition – a matter of great trouble – should Leonard make up his mind to proceed later.

The enthusiastic Leonard needed no time to make up his mind.

"I shall go," said he. "If you will come too, Jack, I shall be only too glad. But, if not, I may be able to find some one else; or I shall go alone. So I shall send word at once to keep the boats and the Indians."

"But," objected Maud Kingsford, "consider! You know nothing of this stranger; he may be a blackleg, an escaped murderer or desperado, or all sorts of things."

"No, no! Carenna knows. She has sent word that I can trust this man, and she knows. She is too fond of me to let me get mixed up with any doubtful character. Dr. Lorien, too, and Harry have seen him, and talked with him, and think well of him; so Matava says. I shall know more when I see them in a day or two. Meantime, I shall keep the canoes and Indians, and risk it."

Then he rushed off to have a further talk with Matava, and, as he said, see about getting the Indian "some grub."

Jack and Maud, left alone, looked at each other in dismay. It had been one thing to talk vaguely of what they would do in case Leonard should take what at the time seemed a very unlikely step. It was quite another to be thus suddenly brought face to face with it.

Maud turned very pale and seemed about to faint. She felt keenly how hard it would be to see her lover depart upon an adventure of this uncertain character, the end or duration of which no one could even guess at. But she recovered her self-possession with an effort and, looking steadily at Templemore, said,

"What you said you would do for our sakes is to be very quickly put to the test, it seems. You – will – go, Jack?"

"Yes," he answered firmly; "since it is your wish."

"You must," she answered. "It is hard to lose you; it will be hard for us both. But go – and go with a good heart. Be sure I will be a daughter to your mother while you are away."

He took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips.

"For your sake, dear Maud, I shall go," he said. "For your sake and for my mother's; in the hope that some success may result; but not – Heaven knows – for the mere sordid hope of gain."

CHAPTER II
MONELLA

Two days later Dr. Lorien and his son arrived in Georgetown and, after taking rooms at the Kaieteur Hotel, went at once to call upon the Kingsfords. This haste was, in reality, prompted by Harry, whose thoughts were bent upon his hopes of once more seeing the pretty Stella; but the ostensible reason that he urged upon his father was somewhat different, and had to do with the message of which they were the bearers from the white stranger they had met in their travels.

At the evening dinner the matter was discussed, Mr. Kingsford and his son Robert and the others being present.

The two travellers had much to tell of their adventures, which had been full of both interest and danger, apart from the matter of the stranger's message.

"And yet, I think," observed the doctor, thoughtfully, "our meeting with this stranger, and his behaviour, impressed me more than almost all else that happened to us."

"How so? What is he like?" asked Mr. Kingsford.

"In figure he is very tall; of a most commanding stature and appearance. *I* am not short."

"Why, you are over six feet!" put in Harry.

"And yet I almost think, if he had held his arm straight out, I could have walked under it with my hat on, and without stooping."

"I'm sure you could, dad," Harry corroborated.

"As to age – there I confess myself at sea. As a doctor I am accustomed to judge of age; yet he thoroughly puzzled me. If I could believe in the possibility of a man's being a hundred and fifty years old and yet remaining strong and hale and vigorous, I should not be surprised if he had claimed that age. On the other hand, if one could believe in a young, stalwart, muscular man of thirty with the face and white hair of an old-looking, but not *very* old man, then I could have believed it if I had been told he was no more than thirty. In fact, he was a complete puzzle to me; a mystery. But the most remarkable thing about him was the expression of his eyes; they were the most extraordinary I have ever seen in my life."

"Wild – mad-looking?" Templemore asked.

"Oh no, by no means; quite the reverse. Very steady and piercing; but wonderfully fascinating. Mild and kind-looking to a fault; and yet changing to a look of quiet, almost stern resolution that had in it nothing hard, or cruel, or disagreeable. In fact, I hardly know how to describe that look, or convey an idea of it, except by saying that it was something between the gaze of a lion and that of a Newfoundland dog. It had all the majesty, the magnanimity, the conscious power of the one, with the benevolence and wistful kindness and affection of the other. Never have I seen such an expression. I really did not know the human countenance could express the mingled characteristics one seemed to read so plainly in his – all kindly, all noble, all suggestive of sincerity and integrity."

"You *are* enthusiastic!" said Robert, laughing.

The old doctor coloured up a little; then took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"I know it sounds strange to hear an old man of the world like me speak so forcibly about a man's appearance," he returned; "but, if it is true, I do not see why I should not say it. Ask Harry here."

"I couldn't take my eyes off his face," Harry declared. "He fairly fascinated me. I felt I should have to do anything he told me; even to taking my pistol and killing the first person I met. I do believe I should have done it – or any other out-of-the way thing. And he made you feel, too, as though you liked him so, that you longed to do any mortal thing you could to please him."

"What's his name?" asked Templemore.

"Monella."

"Monella? Is that all? No other name?"

"None that I heard. And as to his nationality, I cannot even so much as guess. I have been in Central Africa, in Siam, in India, in China, in Russia, and have picked up a smattering of the languages of those countries; but this man jabbered away in all; additionally, he spoke French, German, Spanish and Portuguese, besides English. So much I know. How many more he speaks I can't say."

"Injun," said Harry.

"Oh yes, I forgot that. We had some of three different tribes with us, and he spoke to each in his own tongue."

"And what is his object in going in for this Roraima exploration?" asked Mr. Kingsford.

"He has a curious theory. He declares that the ancient island-city of El Dorado – or Manoa – was not at the lower end or part of the Pacaraima mountains, as some have surmised, but at the further and highest point of the range, which is Roraima itself. He holds that the great lake or inland sea of Parima once washed around the bases of all those mountains, making islands of what are now their summits; and that the highest and most inaccessible of all, Roraima, was selected by the Manoans for their fastness, and for the site of their wonderful 'Golden City.'"

"But that theory won't help him to get up there, will it?" Jack asked.

"Ah, but there is something else. He states that he was brought up by some people, the last members of what had once been a nation, but has now died out. They lived in a secluded valley high up on the slopes of the Andes. He has travelled all over the world, and went back to these friends of his, only to find that they were all dead, save one, and that he was fast dying. This survivor gave him an ancient parchment with plans and diagrams, by means of which, it was declared, the top of the mountain can be reached, where will be found whatever traces may be left of the famous city of Manoa or El Dorado. This man, Monella, has other old parchments which he can read, but I could not – he showed me some – and from these he declared his belief that there is almost unlimited wealth to be gained by those who find the site of this wonderful city."

All this time Leonard had been listening with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, though in silence. Here he glanced with a satisfied smile at Templemore, and said,

"There's method in all that; at all events he is not undertaking the thing in a haphazard way and without something to go upon, that's certain."

Jack did not look hopeful.

"It is probably just as wild and hopeless an adventure all the same," was his reply. "What 'directions' or 'plans' or 'diagrams' can help a man to-day after the lapse of hundreds and hundreds of years – even if they were reliable, and the old party who handed them over was not mad – as he probably was?"

"As to Monella," observed the doctor, "I could see no sign of madness in him. He is one of the most intelligent, best-informed men I ever met. I cannot say anything, of course, of his informant."

"Has he any money, do you suppose – this man?" Robert asked.

"I don't know. But he pays the Indians well, and has got together a lot of stores, it seems; which must have been a costly thing to do. They have been brought over the mountains from Brazil. And he specially said you need not trouble to load yourself up with much in the way of stores – only sufficient to get to him. After that you will be all right. And he said nothing about money being wanted. But," and here the doctor hesitated, "he is very particular as to the character and disposition of those he purposes to work with. In fact, he subjected me to a long sort of cross-examination respecting our friend Leonard here. He had already gained a lot of information about him from the old Indian nurse, it seemed, and I was surprised at the details he had picked up and remembered. In fact, Master Leonard," continued the doctor, addressing the young man, "he seemed to know you almost as well as if he had lived with you for years. And your friend Mr. Templemore, too, he seemed to know about him, and to expect that he would join you."

"How could that be?" Jack demanded.

"Oh, from the old nurse and Matava, I suppose."

"To tell you the honest truth," Harry interposed, "I believe there's some hocus-pocus business about those two. She is reputed to be a witch, you know; not a bad witch, but a good sort. And I quite believe Monella to be a wizard; also of a good sort. And when those two laid their heads together, they could know a lot between them, I suspect. I should not at all wonder if he were not magician enough to lead you to the 'golden castle,' or 'city,' or whatever it is, and find its hidden stores of gold. I wish I had a chance to join him. But dad's wanting me somewhere else. So I am out of it."

"Yes," observed his father. "We have to go on to Rio, where I have some law business on. But we shall not be away a great while, and then we are going back to that district."

"Going back?" said Templemore in surprise.

"Yes, there is a lot to be done there. It is a wonderful place for my sort of work, and we really saw but very little of it after all. So we are going again when we return from Rio; but I cannot at all tell when that may be."

The doctor was a fine-looking specimen of a hardy, bronzed traveller. He was, as has been said, over six feet in height; his hair and beard were iron-grey, his complexion was a little florid beneath its tan, and his expression good-humoured and often jovial. His son, Harry, was somewhat slight in build, but wiry, and had been used to knocking about with his father. He was a young fellow with boundless animal spirits and plenty of pluck and courage. His ready kindness to every one made him a general favourite; and the lively, captivating Stella and he were special friends.

Mr. Kingsford asked the doctor whether any time had been estimated for the length of the expedition.

"That would be difficult," Dr. Lorien answered. "Apart from the long and tedious journey there, there is the girdle of forest that surrounds Roraima to be cut through. That may take months, I am told."

"Months!" The exclamation came from Maud who, with Stella, had been a silent but appreciative listener.

"Yes. It is a curious thing, but this forest belt is never approached even by any of the Indian tribes. They look upon it with superstitious awe and will not even go near it. Indeed, they all regard Roraima with a sort of horror. They declare there is a lake on the top guarded by demons and large white eagles, and that it will never be gazed on by mortal eyes; that in the forest that surrounds it are monstrous serpents – 'camoodis' they call them – larger far than any to be found elsewhere in the land; besides these, there are 'didis', gigantic man-apes, bigger and more ferocious and formidable than the African gorilla. Altogether, this wood has a very bad reputation, and no Indian will venture near it. Indeed, the mountain of Roraima and all its surroundings are looked upon as weird and uncanny. As a former traveller has expressed it, 'its very name has come to be surrounded by a halo of dread and indefinable fear.'"

"How, then, is the necessary road to be made through this promising bit of woodland?" asked Templemore.

"*There* has been Monella's difficulty," returned the doctor. "But for that, doubtless, he would not have troubled about any one else's joining him. But, though he is very popular amongst the Indians, they cannot get over their fear of the 'demons" wood, as they call it. They are, in fact, quite devoted to him, for he has done much that has made him both loved and feared – as one must always be to gain the real devotion of these people. He has effected many wonderful cures amongst them, I was told; but, more than that, he has saved the lives of two or three by acts of great personal courage. So that, at last, he even prevailed upon them to enter the 'haunted wood' with him. But they are making very little progress, it appears; he cannot keep them together, and they give way to panic at the slightest thing and make a bolt of it; then he has to go hunting over the country for them, and it takes days to get them together again – and so on. He is in hopes that the presence and example of other white men will inspire them with greater confidence and courage."

"A promising and inviting outlook, I must say," said Jack, eyeing Leonard gravely.

"Never mind," Leonard exclaimed with enthusiasm. "If he can face it, so can we; and if it is good enough for him to brave such difficulties, it is good enough for us. It only shows what sterling stuff he must be made of!"

At this Jack gave a sort of grunt that was clearly far from implying assent to Leonard's view of the matter.

There was further talk, but it added little to the information given above; and, inasmuch as Leonard had already made up his mind, almost in advance, and had to ask no one's permission but his own, he determined at once to set about the necessary preparations; and Jack Templemore – though with evident reluctance – agreed to accompany him.

"I have a list of all the things I took with me," remarked Dr. Lorien, "and notes of a few that I afterwards found would have been useful and that I consequently regretted I had not taken; and also some specially suggested by the stranger Monella. You had better copy them all out carefully, for you will find it will save you a lot of time and trouble."

Thus it came about that in less than a week their preparations were all made, and the two, with Matava as guide, were ready to set out. Matava had with him fourteen or fifteen Indians, who had formed the doctor's party, and these, and the canoes with the stores on board, were soon after waiting at the Settlement, ready to make a start.

Then, one sunny day at the beginning of the dry season, the Kingsfords, with Mrs. Templemore, and the doctor and his son, all took the steamer to the "Penal Settlement" (a place a few miles inside the mouth of the Essequibo river, the starting place of all such parties), to see the young men off and wish them God speed. When it came to this point the struggle was a hard one for Maud and for Templemore's mother; but they bore themselves bravely – outwardly at least. The three canoes put off amidst much fluttering of handkerchiefs, and soon all that could be seen of the adventurers were three small specks, gradually growing less and less, as the boats made their way up the bosom of the great Essequibo river – here some eight miles in width. Their intended journey had been kept more or less a secret; such had been the wish of him they were going to join. Hence no outside friends had accompanied the party to see them off. Those who knew of their going away thought they were only bent upon a hunting trip of a little longer duration than usual.

For two loving hearts left behind the separation was a trying one. For a few days Mrs. Templemore stayed on at 'Meldona' with Maud, and the presence of Dr. Lorien and the vivacious Harry helped to cheer them somewhat; but, when the doctor and his son started for Rio, the others returned sadly to the routine of their everyday life, with many anxious speculations and forebodings concerning the fortunes of the two explorers.

CHAPTER III
THE JOURNEY FROM THE COAST

The greater part of the interior of British Guiana consists of dense forests which are mostly unexplored. No roads traverse them, and but little would be known of the savannas, or open grassy plains, and the mountains that lie beyond – and they would indeed be inaccessible – were it not for the many wide rivers by which the forests are intersected. These form the only means of communication between the coast and the interior at the present day; and so vast is the extent of territory covered with forest growth that it is probable many years will elapse before any road communication is opened up between the sea and the open country lying beyond the woods.

Of these vast forests little – or rather practically nothing – is known save what can be seen of them from the rivers by those voyaging to and fro in canoes. There are a limited number of spots at which the Indians of the savannas come to the banks of the rivers to launch their canoes when journeying to the coast; and to reach these places they have what are known as 'Indian paths' through the intervening woods. These so-called paths are, for the most part, of such a character, however, that only Indians accustomed to them can find their way by them. Any white man who should venture to trust himself alone in them would inevitably get quickly and hopelessly lost. Hence – save for a few miles near the line of coast – there are, as yet, absolutely no roads in the country.

Naturally, under such conditions, the forest scenery is of the wildest imaginable character, and its flora and fauna flourish unchecked in the utmost luxuriance of tropical savage life; for the country lies but a few degrees from the equator, and is far more sparsely populated than even the surrounding tropical regions of Brazil and Venezuela.

Fortunately, however, for those who for any reason have occasion to traverse this wild region, there is no lack of water-ways. Several grand rivers of great breadth lead from the coast in different directions, most of them being navigable (for canoes and small boats) for great distances, leaving only comparatively short stretches of forest land to be crossed by travellers desiring to reach the open plains and hills.

Of these rivers, the Essequibo is one of the finest, and it was by this route that the two friends, Elwood and Templemore, set out, under Matava's guidance, to reach their destination. From this river they branched off into one of its affluents, the Potaro, noted for its wonderful waterfall, the Kaieteur, which they visited *en route*. Here their canoes were left and exchanged for lighter ones, hired from the Ackawoi Indians, who live at a little distance above the fall; their stores and camp equipage being carried round. So far the journey had been uneventful, save for a little excitement in passing the various cataracts and rapids; but the two young men knew their way fairly well thus far, having visited the Kaieteur with Matava some years before.

When, however, the journey was resumed above the Kaieteur, the route was new to them; and, among the first things they noticed, were the alligators with which the river abounded. In the Essequibo they had seen none, and not many below the fall; but from this point, as far as they ascended the river, they saw them continually. Once they had a narrow escape. They were making arrangements for camping on the bank, and were nearing the shore in the last of the canoes, when a tremendous blow and a great splash overturned the boat, and they found themselves struggling in the stream. An alligator had struck the canoe a blow with its tail and upset it. Fortunately, however, it was in shallow water; and the Indians, seeing how matters were, made a great splashing, and thus frightened away the reptile. The contents of the canoe were partly recovered, not without difficulty; but some were damaged by the water.

As they proceeded up the river, the rapids and cataracts became more frequent, and the negotiation of them more difficult, till they reached a spot where further navigation was impossible, and they had to take to the forest, their stores and baggage being henceforward carried by the Indians.

This marked the commencement of the really arduous part of the journey. So long as the stores were carried in the boats, the Indians had been cheerful and docile, and easy to manage. But now their work was harder, and food was scarcer – for game is difficult to shoot in the forest. Then, after two or three days, the gloom of the woods began to have an evident effect upon their spirits; they first became depressed, and then began to grumble. This would not have been of so much consequence, perhaps, but that Matava became apprehensive that they might desert. They were not people of his tribe, it seemed; they had come with Dr. Lorien from a different district; and when they began to understand that the eventual destination was Roraima, they became still more depressed.

All the Indian tribes who have heard of Roraima, in any way, have the same superstitious dread of it; and those now with the two young men were evidently not exceptional in this respect. Templemore and Elwood began to feel anxious and, to make matters worse, food ran short for the Indians. The latter live chiefly on the native food, a kind of bread called cassava, and, of this, a good deal of what they had brought with them had been lost or spoiled by the upsetting of the canoe.

In consequence, Matava advised that they should interrupt their direct journey to turn aside to an Indian settlement that he knew of, about a day's journey off the route they were pursuing; there they would be able to replenish their stores, he thought; and to this course a reluctant assent was given by the two friends.

It turned out to be more than a day's journey, however; but they reached the place on the second day. It was called Karalang; there were not more than a dozen huts, and the people at first said that they had no food to spare; but eventually promised to procure some if the travellers would wait a few days; and this they were perforce compelled to do.

This village was situated on a hill in a piece of open country in the midst of the great forest; and, during their enforced rest, the two friends were enabled to engage in a little hunting, and to see more of the wild life of the woods than they had seen before.

The first thing they did on arrival was to procure a couple of fowls for cooking, of which there were plenty in the village. But these were of no use as food for the Indians, who never eat them. Throughout the country this is everywhere the case; the Indians keep fowls, yet never eat them; and it is said that, were it not for the vampire bats and tiger-cats, these would increase beyond all reason. Though, however, they object to fowls as a diet, they have no dislike to fish, and they were not long in discovering that there were some in a stream that ran near the village; and a supply was caught by their method of poisoning the fish in such a way that they float on top of the water as if dead, but are nevertheless palatable and wholesome as food. The poison is prepared from a root.

Amongst the miscellaneous stores the two had brought they had a liberal supply of firearms – five Winchester rifles, half-a-dozen revolvers and two guns, each with double barrels, one for shot and the other for ball. The extra weapons were in case of loss or accident, and Templemore had a good stock of tobacco, for he never felt happy for long together without his pipe.

On their way up they had had very little shooting. Jack had indeed killed an alligator, by way of relieving his feelings after the upsetting of the canoe; but there had been very little time to spare for sport. Every morning they had started as soon as the morning meal had been eaten, and had gone into camp at night only in time to cook a meal before it became dark. For in this part of the world night closes in at about half-past six on the shortest days of the year, and a little before seven on the longest. Practically, therefore, the varying seasons bring little difference in the length of the days. One cannot there get up at three or four o'clock and "have a good long day," with an evening keeping light till eight and nine o'clock, as in summer-time in Europe. Hence the days seem short for travel and sport, and the nights very long.

"I think we've stuck to it pretty well," Jack observed in the evening, as he sat smoking by the camp fire, outside their tent – for though the day had been hot the evening was chilly – "and we deserve a rest. So it is just as well. We will have two or three days' shooting, and a look round, before we go on to tackle 'the old man.'"

'The old man' was the one they were on their way to see – the one Dr. Lorien had met and described so enthusiastically. Jack was a little sceptical as to whether the good-natured doctor had not sacrificed strict accuracy to his friendly feeling for the stranger. Leonard, too, felt full of curiosity upon the same point.

"I can scarcely believe, you know," Jack continued, "that our friend will turn out all that the doctor pictured him."

"I shall be glad if he does, at any rate," Leonard made reply. "He would be almost worth coming to see for himself alone."

Jack laughed.

"That's rather stretching a point, I think. However, I am keeping an open mind on the subject. The gentleman shall have 'a fair field and no favour,' so far as my judgment of him goes. I won't let myself be prejudiced in advance, either one way or the other."

During the following days they enriched their stores by the skin of a fine jaguar, shot by Templemore, a great boa-constrictor – or 'camoodi' – twenty-four feet long, shot by Leonard, and many trophies of lesser account. Then, a fresh lot of cassava having been procured for the Indians, the journey was resumed.

In about three weeks from the time of their start, the party emerged from the forest into a more open country, where rolling savannas alternated with patches of woodland. Here the air was fresher and more bracing, so that the depressing effect of the gloomy forest was soon thrown off. They could shoot a little game, too, as they went along; there were splendid views to be had from the tops of the ridges and low hills they crossed. The ground steadily rose and became first hilly and then mountainous, till, having crossed a broad, undulating plateau, they once more entered a forest region, but this time of different character. The trees were farther apart; there were hills, and rocky ravines, and mountain torrents, steep mountains, and deep valleys. The way became toilsome and difficult; game was scarce, or at least not easy to obtain, owing to the nature of the ground; the cassava ran short, and, once more, grumbling arose and trouble threatened.

At last, one evening, Matava, with perplexity in his face, led the two young men aside to hold a consultation.

"These people," he said in his own language, "say they will not go any farther!"

"How far do you reckon we are now from your own village?" asked Jack.

"About four days. If we could but persuade them to keep on for two days more, we could fix a camp, and I could go on alone and bring back some of my own people to take all the things on."

"Ah! a good idea, Matava. Well, let us see what persuasion will effect. Any way, we had better get them to go as far as we can, and then encamp at the first likely camping-ground."

In the end the Indians were prevailed upon, by promise of extra pay, to go the additional two days' journey. Beyond that they would not budge.

"They think that mountain over there in the distance is Roraima," Matava explained; "and I cannot get them to believe it isn't. And they are frightened, and won't go any nearer to it."

There was, therefore, nothing to be done but to adopt Matava's suggestion. It was agreed that the two friends would stay in camp and keep guard over their belongings, while he started next day for his village, to bring help.

The spot was a convenient one in which to camp for a few days, with a stream of water near. That evening, therefore, the Indians were paid, this being done in silver, which they knew how to make use of. The next morning, when Elwood and Templemore got out of their hammocks, they found they were alone with Matava. All the others had disappeared.

"Ungrateful beggars!" said Jack. "They might, at least, have gone in a respectable manner, and not like thieves slinking away. Let's hope they are not thieves."

But they were not. An examination showed that nothing had been stolen.

"The poor fellows were only frightened," Leonard observed. "They are honest enough."

Matava, meantime, was making ready to set off alone for carriers from his own village. When he was ready, Templemore expressed a desire to walk a little way on the road with him 'to take a peep over that little ridge yonder'; which is a wish common to travellers in a country that is new to them. But when they reached the ridge, there was only to be seen another short expanse of undulating savanna, whereupon Jack decided to return, leaving Matava to continue on his way.

Leonard, left to himself, finished the occupation he had in hand – the cleaning of his double-barrel – and, having loaded it, strolled out of the camp in another direction, to take a look round. He left the camp to itself, not intending to go far, and expecting that his friend would be back in a quarter of an hour or so. Not far away a 'bell-bird' was ringing out its strange cry, that has been compared by travellers to the sound of a convent bell. He had heard these birds often in the forest since leaving the boats, but, in consequence of the density of the woods, had never been able to get near one. Here, where the trees were more open, there seemed to be a better chance, and he followed, as he thought, the sound. But soon he came to the conclusion that he had been in error; or the bird had flown across unseen; for the direction of the sound seemed to have changed. He, therefore, turned off towards where he fancied the bird now was; and this happened several times, till at last he became confused and found he had fairly lost his way. It is a peculiarity of the 'bell-bird,' as it is of many other birds of the forest, that their notes are often misleading; it is one of those cases of what has been termed by naturalists 'Ventriloquism in Nature,' many examples of which the traveller in these wild regions comes across. Leonard had arrived at the head of a small glen, and found himself on a grassy bank beside a little stream, sheltered from the glare of the sun by over-hanging branches. He laid down his gun and went to take a drink of the inviting limpid water, and then sat awhile on the bank looking down the picturesque ravine. It was very quiet and peaceful all around, and he fell into one of his day-dreams. At such times the minutes pass on unheeded; and he sat for a long while oblivious of all that went on about him. But presently, behind him, a silent, cunning enemy crept up unseen and unheard till near enough for a spring; then there was a loud roar, and the next moment Leonard was lying on the ground in the grasp of an enormous jaguar.

For a minute or two the beast stood over him growling, but not touching him after the first blow that had knocked him down; while Leonard lay dazed and helpless, with just enough consciousness to have a vague idea that the best thing he could do, for the moment, was to lie perfectly still. Then, with another roar, the animal seized him by the shoulder and began to drag him down the slope towards some bushes. At that moment Leonard, whose face was turned away from the brute, saw, like one in a dream, the undergrowth through which he himself had come, part asunder and three figures appear. Two of them were Templemore and Matava, who stood rooted to the spot with horror-stricken faces; the third was a tall stranger who towered above the other two, and who also stood still for a second or two eyeing the scene, while the jaguar growled threateningly.

Then the tall stranger advanced, and the animal released its hold and was itself seized and pulled from over Leonard. In another moment he felt himself lifted in two giant arms, and, looking up, saw the stranger bending upon him a gaze in which there seemed a world of tender anxiety and compassion. Everything appeared to swim around him, and he knew that consciousness was leaving him; yet, for a space, the fascination of that look seemed to hold him chained.

"You – must – be – Monella!" he said, softly. Then he fainted.

CHAPTER IV
THE FIRST VIEW OF RORAIMA

When Leonard came to himself sufficiently to see and understand what was going on around him, for the moment he thought himself once more in his days of childhood; for the first face he recognised was Carenna's, his Indian nurse, who was bending over him in much the same way and with the same expression as of yore. But, when he looked round, he saw that he was in an Indian hut; and slowly the memory of what had occurred came back to him.

Carenna, when she saw that he was himself again, gave a joyous cry; then, conscious of her indiscretion, put her finger on her lips to imply that he must remain quiet. He felt no inclination to do otherwise, and soon fell into a refreshing sleep, which lasted for some time.

When next he opened his eyes they rested on another pair, large and steady, and that seemed to have a wondrous depth and meaning in them. Then he saw that they belonged to the stranger who had pulled the jaguar off, and was now sitting alongside the mattress on which he lay.

"Keep thee quiet, my son," said he in a low, musical voice. "All goes well, and in two or three days you will be as strong as ever again."

There was something soothing in the mere glance of the eye, and in the very tones of the man's voice; and Leonard, reassured by them, remained passive for a while, till Carenna again appeared with a drink she had prepared for him.

When, later, Jack Templemore came in, and Leonard was able to talk, he found he had been ill for a week, and that he was then in the hut of Carenna at the village of Daranato.

"I've had an awfully anxious time of it," Jack said; "but Monella seems skilled in doctoring, and Carenna has been most devoted in her nursing and attention and would brook no interference; so I've had to hang around and pass the time as best I could."

When once Leonard had 'turned the corner,' as Jack called it, he recovered rapidly, and was able, in a few days, as Monella had predicted, to get about again. Nor was he any the worse for his mishap; for the beast's teeth had just missed scrunching the bone.

When he wished to offer his thanks to Monella, the latter put him off with a quiet smile.

"We think nothing of little incidents like that, my son, in a land such as this. Your thanks are due to God who sent me to you at the moment; not to me. Being there, I could not well have done otherwise than I did."

It appeared that Monella had come out from the village a day or two before to look out for them, and had fallen in with Matava. The Indian had led him towards the camp, near which they had met Jack, who was wandering about in search of Leonard. On learning that he was missing, Monella had proceeded to the camp and thence – by some method known only to himself – had tracked Leonard's footsteps – a thing that even Matava confessed himself unable to do – and thus had come upon him just in time.

"When I saw how matters stood," said Jack, "my very heart seemed to stand still. Neither I nor Matava dared to risk a shot, for the brute stood up nearly facing us and holding you in his mouth. But that wonder, Monella, quietly laid down his rifle and drew his knife, keeping the beast fixed with his eye all the time; then he walked up to it as coolly as though he were going to stroke a pet cat, put out his hand and caught it with such a grip on the throat that it nearly choked and had to let go of you at once. And presto! Before it could get its breath, whizz went the knife into its heart! And he lifted it up and threw it away from him, clear of you, as easily as one might a small dog. Then he picked you up and carried you to the camp, as though you were but a baby. The whole affair took only a few moments, and passed almost like a dream. It's fortunate he happened to come out to meet us. How could he possibly know we were coming?"

"I have always told you," said Leonard dreamily, "that there seems to be a strange sympathy between my old Indian nurse and myself. She tells me she 'felt' that I was in the neighbourhood, and sent word to Monella, who at once went to her, and then came on to try to intercept us. Only, you know, you never believed in those things. Yet here, you see, Monella must have believed her, or he would not have had such confidence in our coming as to wait about for us as he did."

"It's very strange," Jack admitted. "I confess I do not understand you 'dreamers.' I am out of the running there altogether.

"They say," he continued, "that from the top of yonder low mountain before us you can see Roraima pretty plainly. But I had no heart to go out to look for it while you were so ill, and, since you have been getting better, I have preferred to stay and keep you company. But now, I suppose, it will not be long before we set eyes, at last, upon the wonderful mountain that is to be our 'El Dorado'!"

When Elwood heard this, he became anxious to get a sight of the object of their journey; so, two days after, they started before dawn, with Monella, to walk to the top of the low mountain Jack had pointed out.

They reached the summit of the ridge just when the sun was rising, and there before them, like a veritable fairy-land in the sky, they saw the mysterious Roraima, its pink-white and red cliffs illumined by the morning sun, and floating in a great sea of white mist, above which showed, here and there, the peaks of other lower mountains like the islands they once were, but looking dark and heavy, in their half-shadow, beside the glorious beauty of this queen of them all, that reared herself far above everything around.

It is impossible to give an adequate idea of the impressive grandeur of this mountain, which might be likened to a gigantic sphinx, serene and impassive in its inaccessibility.

Or it might be likened to a colossal fortress, built by Titans to guard the entrance to an enchanted land beyond; for the cliffs at its summit appeared curiously turreted, while at the corners were great rounded masses that might pass for towers and bastions.

In places, with the light-coloured cliffs were to be seen darker rocks, black and dark green and brown, worked in, as it were, with strange figures, as though inlaid by giant hands. And everywhere the sides were perpendicular, smooth, and glassy-looking. Scarce a shrub or creeper found a precarious hold there; but down from the height, at one spot, fell a great mass of water – like a broad band of silver sparkling and glistening in the sunlight – that came with one mad leap from the top and disappeared in a cloud of spray and mist two thousand feet below. Further along could be seen other narrower falls like silver threads.

There was no crest or peak as with most mountains. The top was a table-land, beyond whose edge one could see nothing. This edge was fringed with what looked like herbage, but, seen through a powerful field-glass, proved to be great forest trees.

Then, as the sun rose higher and warmed the air, the mist cleared somewhat around the lower part of the precipitous cliffs, so that far, far down could now be seen the foliage that crowned the great primæval forest – the 'forest of demons' – that girdled the cliffs' base. Gradually the mist descended, and the full forest's height showed up like a Titanic pedestal of green, itself floating in the haze that still remained below.

By degrees the mist rolled down the mountain's side, for below this extensive forest-girdle the actual base and lower slopes began slowly to appear, with waterfalls, and cascades, and rushing torrents and great rivers dashing and foaming in their rocky beds. Then other intervening ridges and patches of forest and open savanna gradually came into view, with the full forms of the surrounding smaller mountains, the whole making up a panorama that was marvellous in its extent and in the variety of its shapes and tints.

But scarcely had the sun revealed this wondrous sight to their astonished eyes, when a cloud descended upon Roraima's height.

Almost imperceptibly it grew darker, then darker still and yet more sombre, till the erst-while fairy fortress seemed to frown in gloomy grandeur. Its salmon-tinted sides, but now so airy-looking in their lightness, turned almost black, and seemed to glower upon the brilliant landscape. The forest also lost its verdant colouring and looked dark and forbidding enough to pass for an enchanted wood peopled by dragons, demons, and hobgoblins to guard the grim castle in its centre.

Then the cloud descended lower still, and castle and haunted forest passed out of sight, as swiftly and completely as though all had been a magical illusion that had vanished at a touch of the magician's wand.

Leonard rubbed his eyes and felt half inclined to think he had been dreaming. All this time not a word had been exchanged. Each had seemed wrapped up in the weird attraction of the scene; and the new-comers, even the practical Jack, had been astounded, almost overwhelmed, at the sight of the stupendous cliffs and tower-like rocks of the mysterious mountain, and its changes from gorgeous colouring and ethereal beauty to black opacity and shapelessness.

Presently Monella turned and led the way back to the camp, the others following, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

Templemore was more impressed by what he had just witnessed than he would have cared, perhaps, to own. Never before had he seen such a mountain, though he had crossed the Andes, and had looked upon the loftiest and grandest on the American Continent. To him there was something about Roraima that was wanting in all other mountains; a suggestiveness of the unseen, of latent possibilities. He could now understand why the Indians regarded it with fear and awe. It was, indeed, impossible to look upon it without believing that some wonderful story was hidden in its inaccessible bosom; some mysterious secret that it kept jealously concealed from the rest of the world. For, perhaps, the first time in his life, he was conscious of a feeling that bordered on the superstitious. What if that which they had witnessed were meant to shadow forth a warning; to be an omen! Did it portend that, should they gain the summit of Roraima, they would find there indeed a sort of earthly Paradise, but that it would turn – as suddenly and completely as the fairy-like first view had changed that morning – to the darksome solitude of a charnel house?

But Leonard, for his part, when he came to talk upon the matter, was only more enthusiastic than before; and Monella smiled with indulgent approbation when, with the ingenuous impulsiveness of youth, he enlarged upon his delight and expectations.

When they returned to the Indian village preparations were begun for a forward move to the place Monella had made his head-quarters; not far from the commencement of the mysterious forest the Indians regarded with such dread.

During the march thither they had many more glimpses of Roraima; finally they emerged upon the last ridge that faced it, from which a full view of its towering sides and of the forest at their base could be obtained.

Between them was a deep ravine, along which flowed a narrow river dotted with great boulders. Having crossed this with some difficulty and ascended the other side, they reached an extensive undulating plateau, an open savanna with here and there small clumps of trees. They were now almost under the shadow of the great cliffs, and before them, three or four miles away, was the beginning of the encircling wood.

Rounding the end of a thicket distant a mile or so from this wood, they came suddenly upon a large and substantially built log hut, and this, Monella told them, was his temporary residence. Near it were several smaller huts roughly but ingeniously formed of boughs and wood poles, which the Indians who worked with him had constructed for themselves.

As they entered the larger dwelling Monella thus addressed them:

"This, my friends, is where we shall have to live until our work in 'Roraima Forest' shall be completed. Make yourselves as much at home as the circumstances will permit; we are likely to occupy it for some time."

And a fairly comfortable home it was; far more so indeed than the young men had ventured to expect. There was rough furniture, there were lamps for light at night, a number of books, and many other things that took them altogether by surprise.

"It must have taken you a long time," said Jack Templemore, "to get all these things transported here, and this place built and its furniture made."

"It has taken me years!" was the reply.

The Indians who accompanied them, numbering about twenty, were all of Matava's own tribe; altogether a different race from those who had accompanied them nearly to Daranato and had been paid off and gone home. When Monella had left his abode, temporarily, at Carenna's request, to come to meet the two, all the Indians had gone with him, objecting to be left so near to the 'demons' wood' without him. Now, however, they quickly distributed themselves among the huts, one acting as cook and servant in the house, and Matava attending to all other matters as general overlooker.

So far little had been said between the young men and their strange host as to the objects and details of their enterprise. The circumstances of their introduction had been so unusual that the discussion had been tacitly postponed until Leonard should have recovered sufficiently to take part in it. And even then, when Jack had broached the subject, Monella had remarked,

"You had better wait till you have been to my cabin near Roraima, when I can better explain the nature of the undertaking. Then, if you do not care to join me in it, or we seem unlikely to get on well together, we will part friends and you will merely have had an interesting bit of travelling." So all farther explanation had been adjourned.

"I call this more than a 'cabin,'" said Leonard, when they had had time to make a sort of tour of inspection. "I think we ought to give it a better name. Suppose we call it 'Monella Lodge.'" And 'Monella Lodge' it was henceforth called.

CHAPTER V
IN THE 'DEMONS' WOOD.'

The following day, Monella led the two friends to the road he had begun to cut into Roraima Forest; but first he showed them two llamas that were kept in a rough corral near his dwelling.

"I brought them all the way from the other side of the continent," he said. "You know that there they are the only beasts of burden, and in this country there are none. They will be useful to us later."

As to the so-called 'road,' it was really but a pathway; and, in places, almost a kind of tunnel. The great trees of this primæval forest were so high and dense that but little daylight penetrated to the ground beneath; and on all sides the undergrowth was so thick and tangled that almost every foot had to be cut out with the axe. Here and there one could see for a few yards between the giant trunks, and at these spots the path had been made wider. One curious thing Jack noted: the path did not start from that part of the wood opposite to 'Monella Lodge'; nor even from the margin of the wood itself.

Asked why this was, Monella thus made answer: "If in our absence others should come here, they might hunt up and down for the path a long time before they hit upon it – and very likely never find it. On this stony ground the tracks we leave are very slight and difficult to trace."

"But," said Jack, "your Indians know the way."

Monella smiled.

"Not one of them would ever show another man the way," he replied, "let him offer what he might."

"But why all these precautions?"

"Later you will understand."

But, when Jack came to look round, his heart sank within him.

"I should not care to have a few miles of railway to cut through wood like this," he said. "It's the worst I ever saw. I do not wonder you have found it more than you could manage – only yourself and these Indians – and it's a wonder you ever got them to join at all, considering all the circumstances."

"Yes; that's where it is," Monella answered. "Many men would have despaired, I think. We have had trouble, too. Two Indians met with accidents and were badly hurt; though now they are recovering. Then, some of the small streams that issue from the mountain became suddenly swollen once or twice, and washed away the rough bridges we had made across them; and we have met with many unexpected obstacles, such as great masses of rock, or a fallen tree, some giant of the forest that was so big it was easier to go round it than to cut through it."

That evening, Monella explained his project, and showed the young men the plans and diagrams Dr. Lorien had spoken of, and then went on to say,

"If you decide to join me, you ought to know something of the language in which these old documents are written. I both read and write it, and I speak it too. You will find it interesting to decipher them, and an occupation for the evenings."

Jack was not enthusiastic at this suggestion; but Leonard cordially embraced it.

"To learn the language of an unknown nation that has passed away will be curious and *very* interesting," he declared, "and will, as you say, help to pass the time. You may as well learn it too, Jack. You speak the Indian – why not learn this? Then we can talk together in a tongue that no one but ourselves and our friend here can understand."

"And where did these ancient people 'hang out'?" asked Jack irreverently.

"Have you heard of the lake of Titicaca and the ancient ruins of the great city of Tiahuanaco; a city on this continent believed by archæologists to be at least as old as Thebes and the Pyramids?" Monella asked.

"*I* have," Leonard answered, "though I know very little about them. But I believe I was in that country when very young, and had a curious escape from death there."

Monella turned his gaze quickly upon the young man.

"Tell me about it. What do you remember?" he asked.

"Oh, I do not remember anything; I was too young. But I have been *told* how that my father went somewhere in that district on a prospecting expedition, and, not liking to be separated from my mother, took her with him, and my nurse, Carenna, and myself. Whilst there they came across a small settlement of white people, as I understand, and remained with them some time. There was amongst these people a child of my own age, and so exactly like me, that my nurse grew almost as fond of it as she was of me, and used to like to take the two out together. One day, it seems, we both went to sleep on the grass, and she left us for a few minutes to gather fruit. When she returned a poisonous snake crawled hissing away, and she found the other poor little child had been bitten and was dead.

"That's all I know about it. Who the people were, and where the place was, I cannot say. I have always understood, however, that it was somewhere in the direction of Lake Titicaca. But Carenna could tell you more."

"And what about this ancient people of yours?" Templemore asked of Monella, who still gazed thoughtfully and inquiringly at Leonard. Templemore had heard of Elwood's early adventure many times before.

"High up on the eastern slopes of the great Andes is an extensive plain, as large as the whole of British Guiana," the old man replied. "It is twelve thousand feet above the level of the sea, and there, at that great height, is also the largest lake of South America, Lake Titicaca, over three thousand square miles in extent, on the shores of which was once a mighty city called Tiahuanaco. It is now in ruins; yet, even amongst its ruins, it boasts of some of the oldest and most wonderful monuments in the world. Two thousand feet above this again, are another large plain and another lake, little known to the outside world, being, indeed, almost inaccessible. It was there my people dwelt, and tradition asserts that they retired thither when driven out of Tiahuanaco by some invasion of hordes from other parts of the continent."

"Is it a very old language, do you suppose?" Jack asked.

"Undoubtedly one of the oldest in the world; and yet not difficult to acquire by those who know the language of Matava and his tribe – as you do. It has some affinity to it."

As regards the tongue spoken by the Indians, Leonard had learnt it from Carenna in his childhood; and Templemore had picked up a good deal from the same source, as well as on his hunting expeditions with Leonard and Matava.

When it came to discussing terms, Monella declared that he had none to make, except that on no consideration whatever should any other white man be invited or allowed to join them. As to the rest, he simply suggested that any wealth they might acquire by their enterprise should be shared equally between them.

"Suppose one of us were to die," observed Jack. "How then? Might not the survivors choose some one else to join them? Though," he added thoughtfully, "if it were *you*, we should not be likely to go on."

"*I* shall not die, my friend, until my task be finished," replied Monella with conviction.

"You cannot say," was Jack's rejoinder.

"No, I do not say I *know*, yet I can say I *feel* it. No man dieth till he hath fulfilled the work in life allotted to him by God," Monella finished solemnly.

The others already knew him, by this time, as a man with deep-seated religious convictions; though he made no parade of his beliefs. He seemed to have a simple, steady faith in an overruling Providence, and showed it, unostentatiously, in many ways, both in his actions, and in the advice he gave, on occasion, to the young men.

In the result, the bargain – if it can be so termed – was concluded. Elwood and Templemore formally enrolled themselves under Monella's leadership, and henceforth performed the duties he assigned to them; amongst other things assisting almost daily in the formation of the path that was to take them through the forest. When not so engaged, they would go out with some of the Indians on hunting or fishing excursions in search of food.

Monella had with him, amongst other things, a beautifully finished theodolite of wonderful accuracy and delicacy; with this he settled the direction of the road from day to day. Often, obstacles were encountered that made it impossible to go straight; these had to be worked round and the proper direction picked up again by means of Monella's calculations.

Another circumstance worthy of note and that caused the two young men at first some surprise, was the fact that Monella had with him some mirrors specially prepared and fixed in strong cases for carrying about in rough travel, and intended for heliographic signalling. They frequently took these out and practised with them by sending messages to one another from the ridges of hills far apart. Monella tried also to instruct Matava and some of the Indians in the work, but without success. They were indeed afraid of the glasses, and looked upon it all as some kind of magic.

"Wouldn't it be simpler to go up the bed of this stream that you seem to have been following more or less all the time, even if it be longer?" observed Jack one day.

Monella shook his head.

"No use, my friend. It divides into so many branches; and then again, in case of a rise of its waters, we should have all our road submerged at once."

On Sundays they always rested. This, it appeared, had been Monella's custom all along.

In his conversations in the evenings and during their Sunday strolls, he would instruct and amuse his hearers with his reminiscences and adventures in all parts of the world, or with his intimate knowledge of the wild life around them. From his account, he had undergone, at times, terrible and extraordinary hardships and privations on the plains and in the forests of India and Africa; of Australia; the Steppes of Tartary; the Highlands of Thibet; the interior of China and Japan; the wilds of Siberia; of Canada; the prairies of North America, and the pampas, plains, and rugged mountains of South America – all, as Dr. Lorien had said, seemed to be alike known to him. Nor was he less familiar with the countries and cities of Europe; yet he spoke of his travels and experiences in a simple manner that had in it nothing of boastfulness or ostentation, but as though his sole object were to amuse and entertain his two young friends.

As they penetrated farther into the forest, their work became harder and the progress slower. This latter was unavoidable, since each day they had to walk farther and farther to and fro. Moreover, the Indians, who had displayed greater courage – so Monella had said – now that they had two more white men with them, once more began to show signs of nervous apprehension and fear.

This was doubtless due to the great difference in many ways – some definite enough, others indefinable and vague – between this forest and those generally to be found in the tropical regions of South America. Not only were the trees still more gigantic – making it gloomier – and the undergrowths more dense and tangled, but the birds and animals, judging from their cries, were unfamiliar to them. Many of the sounds usual to forest life in British Guiana were absent; the constant note of the 'bell-bird' was not heard, nor was even the startling roar of the howling monkeys. Instead were heard other sounds and noises of an entirely novel and peculiar kind, unknown even to the Indians who had been used to forest travelling all their lives; sounds that even Monella either could not explain – or hesitated to. One of these was a horrid combination of hiss and snort and whistle, loud and prolonged like the stertorous breathings of some monstrous creature. Some of the Indians declared that this was the sound traditionally said to proceed from the great 'camoodi,' the monstrous serpent that is supposed to guard the way to Roraima mountain; while others inclined to the opinion that it was made by the equally dreaded 'didi,' the gigantic 'wild man of the woods,' that also had, as they averred, its special haunts in this particular forest. At times, a startling, long-drawn cry would

echo through the wood, so human in its tones as sometimes to cause them to rush in the direction it seemed to come from, in the belief that it was a cry for help from one of the party who was in danger. This strange, harrowing cry, the Indians called 'The cry of a Lost Soul'[6]; and they were always seized with panic when it was heard.

There were other cries and sounds equally mysterious and perplexing; and, so the Indians began to declare, strange sights too. Of these they could give no clear account, but they maintained that, in the shadows in the darker places, or just before nightfall, while returning from their work, they now and then caught passing glimpses of vague shapes that seemed to peer at them and then disappear within the gloomy forest depths. And even Elwood and Templemore were conscious of the occasional presence of these silent unfamiliar shapes, and sometimes fired at them, though without result. These facts they made no attempt to conceal from one another, though, in their intercourse with the Indians, they put a bold face on matters, and affected to disbelieve the stories told them.

Monella alone was – or appeared to be – entirely undisturbed by all these things. If conscious of them, he gave no sign of it, but went about whatever he had to do as though danger were to him an unknown quantity.

There was, however, one unpleasant fact that could not be ignored, and that was the unusual number of 'bush-masters' of large size in the wood. This is a poisonous snake, very gaudily coloured, whose bite is certain death. It does not – like most serpents – try to get out of the way of human beings, but, instead, rushes to attack them with great swiftness and ferocity. It is the only *aggressive* venomous snake of the American continent. It usually attains a length of five or six feet; but, in this forest, the explorers killed many of eight or nine feet, and two – that came on to the attack together – were nearly eleven feet long, with fangs as large as a parrot's claw. In consequence of the frequency of the attacks of these reptiles, so much dreaded by the Indians, and indeed by all travellers, one or two of a working party, armed with shot guns, had to be told off to keep watch; rifles being of no use for the purpose.

Templemore, as it happened, had had a bad fright when a child from an adventure with a snake; and this – as is frequently the case – had left in his mind, all the rest of his life, a great horror of serpents. He found, therefore, the presence of these 'lords of the woods,' as their Indian name implies, a source of ever-present abhorrence.

Besides the 'bush-masters,' there were the 'labarri' – also a large venomous snake, but not aggressive like the other – and rattlesnakes. There were also, no doubt, boa-constrictors, or 'camoodis,' of the ordinary kind; but, thus far, only one had been seen, and that, though large, was nothing out of the way as regards size for that country.

Nor were serpents their only visible enemies; there were others of a kind new to the two young men. One day, while with the working party at the farthest part of the track, they heard the whole forest suddenly resound with a perfect babel of discordant noises. There were shrill cries and squeals, hoarse roars and growls, then a kind of trumpeting. The Indians retreated, throwing down their axes to pick up their rifles. As they hastily retired, four large animals sprang into their path, one after the other, with loud roars and growls. But Monella, who was behind Elwood, stepped forward and rolled two over with his repeating rifle, and Jack stopped another of the beasts with his. The fourth, apparently not liking the way things were going, leaped into the thicket and disappeared; though, judging from the sounds that came from the direction it had taken, there were many more of its fellows close at hand. Gradually their cries grew fainter, until they died away in the distance.

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[6] This strange cry is often heard in the depths of the forests in this region, and has never been accounted for, the only explanation given by the Indians being the one stated above, viz., that it is 'the cry of a Lost Soul.' It is alluded to by the American poet, Whittier, in the following lines: —"In that black forest where, when day is done,*****Darkly from sunset to the rising sun,A cry as of the pained heart of the wood,The long despairing moan of solitudeAnd darkness and the absence of all good,Startles the traveller with a sound so drear,So full of hopeless agony and fear,His heart stands still, and listens with his ear.– The guide, as if he heard a death-bell toll,Crosses himself, and whispers, 'A Lost Soul!'"

Meanwhile, further shots had given the *coup de grâce* to the three that had been knocked over, and the victors went up to examine them. They seemed to be a kind of panther or leopard of a light grey colour, approaching white in places, with markings of a deeper colour.

Neither Templemore nor Elwood had ever previously seen any animal, or the skin of one, at all like these. They were, moreover, of different shape from either the jaguar or the tiger-cat; larger than the latter, and more thick-set than the former.

"These must be the 'white jaguars' that the Indians say help to guard Roraima," Jack observed, looking in perplexity at the strange creatures.

"Yes," said Matava, who had now come up, "and they are 'Warracaba tigers.'"[7]

"What on earth are they?" asked Leonard.

"Warracaba tiger," Monella said, "is the name given to a species of small 'tiger' (in America all such animals are called 'tigers') that hunts in packs, and is reputed to be unusually ferocious. They have a peculiar trumpeting cry, not unlike the sound made by the Warracaba bird – the 'trumpet-bird' – hence their name."

"They look to me more like light-coloured pumas," Jack remarked.

"No; pumas are not marked like that, and do not make the sounds we heard. Besides, you need never fear a puma, and should never shoot at one, unless it is attacking your domestic animals."

Both Templemore and Elwood looked up in surprise.

"I always thought," the latter said, "that pumas were such bloodthirsty animals."

"So they are, to other animals – even the jaguar they attack and kill. But men they never touch, if let alone. I do not believe there is a single authenticated instance of a puma's hurting any human being, man, woman or child. In the Andes and Brazil – where I have lived long enough to know – the Gauchos call the puma 'Amigo del cristiano' – 'the friend of man' – and they think it an evil thing to kill one."[8]

A few days after, they were attacked again by these furious creatures, and this time did not come off so well, for two of the Indians were badly mauled. But for Monella's cool bravery, indeed, matters would have been much worse; and Templemore had a narrow escape. Then, a day or two later, one of the Indians was stung by a scorpion; and Jack came near being bitten by a rattlesnake – would have been but for Monella, who, just in time, boldly seized the reptile by the tail, and, swinging it two or three times round his head, dashed its brains out against a piece of rock.

Indeed, upon all occasions where there was any kind of danger, Monella's ready, quiet courage was always displayed in a manner that won both the admiration of his white colleagues and the devotion of his Indian followers. Moreover, as Dr. Lorien had stated, and as Leonard had found by actual experience, he was skilled in medicine and surgery. To wounds he applied the leaves of some plant, of which he had a store with him in a dried state, the curative effects of which were reputed among the Indians to be almost marvellous.

But even these incidents were surpassed by a startling experience they had a short time afterwards. On going to their working ground one morning, two or three Indians in advance of the remainder of the party saw, lying across the path, what they took to be the trunk of a tree that had fallen during the night; and they sat upon it, indolently, to wait for the others to come up. Suddenly, one of them sprang up, exclaiming, "It's alive! I felt it move! It is breathing!" They all jumped up,

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[7] A vivid account of an adventure with these formidable animals will be found in Mr. Barrington Brown's 'Canoe and Camp Life in British Guiana,' page 71. Very little is known about them, but they are believed to have their haunts in the unexplored mountain districts, from which they occasionally descend into other parts. Mr. Brown states that the Indians fear them above everything; and, while comparatively brave as regards jaguars and tiger-cats of all kinds, give way to utter panic at the mere idea that 'Warracaba tigers' are in their neighbourhood. It is said that nothing stops or frightens them except a broad stream of water – not even fire.

[8] A very interesting account of the South American puma will be found in 'The Naturalist in La Plata,' by Mr. W. H. Hudson. He states that the puma has a strange natural liking for, or sympathy with, man; that, though ferocious and bloodthirsty in the extreme as regards other animals, yet it never attacks man, woman, or child, awake or asleep. He quotes many authorities, and gives numerous instances, of a very remarkable character, from the accounts of hunters and others whom he has himself seen and questioned.

in alarm, when the great snake – for such it proved to be – glided off into the wood. Most likely the others would have ridiculed their story, but that Templemore happened to come up in time to witness what occurred. And through the underwood, on both sides of the path, was plainly to be seen a sort of small tunnel that marked the place where the serpent had been lying asleep.

Matava and his fellows, of course, insisted that this was the great 'camoodi,' that Indian tradition had long declared existed in this forest – set there specially, by the demons of the mountain, to guard it from intrusion.

These constant dangers and adventures made the task of keeping the Indians from deserting doubly difficult, and rendered the work both harassing and tedious to the others. Only Monella showed no weariness, no sign of the strain it all involved; so far from that, these troubles seemed only to increase his vigilance, his power of endurance, and his determination.

And all the time they were cutting their way through vegetation that would have astonished and delighted the heart of a botanical collector such as Dr. Lorien. Not only within the wood, but in the whole district round, unknown and wondrous flowers and plants abounded. But the explorers had neither time nor inclination to take that interest in them they merited, and would, at any other time, have undoubtedly excited.[9]

[9] See extract given in the preface (page viii.) from Richard Schomburgk's book 'Reissen in Britisch Guiana.'

CHAPTER VI
THE MYSTERIOUS CAVERN

When the time drew near for the adventurers, if Monella's calculations proved correct, to reach the base of the towering rock towards which they were making their way with so much labour, a suppressed excitement became apparent throughout nearly the whole party. It was clearly visible in the Indians and in Elwood; and Templemore, even, showed signs of anxiety. Monella alone was imperturbable as ever, and, if any unusual feeling arose in his mind, there was no trace of it to be seen in his placid manner. Perhaps a close observer might have seen, at times, a little more fire in the gaze of his keen eyes; but it was scarcely noticeable to those around him.

Elwood did not attempt to hide the state of expectancy into which he had gradually worked himself; but while he, on the one hand, grew more excited, Jack Templemore, on the other, became steadily more pessimistic and moody. Since the adventure of the great 'camoodi' he seemed nervous and depressed, and he no longer troubled himself to conceal the discontent that now possessed him. The continued sojourn in that terrible forest was becoming too much for his peculiar temperament. Its gloom oppressed him more and more each day; and he had become silent and unsociable, often sitting for long intervals stolidly smoking and, if addressed, replying only in monosyllables. They had now been for some weeks in the wood, camping in it every night, and going back to 'Monella Lodge' only for the Sundays. To this rule Monella rigidly adhered; but, since it took the greater part of a day to reach the edge of the forest from the point they had now attained, but little work was done at the path-making on Saturdays, Sundays, or Mondays. Hence their progress had become slower, and Templemore's discontent and impatience increased in proportion.

One morning, after breakfast, Jack was sitting on a log moodily smoking, while Elwood was busying himself clearing up after the meal recently finished. Monella and all the Indians had gone to the path-end, and were out of sight; but the strokes of their axes, and their calls one to another, could be heard distinctly, now and again, echoing through the almost silent wood. Very little else broke the stillness, but once or twice they had heard that weird sound, half hiss, half whistle, that the Indians attributed to the monstrous serpent. Presently, Jack took his pipe from his mouth and addressed Elwood: —

"You heard what Monella said last night, that he hoped to-day or to-morrow would see the end of this work. Supposing, as I expect, that we find that we merely run against inaccessible cliff, I want to know what you intend to do. To attempt to work either to right or to left, along the foot of the rock, in the hope of finding an opening would be, I feel convinced, a mere wild-goose chase, and would lead us only farther into this hateful forest, and uselessly prolong our stay in it. Now, Leonard, is it agreed that the thing is to end when we get to the cliff? I've asked you again and again as to this, but you always put me off."

"I put it off – till the time comes for deciding about it; that's all, you old grumbler. What is the use of talking before we see how Monella's calculations come out?"

"If I grumble, as you call it, it is because I am anxious for others. I gave a solemn promise before I left my poor old mother that I would not rush into any obvious and unnecessary danger; any danger, that is, beyond the ordinary risks of travel in a country like Guiana. Now – "

"Well, what dangers have we courted that are beyond the 'ordinary risks of travel,' as you call them?" Elwood demanded cheerfully. "We have come safely through forests and plains thus far, and now we are in another forest – "

"Yes, but what a forest! I have been, as you know, pioneering in the furthermost recesses of Brazil and Peru; I know a little – just a *little*– you will allow, of wild life; but never have I seen the like of this wood! No wonder the Indians shun and fear it; indeed, it is a marvel to me how Monella

ever induced them to enter upon this work, and it is still more wonderful how he has managed to keep them from deserting him. Heaven knows what we have experienced of the place is enough to try the courage of the best – the most ferocious 'tigers,' the biggest serpents of one sort ever dreamed of, and the more deadly and more fiercely aggressive venomous ones; strange creatures that one can only catch glimpses of and can never see; sounds so weird and unnatural that even the Indians can offer no explanation. That great serpent, alone, fills me with a continual cold horror. We never know where it may be lurking; it may make a rush at one of us at any moment, and what chance would one have with such a beast? What consolation, to think it would probably get a bullet through its head from one of us, if, while that was being done, it crushed another to a jelly?"

"Your old horror and dislike of serpents make you nervous, old boy. I wish you could get over it. In all else, you know, you are as bold as – as – well, as Monella himself; and that is saying a lot, isn't it? You must admit that, if our enterprise has its dangers, we have a leader who knows what he is doing."

"A splendid fellow! but – a dreamer – or – a madman!"

"A madman! He has method in his madness then! I admire him more and more every day. He is a man to lead an army; to inspire the weakest; to put courage into the most timid. I do not wonder the Indians are so devoted to him. *I* would follow him anywhere, do anything he told me! His very glance seems to thrill you through with a courage that makes you ready to dare everything! He is a born leader of men! He carries out, in every action, in his manner, his air, his principles, his extraordinary cool courage, and his gentle, simple courtesy, all my ideas of a hero of romance of the olden time – the very *beau idéal* of a great king and chivalrous knight. *I* can see all this; his very looks, his slightest motions are full of a strange dignity; never have I seen one who so excited alike my admiration and my affection! Yet, I do admit he is a mystery. One knows nothing – "

"Exactly," Jack burst in, interrupting at last the speech of the enthusiastic Leonard. "It is true, what you say, in a measure. He seems to have in him the making of such a man as you, I can see, have in your mind – a hero, a leader of men. Yet here is he, an unknown wanderer on the face of the earth, giving up the last years of his life to a fatuous chase after El Dorado, with a few Indians and a couple of credulous young idiots joining in his mad quest. I like him; I admire him; I believe in his sincerity. But I say he is mad all the same, a dreamer; and for the matter of that, so are you. You suit each other, you two. Two dreamers together!" And Templemore got up and began pacing up and down, restless in body and disturbed in mind.

Leonard watched him with a half smile; but Templemore looked serious and anxious.

"We are surrounded by hidden enemies – many of them deadly creatures," he went on gloomily. "Already three of us have fallen victims, and we know not who may be the next. Even the most constant and watchful vigilance does not avail in a place like this; and the never-ceasing worry of it is becoming more than I can stand. One wants eyes like a hawk's and ears like an Indian's. One cannot feel safe for a single minute; you want eyes at the back of your head – "

Leonard went up and put his hand on the other's arm.

"All because you are so anxious about *me* and others, dear old boy," he said. "If you really thought of yourself alone you would never trouble; but you make a great affectation of nervous apprehension for yourself, while all the time you are thinking only of me."

Templemore shook his head.

"I don't know how it is," he returned, "but the thought of that great snake *haunts* me. I feel as if some terrible trouble were in store for us through it. A kind of presentiment; a feeling I have never had before – "

Elwood burst out laughing.

"A presentiment! Great Scott! *You* confessing to a presentiment! You who always deride *my* presentiments, and dreams, and omens! Well, this is too good, upon my word! Who is the dreamer *now*, I should like to know?"

Just then they heard a call, and, looking along the path, saw Monella at some distance beckoning to them.

"Bring a lantern," they heard him say, "and come with me, both of you."

"A lantern!" exclaimed Jack. He took one up and examined it to see that there was plenty of oil. "What on earth can he want with a lantern? Is he going to look for the sun in this land of shadow?"

When they came up to Monella they looked at him inquiringly, but no sign was to be had from a study of his impassive face. Yet there seemed, Jack thought, a softer gleam in his eyes when he met his gaze.

"I think our work is at an end," he said to the young men; "and," addressing Jack more particularly, "your anxiety may now, let us hope, be lightened."

Then he turned and walked on with a gesture for the two to follow. And Templemore felt confused; for the words Monella had spoken came like an answer to the thoughts that had been in his mind; so much so that he could not help asking himself, had this strange being divined what he and Elwood had been talking, and he (Jack) had been so seriously thinking, of?

However, these speculations were soon driven away by surprise at the change in the character of the wood. The trees grew less thickly, and the ground became more stony, the undergrowth gradually thinner; more daylight filtered down from above, and soon they found they could see between the trunks of the trees for some distance ahead. And then, in the front of them, it grew lighter and lighter, and shortly the welcome sound of falling water struck upon their ears. Then they came upon a stream – presumably the same that they had been, in a measure, following through the wood – rushing and tumbling in a rocky bed – for they were going up rising ground – and splashing and foaming in its leaps from rock to rock. The trees became still sparser, and the light stronger, till, finally, they emerged into an open space and saw, rising straight up before them, the perpendicular flat rock that formed the base of Roraima's lofty summit.

It was here fairly light; indeed, a single ray of sunlight played upon the splashing water in the little stream, and the spray sparkled in the gleam. But still very little sunlight ever entered the place. The great wall of rock that reared itself in a plumb-line two thousand feet into the sky, overshadowed it completely on the one side; and on the other were the great trees of this primæval forest towering up three hundred feet or more, and extending their branches above across almost to the rock, though below, the nearest trunk was quite fifty yards away. They stood, in fact, upon the edge of a semi-circular clearing that extended for a distance of perhaps a hundred yards, its radius being about fifty yards if taken from the centre of the exposed portion of the cliff. At each end of this space the trees and undergrowth closed in again upon the rock in an impenetrable tangled mass, denser, and darker even, than that through which the explorers had been slowly cutting their way.

Some of the Indians were grouped round the stream, two or three enjoying the luxury of wading in it, or sitting on the bank and dangling their feet in the clear cool water. Matava and the others were busy upon some kind of rough carpentering. Templemore and Elwood saw that the stream issued from a hole in the rock near one end of the clearing; and this was of itself a matter for surprise. They were, however, still more astonished when Monella, with a strange smile, pointed out another aperture in the rock near the centre of the open portion of the cliff. It was about sixteen or eighteen feet from the ground, and was not unlike a window or embrasure in a stone building of considerable thickness. Within – at a distance of eighteen inches or so – it seemed however to be closed by solid rock.

The two gazed in silence at this unexpected sight; Elwood showing in his eager manner the hopes that it aroused, and Templemore pondering in silent wonder as to what it all meant. That Monella's 'calculations' had led them to a most unexpected result thus far – whether by accident or otherwise – he could not but admit. Of the fact there was now no doubt. But a clearing of this character, opposite to what looked like an opening in the rock, or entrance to a cave, was a fact too startling to be the outcome of a mere coincidence, or a lucky chance. He knew that a party of explorers might spend years – centuries, indeed, if they could live long enough – in a search for such a place in that forest

and never find it, unless guided by the most exact information. Then the fact that the opening was so nearly in the centre of the clearing had a significance of its own; the question whether it was actually the entrance to a cave or merely a curious accidental hollow in the rock was thus answered, as it were, in advance. Besides, just below the 'embrasure' a small stream trickled out, and, falling down the rock, found its way amongst the stones to the larger water-course beyond. Here there seemed presumptive evidence that the space at the back of the rock was hollow – was, in fact, a cave. But in that case the entrance must have been purposely closed by human hands. If so, by whom? and when? and why?

These thoughts revolved rapidly in Templemore's mind while he stood looking at the rock. He glanced around at the giant trees, and thought of the almost impenetrable character of the forest they had come through, and he felt that, if the ideas that had come into his mind were correct, it was impossible to suppose that such a cave could be the retreat say, of any unknown Indians living at the present time. Therefore, the puzzle seemed the greater. *Who* could have been there before them – and how long ago?

But Matava now approached the cliff bearing a sort of rough ladder that he had constructed under Monella's directions; this he placed against the rock just under the opening, planting the ends firmly in the ground. He had cut down two young saplings and, partly by means of notches, and partly by twisting some strong fibres to hold them, had fastened cross-pieces at short intervals, and so fashioned the whole into a very serviceable ladder.

Monella signed to him to hold it firmly, and proceeded to test its strength. Then, satisfied as to this, he quietly mounted it till he could insert his hand into the aperture. After a moment or two he called to Elwood and Templemore to assist in steadying the ladder; and, when they had come to the assistance of Matava and another Indian who was with him, Monella leaned over into the opening and, exerting all his great strength, pushed away the stone that was closing it, exposing to view a cavern beyond. After a brief look inside, he asked for a lighted lantern and a long stick, and, while these were being handed up, the expectations and curiosity of his companions became excited to a lively degree. The Indians, who had been amusing themselves in the water, came crowding round, half pleased, half afraid at this unexpected development of events.

"You're never going to venture into that place?" Templemore asked. "It may be full of deadly serpents. For Heaven's sake do not be rash enough to risk it. Send one of the Indians – "

Monella replied with a look – a look that Jack remembered for many a day after. His eyes simply flashed; and then he said quickly,

"Did you ever know me bid another go where I would not venture myself?"

Then he took the lighted lantern, swung it into the cavern at the end of the stick, and, having satisfied himself that the air within was not foul, he threw the stick in first and followed, himself, into the semi-darkness.

A minute after, his head and shoulders re-appeared, just when Jack was half way up the ladder to follow him.

"Wait a few minutes before you come up," he asked him. "I just want to give a glance round, and there is but one lantern. Or – well – suppose you come up and wait inside. But tell the others to keep to the bottom of the ladder, and be ready to hold it in case we should wish to beat a hasty retreat."

This seemed prudent counsel, and was carried out. When Jack got off the ladder into the opening, he was told to jump down inside; and he found there a level rocky floor about three feet below the aperture, which had thus a resemblance to a veritable window. By the dim light it gave he could see that he was in a cavern of considerable height and extent, and Monella, with his lantern, disappearing through an arched opening at some distance that seemed to lead to another cave within. He had brought with him his double-barrel, one barrel loaded with small shot, the other with ball, and he gave a look at the revolver in his belt while he stood waiting at the entrance and gazing curiously about him. He saw that a small stream of water ran through one side of the cave; there were, in fact, two streams, for one ran in a ledge at some distance from the ground; but when it came to the opening

they had come through, it fell to the floor and joined the other stream, the whole finding its way out through a fissure in the rock and running down outside, as has been before described. Now the stone slab that had closed the 'window,' as Jack called the opening, had rested on a continuation of what may be termed the sill, and, on being pushed, had rolled off. It was a thin slab, roughly circular in shape; not unlike what one might suppose a millstone to be in the rough. Jack regarded it with close attention, almost indeed with awe; it spoke so plainly of human beings having inhabited the place, or, at least, of their having fashioned this method of closing the entrance to the cave. How long ago had they been there? And, when they went away, why had they closed the entrance so carefully?

Monella seemed a long time away; so long that Jack at last began to think of starting to look for him – they had already sent for another lantern in case it should be required – when he heard his footsteps in the distance, and shortly afterwards saw the gleam from his lantern. When he came closer, Jack scanned his face keenly, but, as usual, read nothing there.

"You can call Elwood," said Monella, "and I will take you to where I have been. You need have no fear; the place is quite free from reptiles."

When, however, Leonard was called, a difficulty arose; Matava and his fellows objected very strongly to being left alone outside; but it also appeared that they objected still more strongly to coming into the cavern. On no consideration whatever would they enter 'the demons' den,' as they had already named it. But, since they had to make a choice, they elected, in the end, to remain outside and wait.

When Elwood was inside and had had a few moments in which to get accustomed to the obscurity and peer wonderingly about him, Monella pointed out how the opening had been closed.

"I want you to notice," he observed, "that this stone was *cemented*, and this little stream of water that has accidentally found its way round here, has, in the course of time, loosened the cement; else I could not have pushed the stone away. We should have had to blast it."

"Yes," said Jack; "and it also shows that it was closed *from the inside*. Whoever last closed it never went out again – at least not by this entrance. Where then did they go to?"

"That's what we have to see about," returned Monella. "Now, follow me, and I will show you something that will surprise you."

CHAPTER VII
THE CANYON WITHIN THE MOUNTAIN

Monella, with the lantern in his hand, led his two companions through an arched opening into a second cavern which seemed to be larger and loftier than the first; and this, in turn, opened into a third, at one end of which they could see that daylight entered. Monella stopped here and, lifting the light high in one hand, pointed with the other to side-openings in the rock.

"They are side-galleries, so to speak," he said, "but do not appear to be of any great extent. I have been to the end of two or three. They all seem to be perfectly empty too; not so much as a trace of anything did I see, save loose pieces of stone here and there, that had, no doubt, fallen from the roof. Now we will go to the entrance on this side." And he turned and walked on towards the place where they could see the glimmering of daylight.

Quite suddenly they turned a corner and saw before them a high archway, leading out into the open air; and, before the two young men had had time to express surprise, they had stepped out of the gloomy cavern into a valley, where they stood and stared in helpless astonishment upon a scene that was as lovely and enchanting as it was utterly unexpected.

They saw before them the bottom of a valley, or canyon, of about half a mile in length, and nearly a quarter of a mile in width; its floor, if one may use the expression, consisted chiefly of fine sand of a warm tawny hue; its sides, of rocks of white or pinkish white fine-grained sandstone, with here and there veins, two or three feet wide, of some metallic-looking material that glistened in the sunlight like masses of gold and silver. In other places were veins of jasper, porphyry, or some analogous rock, that sparkled and flashed as though embedded with diamonds; other parts again were dark-coloured, like black marble, throwing up in strong relief the ferns and flowers that grew in front of them.

At the further end of the valley a waterfall tumbled and foamed in the rays of the sun which, being now almost overhead, threw its beams along the whole length of the canyon. The stream that flowed below the fall widened out into clear pools here and there, fringed by stretches of velvety sward of a vivid green. The water of this stream was of a wonderful turquoise-blue tint, different from anything, Templemore thought, that he had ever seen before; and he and Elwood gazed with admiration at its inviting pellucid pools. But most extraordinary of all were the flowers that nearly everywhere were to be seen. In shape, in brilliancy of colouring, and in many other respects, they differed entirely from even the rare and wonderful orchids and other blossoms they had come across in the vicinity of Roraima. Of trees there were not many, though a few were dotted about here and there by the side of the river; and, in places, graceful palms grew out of the rocky slopes at the sides and leaned over, somewhat after the fashion of gigantic ferns. Though the valley was so shut in, and the heat in the sun very great, yet the amount of green vegetation on all sides, the blue water, and the light-coloured, cool-looking rocks, made up a scene that was gratefully refreshing after the gloom of the forest scenes to which the explorers had been so long accustomed. Moreover, by stepping back into the cool air of the cavern, they could look out upon it all without experiencing the drawback of the intense heat.

Elwood was in ecstasies. The triumphant light in his eyes, when he turned round and looked at his friend, was a thing to see.

"You confounded, wretched old grumbler," he exclaimed, "what have you to say now? Is not *this* worth coming for? Or is it that even *this* will not suit you? Perhaps it is all too bright, the water too blue, the flowers too highly coloured, or" – here a most delicious scent was wafted across from some of the flowers – "they are perfumed too highly to please you! You haven't found fault with anything yet, and we have been here nearly five minutes!"

Jack laughed; and Leonard noticed that it was more like his old, easy, good-natured laugh.

"I think you are too severe upon me, Leonard," he replied. "Don't you think so, Monella?"

Monella, the while, had been standing gazing on the scene like one in a dream. More than once he passed his hand across his eyes in a confused way, as though to make sure he was awake. When thus addressed, however, he seemed to rouse himself, and, without noticing the bantering question that had been addressed to him, and, extending one hand slowly towards the valley that lay before them, said,

"I praise Heaven that I have been led, after many days, to the land that I have seen in my visions. *Now* do I begin to understand why they were sent. And you too, my son," he added, looking at Leonard, "you have had your visions and your dreams. Tell me, does this not remind you of them?"

"Indeed it does," returned Leonard seriously. "Though, till you spoke of it, I had not thought of it. I felt so glad to think we had been successful so far, and that your expectations were being justified. It is all very strange."

"I am out of all that," observed Jack, with a comical mixture of offended dignity and good-natured condescension. "You dreamers of dreams have the best of such beings as I am. *You* are led on by visions of what is in store for you, as it would seem, while *I* have to work in the dark, and follow others blindly, and – "

"And think of nothing but how best you can serve and protect your friends," said Monella, looking at him with a kindly smile. "We are not all alike, my friend. It is not given to all to 'dream dreams,' any more than it is given to all to have true manly courage combined with almost womanly affection for those they call their friends. We three have little to boast of as between one another, I fancy. Would it were so more often where three friends are found grouped together or associated in any undertaking. But now to consider what is next to be done. It seems to me we could not have a better place for our head-quarters in our future explorations than this cavern. Here we have all we want: shelter from rain, and sun, water – pretty well all we could ask for. We must see about getting our things along here." He paused for a moment and then continued, "On second thoughts I see no reason why you should not remain here. There is no more baggage than the Indians can carry amongst them, and that is all we have to trouble about. I will go back, and you two stay here."

"That seems scarcely fair," Jack protested. "I have been lazy all the morning. I propose I go and leave you here."

Monella shook his head.

"You cannot manage the Indians as I can," he answered. "Indeed, that is one reason why I think you would do better to remain here. When they find you do not return, and that they have to obey me or remain in the forest alone, they are more likely to do what we require. But I will ask you not to go far away, and not to fire off a gun or anything, unless in case of actual danger and necessity."

"You do not believe that the place is inhabited?" Jack exclaimed in surprise.

"Who can tell?" was the only reply, as Monella took up the lantern and turned away.

Left to themselves, Jack pulled out his inevitable pipe, the while that Elwood sought, and brought in, a couple of short logs from a fallen tree to serve as seats; and the two then sat down in the shade of the cavern-entrance.

Jack was very thoughtful; but his thoughtfulness now was of a different kind from his late moody silence. He, indeed, was ruminating deeply upon Monella, who was every day – every hour almost – becoming a greater mystery to him. He had been particularly struck with his manner and the expression of his face when they had stood together, looking out upon that curious scene. In Monella's *words* there had not been much perhaps, but in other respects he had strangely impressed the usually unimpressionable Templemore. There had been in his features a sort of exaltation, a light and fire as of one actuated by a great and lofty purpose, so entirely opposed to the idea that his end and aim were connected with gold-seeking, that Jack Templemore confessed himself more puzzled with him than he had ever been before. Too often, as he reflected, when a man sets his mind, at the time of

life Monella might be supposed to have reached, upon gold-seeking, he is actuated by sheer greed and covetousness. But by no single look or action whatever had Monella ever conveyed a suggestion that the lust of gold was in his breast. Yet, if that were not so, what was his object? Did he seek fame – the fame of being a great discoverer? Scarcely. Again and again he had declared, on the one hand, his contempt for and weariness of the world in general, and, on the other, his fixed intention never to return to civilised life. Jack began to suspect that all his talk about the wealth to be gained from their enterprise had been chiefly designed to secure their aid, and that for himself it had no weight – offered no incentive. What, then, *was* Monella's secret aim or object? What was the hidden expectation or hope, or belief, or whatever it was, that had led him into an undertaking that had appeared almost a chimera; that had so taken possession of his mind as to have become almost a religion with him; that had enabled him to support fatigue and physical exertion, privation, hunger and thirst, as probably could few other men on the face of the earth; and that had become such an article of faith – had made him such a firm believer in his own destiny, that no danger seemed to have any meaning for him? Neither storm nor flood, lightning nor tempest, savage beasts nor deadly serpents – none of the dangers or risks that the bravest men acknowledged, even if they faced them, seemed to have existence so far as this strange man showed any consciousness of them. Never had they known him to step aside one foot, to pause or hesitate one moment, to avoid any of them. He simply went his way in supreme contempt of them all; and, until quite lately – till within the hour almost – Jack had attributed all this either to madness, or to an inordinate thirst for riches for riches' sake – which, as he reflected, would be, in itself, a sort of madness. Now, however, his opinion was altering. The liking he had all along felt was changing to surprised admiration. He remembered the calm, unwavering confidence with which Monella had led them through all their seemingly interminable difficulties and discouragements to their present success – for success he felt it was, in one sense, if not in another. In the strange flowers and plants before them, alone, there were fame and fortune, and what might there not be yet beyond, now that they had in very truth penetrated into that mysterious mountain that had so long defied and baffled all would-be explorers? Monella, he still felt, might be a bit mad – a dreamer or a mystic – but, evidently, he was a man of great and strange resources. Few engineers, as Jack himself knew, could have led them thus straight to their goal from the data he had had to work upon. Yet he showed now neither elation nor surprise, and in particular, as Jack confessed to himself rather shamefacedly, no disposition to remind him of his many exhibitions of contemptuous unbelief. With these thoughts in his mind, and the remembrance of Monella's unvarying kindness of manner – to say nothing of the way he had exposed himself to danger on his behalf – Templemore began to understand better than he ever had before the affection that the warm-hearted Leonard entertained for their strange friend, and he became conscious that a similar feeling was fast rooting itself in his own heart. In fact Monella was now, at last, exercising over the practical-minded Templemore that mysterious fascination and magic charm that had made the Indians his devoted slaves, and Leonard his unquestioning admirer and disciple.

Presently, Leonard, who had fallen into one of his daydreams, woke up with a slight start and exclaimed,

"What a paradise!"

Jack smiled, and said, "I wonder whether it is a paradise without a serpent, as it is without an Eve? But your dreams, Leonard, if I remember, were mixed up with a comely damsel; and there is none here. I fear we shall have to regard her as the part that goes by contraries, as they say."

Leonard looked hard at him, and there was evident disappointment in his glance and tone when he asked,

"Do you then think this place is uninhabited?"

"I do," was the reply. "And I will tell you why. That stone that closed the entrance from the forest was placed there by some one, no doubt, and by some one inside. Yes; but how long ago? A very long time! Hundreds of years, I should say. It has taken quite that time for that stream of water to

hollow out the little channel in the rocky side of the cave and play upon the cement until it has become loosened. The wood outside tells the same tale. It must be hundreds of years since any human beings made their way to and fro through the wood, to or from this place. *Once* there were many people here; and they were not ordinary people either, I can tell you. Not Indians, I mean, for instance. They were clever workers in stone. That 'window,' as I call it, through which we came in, is artificial."

Elwood gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Yes; I noticed it, though you did not. I have little doubt that Monella noticed it too. The cavern was formerly all open, or, at least, it had a large opening, and I am almost certain its floor was originally level with the ground outside. If so, the present floor is artificial, and there are probably vaults beneath. Outside, the stonework is so artfully done that you see no trace of it; it appears to be all solid rock; but inside I saw distinctly traces of the joints. Then, look at these archways, at the one we are now sitting under! They have been worked upon too – to enlarge them, probably; to give more head-room when the floor was made higher. See! here are marks of the chisel!" And Templemore got up and pointed to many places where the marks left by the tool were clearly to be seen.

"Well," said Elwood, "I suppose we shall solve the problem and set all doubts at rest before many days are over. For my part I am in a curious state of mind about it – half impatient, half the reverse. If it is to turn out as you say, I am in no hurry to terminate the uncertainty. This strange spot, the fact that we are really, at last, inside the wonderful mountain – these things open such a vista of marvellous possibilities that I – it seems to me – I would rather, you know – "

"Oh, yes, I know, you old dreamer," Jack exclaimed, laughing. "You would rather wait and have time to dream on for a while than have your dreams rudely dispelled by hard facts. Now suppose we go and take a look round in the shade over there. We need not go out of sight of this entrance; so that Monella will find us immediately he returns."

The sun had now moved so far over that one side of the valley was lying in shadow, and they strolled out to observe more closely the new flowers and plants they had thus far seen only from a distance.

CHAPTER VIII
ALONE ON RORAIMA'S SUMMIT

When Monella returned about two hours later, the two young men had much to tell him of the wonderful flowers and plants they had found, of strange fish in the water, and curious *perfumed* butterflies that they had mistaken for flowers.

There were many of these extraordinary insects flying about. In colouring and shape they resembled some of the flowers; when resting upon a spray or twig they looked exactly like blossoms, and upon nearing them, one became conscious of a most exquisite scent. But just when one leaned a little nearer to smell the supposed flower, it would flutter quickly away, and insect and perfume disappeared altogether. Many of the flowers that were scattered about the rocks were shaped like exquisitely moulded wax bells of all sorts and kinds of colours and patterns, white, red, yellow, blue, etc., striped, spotted, speckled. So distinct were they from anything the explorers had before seen, that they had picked some and brought them into the cavern to show Monella; but he could not give them a name.

The stream from the waterfall, they found, disappeared into the ground just before it reached the cavern. No doubt this was the stream they had seen issuing from the rock upon the other side.

At the further end the valley began to rise, following the stream, which came down in a series of small falls or cataracts. About this part they had found some other caves; but had not entered them.

"And most remarkable of all," said Templemore, "we have not seen a single snake, lizard, or reptile of any sort or kind. Yet this is just the sort of place one would have expected to be full of them. Nor have we seen either animals or birds."

Monella told them the Indians still refused to enter the cave. They all three, therefore, went to the 'window,' and assisted to get their camp equipage inside, the Indians bringing the things to the top of the ladder and handing them through the opening. They preferred, themselves, to camp outside, and had already made a fire to cook some monkeys they had killed with bows and arrows.

When all their things were safe inside, Leonard and Jack took some fishing nets and soon caught some fish in the pools of the stream in the canyon. They then made a fire just outside the cavern entrance, and cooked them for their evening meal. The fish seemed to be a kind of trout, but of a species they had never seen before.

Monella expressed his regret that all attempts to persuade the Indians out of their fear of 'the demon-haunted mountain' had failed.

"They will neither come inside nor remain outside by themselves; that is, if we go away from here to explore farther. It seems to me, therefore, that we ought to have all our stores brought here before we start, and then let the Indians go back by themselves. We may be here for months, so had better get them to fetch everything we can possibly require from 'Monella Lodge.'"

Such was Monella's advice.

"It will take two or three days at least – possibly more," he continued, "to transport all our stores here. During that time we must be content to attend to nothing else, and postpone any further exploration of the mountain. Besides, when we once start, none can tell how far we may be led on. Better have our 'base of operations' settled and secure first. How far away are those other caves that you saw?"

"About a quarter of a mile," Jack answered.

"We will have a look at them in the morning," Monella said thoughtfully. "It may be wiser to hide some of our stores and belongings in different places, so that, if any accident should happen to one lot, the others may be all right. Eh, Templemore?"

"Just the very idea I had in my head when I spoke to you of those other caves," Jack responded. "We can take half an hour or so to explore them in the morning."

"Better take longer," observed Monella. "Better take the day, and do it thoroughly. Much may depend upon it hereafter. Suppose, therefore, that you remain here while Elwood and I return to 'Monella Lodge' and see about packing and bringing some of the 'belongings'? Then, if we find another journey necessary, you can go next time, and Elwood and I will remain here on guard. But we cannot get back to-morrow night. Do you mind staying here alone?"

"Not I!" said Jack, laughing.

"Very well then; we will arrange it so. We shall load up our two animals, and perhaps one journey will suffice after all. Any way, you hunt for the best and most secret hiding-places you can find. See that they are dry, you know. There are the three casks of powder – "

"What! Will you bring them too?"

"Certainly. We may have blasting to do before we have done with what we have in hand. The extra arms, too, we will divide, and secrete in different places."

"I see the idea," Jack assented. "Rely on me to do the best that can be done."

The three went back, after their meal, to where the Indians were camping just outside the 'window.' Matava looked grave, and shook his head dubiously, when Leonard told him of the arrangements come to.

"My heart is heavy, my master," he said in his own language, "at the thought of leaving you to fight the demons of the mountain. It is not good this thing that you are about to undertake. Doubtless the demons have left this place open as a trap to tempt you to enter their country. When you are well inside they will close it and have you securely captured and we shall never see you more. Alas! that my mother should ever have said aught to lead you on to this terrible enterprise. Better had she died first. I feel sure, if you go inside there, we shall never see you again!"

Elwood only smiled, and bid him be of good cheer.

"We shall return," he replied, "and, I trust, not empty-handed. And, if so, you and my old nurse shall share in my good fortune. But, if you think there is danger, why do you not come with us to help? It is not like a brave Indian to be afraid!"

The Indian shook his head and sighed.

"Matava is no coward," he responded. "His master knows that well. Against all earthly dangers Matava will help him to his last breath, but to battle with the demons of Roraima is but madness – and it is useless. No mortal man may brave them and live. *Some* one must take the tale to those left behind. It is not good that they should never know."

"That is a nice way of getting out of it, Matava," said Templemore, who had just come up and heard the last sentence. "But please don't take intelligence of our fate till you have learned it. Above all," he continued seriously, "do not alarm our friends in Georgetown by any wild, preposterous – "

"Oh, don't trouble as to that," Elwood interrupted. "Our friends know Matava and his superstitions about the mountain too well by this time. Besides, we will leave letters with him, to deliver, in case he returns before we get back."

It was now getting dark, and the three white men went back into the cavern to prepare their sleeping arrangements. First, it was determined to make a more thorough examination of the side-galleries, and this was soon done, for they were found to be of very limited extent. In passing the archway that led into the canyon, however, Leonard happened to glance out, and uttered an exclamation which called the others to his side. They also looked out into the valley, and were as much astonished as at their first sight of it that morning. It seemed to be lighted up!

On all sides, high and low, small lights were seen. They were of various colours, and hung, some singly, some in groups or clusters. Many drooped over the water, and were reflected in the pools below. The effect was extraordinary. The place seemed a veritable fairy land; and exclamations of astonishment and admiration burst from each of them while he stood and gazed upon the scene.

Then they went out to the nearest lights, and the marvel was explained. The bell-shaped flowers that had excited their curiosity during the afternoon all glowed with radiance. Inside each was a small projection apparently of a fungoid character, that was phosphorescent. It sent forth a light nearly as brilliant as that of a firefly; and this illumined the bell-shaped blossom, which then appeared of different hues according to its colouring by daylight. Even those that Elwood had picked, and thrown down at the entrance of the cavern, glowed with appreciable glimmer.

"I've heard of some kinds of toadstools and fungi being phosphorescent," Templemore remarked, "but never of such a thing in flowers."

"Yet," observed Monella, "if you come to consider the matter, there is nothing more remarkable in the one case than in the other."

The night passed without incident, and all were astir before dawn, making preparations for the day's work. After a light meal, all except Templemore set out on their way to 'Monella Lodge,' while Jack went out into the canyon to seek for caves and likely hiding-places for their stores, and to look about generally. He took with him his usual two-barrelled gun, a supply of cartridges, and some biscuits and other provisions. Water he knew he could get in plenty. He also took a lantern to enable him to explore the caves. Before leaving the 'window,' as he now always called the entrance by which they had found their way into the first cavern, he drew up the ladder, and then, with some difficulty, rolled the stone that had closed it into its place again. Most likely he could not have given any reason for this action if he had been asked; but probably a vague hatred of the gloomy forest, and satisfaction in shutting it out of view, were what chiefly prompted him.

"I will take all I want round to the other side," he said to himself. "I like that side best. It's a more cheerful outlook."

He thoroughly explored the caves, and decided that they were fairly suitable for the purpose they had in view. Then, quite accidentally, he came upon another that was so hidden by a tangled mass of creepers that its existence would never have been suspected. He fancied he had seen a small animal disappear behind a bush, and trying with a stick to see whether he could rout it out, he found what at first he thought was a large hole; but, on pushing back the creepers, which hung like a curtain across it, he found a large opening about eight or nine feet high. Inside was a roomy cavern with many recesses here and there, like high shelves in the rock, and many short side-galleries. Just the very place they wanted, he decided. Neither here nor elsewhere did he meet with any signs of his pet aversion – the serpent tribe.

He now began the ascent of the canyon, following always the course of the stream that came down it. In some places the way was easy and direct; indeed, as he could not but remark, there was every appearance that a well-defined, wide pathway, with steps here and there, had at one time existed. But in places it was broken away; the steps cut in the rock had crumbled, or trees growing in the fissures had rent them asunder. In other places masses of rock, fallen from heights above, blocked the road; and, occasionally, the trunk of a fallen tree. Then he came to a wayside cave, and was glad to rest in its shade from the heat of the sun, which began to pour down into the canyon with intolerable fierceness. He had proceeded so far that he imagined he must be half way to the top; and he looked up the canyon still beyond him and at the overhanging cliffs with curiosity, wondering how much farther he would have to go to reach its head, and what he would see when he arrived there.

While he sat quietly pondering this question, and enjoying a smoke following upon a light lunch, the idea grew upon him to complete the ascent that afternoon. He knew that, if he did so, it would be impossible to return that night, and this meant passing it in the open air. But that he did not at all mind; he was accustomed to it; and, since he saw no signs of serpents anywhere, there was an absence of the only thing that troubled him in such case. Monella and the others would not return till the following evening; he had plenty of time to do it in, and nothing else to occupy his time.

But would Monella like it? Why, however, should he object? He could do no harm in going to the top and back. It was not as though the place were inhabited and he might get involved in any adventures with the ‘natives.’

The more he thus thought about it, the more strongly did the feeling grow upon him to make the venture. True, he had not much with him in the way of provisions; but he had enough for supper and breakfast if he put himself upon short rations. In the end he resolved to risk it.

Accordingly, so soon as the sun had gone across sufficiently to shade the path, he started off once more, and made his way still upwards. He encountered many obstacles that delayed his journey, but eventually, just when night was falling, he arrived at what he calculated must be the top of the ascent. It was a grassy plateau of a few hundred yards in extent, facing cliffs that rose still higher and shut out the view and were inaccessible. Down these the stream still flowed, though much smaller in volume than was the case below. What, however, caused him dismay, was to find that he was shut in on the other side by a belt of forest that seemed to be almost as dense and impenetrable as the hated wood below. It was too late to think of going back; there he must stay and pass the night. It was cold, too, up there, and he had no rug in which to roll himself. In fact, he began to wish himself back in the cavern, where he could have cooked himself a good supper and then rested comfortably. There was not even a view; he had hoped to have a glorious prospect and, having brought his field-glass, even that he might be able to look across the forest and savanna and make out ‘Monella Lodge’; possibly see his friends, who would now be nearing it. Instead of that, he was shut in upon a narrow ledge beside an unknown forest that might be full of wild animals of a dangerous kind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.