

Scoville Samuel

The Inca Emerald



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The Inca Emerald

CHAPTER I The Beginning

It was a bushmaster which started the Quest of the Emerald – and only a possible bushmaster at that. One May evening in Cornwall, Big Jim Donegan, the lumber-king, sat in the misty moonlight with his slippers on the rail of the veranda of the great house in which he lived alone. He was puffing away at a corn-cob pipe as placidly as if he did not have more millions than Cornwall has hills – which is saying something, for Cornwall has twenty-seven of the latter. Along the gravel walk, which wound its way for nearly half a mile to the entrance of the estate, came the sound of a dragging footstep. A moment later, from out of the shadows stepped a man over six feet in height, a little stooped, and who wore a shiny frock-coat surmounted by a somewhat battered silk hat. The stranger had a long, clean-shaven, lantern-jawed face. His nose jutted out like a huge beak, a magnificent, domineering nose, which, however, did not seem in accord with his abstracted blue eyes and his precise voice.

"What do you want?" snapped Big Jim, bringing his feet to the floor with alarming suddenness.

The stranger blinked at him mildly for a moment with a gaze that seemed to be cataloguing the speaker.

"This is Mr. James Donegan," he finally stated.

"How do you know?" demanded the lumber-king.

"You have all the characteristics of a magnate," returned the other, calmly, "energy, confidence, bad temper, worse manners, and – "

"Whoa!" shouted Big Jim, whose bark was worse than his bite and who always respected people who stood up to him. "Never mind any more statistics. Who are you!"

"My name is Ditson," responded the other, sitting down without invitation in the most comfortable chair in sight. "Professor Amandus Ditson. I am connected with the Smithsonian National Museum."

"Well," returned Mr. Donegan, stiffening, "I don't intend to subscribe any money to the Smithsonian Museum or any other museum, so there's no use of your asking me."

"I had no intention of asking you for anything," returned Professor Ditson, severely. "I had understood that you were a collector of gems, and I came to place at your disposal certain information in regard to the finest emeralds probably now in existence. I too am a collector," he went on abstractedly.

"Humph!" grunted Big Jim. "What do you collect?" he inquired, regarding his visitor shrewdly.

"Bushmasters," responded Professor Ditson, simply.

"Come again," returned Big Jim, much puzzled, "I don't quite get you. What are bushmasters?"

"The bushmaster," announced Professor Ditson, with more animation than he had yet shown, "is the largest, the rarest and the deadliest of South American serpents. It attains a length of over twelve feet and has fangs an inch and a half long. You will hardly believe me," he went on, tapping Mr. Donegan's knee with a long, bony forefinger, "but there is not a single living specimen in captivity at present, even in our largest cities."

The lumber-king regarded the scientist with undisguised astonishment.

"Professor Amandus Ditson," he announced solemnly, "so far as I'm concerned, there can continue to be a lack of bushmasters not only in our great cities, but everywhere else. Snakes of any kind are absolutely nothing in my young life."

"Tut! tut!" responded the professor, reprovingly. "I think that I could convince you that you are wrong in your unfortunate aversion to reptiles."

"No you couldn't," returned Big Jim, positively, "not if you were to lecture all the rest of the year."

"Well," responded Professor Ditson soothingly, "suppose we discuss your hobby, which I understand is precious stones."

"Now you're talking," returned the other, enthusiastically, "I suppose I've about the finest collection of gems in this country, and in some lines perhaps the best on earth. Take pearls, for instance," he boasted. "Why, Professor Ditson, some boys right here in Cornwall helped me get the finest examples of pink and blue pearls that there are in any collection. When it comes to emeralds, there are half a dozen collectors who beat me out. What's all this dope you have about them, anyway?"

"Last year," replied the other, "I was in Peru at a time when they were repairing one of the oldest cathedrals in that country. A native workman, knowing that I was interested in rarities of all kinds, brought me an old manuscript, which turned out to be a map and a description of the celebrated Lake of Eldorado."

"That's the name of one of those dream places," interrupted Mr. Donegan, impatiently. "I've no time to listen to dreams."

Professor Ditson was much incensed.

"Sir," he returned austere, "I deal in facts, not in dreams. I have traveled one thousand miles to see you, but if you can not speak more civilly, I shall be compelled to terminate this interview and go to some one with better manners and more sense."

"Just what I was going to suggest," murmured Big Jim, taken aback, but much pleased by the professor's independence. "So long, however, as you've beat me to it, go on. I'll hear you out anyway."

Professor Ditson stared at him sternly.

"For nearly four hundred years," he began at last, "there have been legends of a sacred lake somewhere in Bolivia or Peru. Once a year, before the Spanish conquest, the chief of the Incas, the dominant race of Peru, covered with gold-dust, would be ferried out to the center of this lake. There he would throw into the lake the best emerald that had been found in their mines during the year and then leap in himself. At the same time the other members of the tribe would stand on the shores with their backs to the lake and throw into the water over their shoulders emeralds and gold ornaments."

"Why on earth did they do that?" exclaimed the old collector.

"As an offering to the Spirit of the Lake," returned the professor. "The Spaniards, when they heard the story, named the lake, Eldorado – The Lake of the Golden Man. As the centuries went by, the location was lost – until I found it again."

There was a long pause, which was broken at last by the lumber-king.

"Have you any proof that this story of yours is true?" he inquired sarcastically.

For answer, the scientist fished a dingy bag from his pocket and shook out on the table a circlet of soft, pale gold in which gleamed three green stones.

"I found this ten feet from the shore," he said simply.

The lumber-king gasped as he studied the stones with an expert eye.

"Professor Ditson," he admitted at last, "you're all right and I'm all wrong. That's South American gold. I know it by the color. African gold is the deepest, and South American the palest. Those stones are emeralds," he went on; "flawed ones, to be sure, but of the right color. The common emerald from the Ural Mountains is grass-green," lectured Mr. Donegan, fairly started on his hobby. "A few emeralds are gray-green. Those come from the old mines of the Pharaohs along the coast of

the Red Sea. They are found on mummies and in the ruins of Pompeii and along the beach in front of Alexandria, where treasure-ships have been wrecked."

Professor Ditson yawned rudely.

"Once in a blue moon," went on the old collector, earnestly, "a real spring-green emerald with a velvety luster, like these stones, turns up. We call 'em 'treasure emeralds,'" he continued, while Professor Ditson shifted uneasily in his chair. "Most of them are in Spanish collections, and they are supposed to be part of the loot that Cortez and Pizarro brought back to Spain when they conquered Mexico and Peru. How large did these old Peruvian emeralds run?" he inquired suddenly.

He had to repeat this question before Professor Ditson, who had been dozing lightly, roused himself.

"Ah yes, quite so, very interesting, I'm sure," responded that scientist, confusedly. "As to the size of South American emeralds," he went on, rubbing his eyes, "the Spanish record shows that Pizarro sent back to Spain several which were as large as pigeon eggs, and there is a native tradition that the last Inca threw into Eldorado an oval emerald as large as a hen's egg."

Donegan's face flushed with excitement.

"Professor Ditson," he said at last, "I've got to have one of those emeralds. Come in," he went on, getting up suddenly, "and I'll show you my collection."

Professor Ditson sat still.

"No, Mr. Donegan," he said, "it would be just a waste of time. To me, gems are just a lot of colored crystals."

The old lumber-king snorted.

"I suppose you prefer snakes," he said cuttingly.

Professor Ditson's face brightened at the word.

"There," he said enthusiastically, "is something worth while. I only wish that I had you in my snake-room. I could show you live, uncaged specimens which would interest you deeply."

"They sure would," returned Mr. Donegan, shivering slightly. "Well," he went on, "every man to his own taste. What's your idea about this emerald secret? Can we do business together?"

The professor's face assumed an air of what he fondly believed to be great astuteness.

"I would suggest," he said, "that you fit out an expedition to the Amazon basin under my direction, to remain there until I collect one or more perfect specimens of the bushmaster. Then I will guide the party to Eldorado and assist them, as far as I can, to recover the sunken treasure."

He came to a full stop.

"Well," queried the lumber-king, "what else?"

The professor looked at him in surprise. "I have nothing else to suggest," he said.

"Suppose we get emeralds which may be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars – what percentage will you claim?" persisted Mr. Donegan.

"I thought that I had made it plain," returned the professor, impatiently, "that I have no interest whatever in emeralds. If you will pay the expenses of the expedition and allow me to keep as my own property any specimens of bushmasters obtained, it will be entirely satisfactory to me. Of course," finished the scientist, generously, "if we catch several bushmasters, I should have no objections to your having one."

"Heaven forbid!" returned the lumber-king. "Professor," he went on with great emphasis, "I am perfectly willing that you shall have absolutely for your own use and benefit any and all bushmasters, crocodiles, snakes, toads, tarantulas, and any other similar bric-à-brac which you may find in South America. Moreover," he continued, "I'll fit out an expedition right here from Cornwall that will do the business for both of us. There's a good-for-nothin' old chap in this town named Jud Adams who has been all over the North huntin' an' trappin' an' prospectin'. In his younger days he was a pearl-diver. Then there're two young fellows here that went off last year with him for me and brought back

the finest blue pearl in the world. I ain't got no manner of doubt but what all three of 'em will jump at the chance to go after emeralds and bushmasters."

"Bushmasters and emeralds, please," corrected the professor.

"Just as you say," responded the lumber-king. "Now you come right in and I'll put you up for the night and we'll send over at once for the crowd that I have in mind and get this expedition started right away."

"The sooner the better," responded the professor, heartily. "Any day, some collector may bring back a bushmaster and beat me out with the Smithsonian."

"I feel the same way," agreed the lumber-king. "I want Jim Donegan to have the first crack at those Inca emeralds."

While all this talk about gold and emeralds and bushmasters was going on in Big Jim's big house, over in a little house on the tiptop of Yelplin Hill, Jud Adams, the old trapper, was just sitting down to supper with two of his best friends. One of these was Will Bright, a magnificently built boy of eighteen with copper-colored hair and dark blue eyes, and the other his chum, Joe Couteau, silent, lithe, and swart as his Indian ancestors. Jud himself was not much over five feet tall, with bushy gray hair and beard and steel-sharp eyes. These three, with Fred Perkins, the runner, had won their way to Goreloi, the Island of the Bear, and brought back Jim Donegan's most prized gem, as already chronicled in "The Blue Pearl." They had learned to care for one another as only those can who have fought together against monsters of the sea, savage beasts, and more savage men. Joe and Will, moreover, had shared other life-and-death adventures together, as told in "Boy Scouts in the Wilderness," and, starting without clothes, food, or fire, had lived a month in the heart of the woods, discovered the secret of Wizard Pond, and broken up Scar Dawson's gang of outlaws. Will never forgot that Joe had saved him from the carcajou, nor Joe that it was Will who gave him the first chance of safety when the bloodhounds were hot on their heels through the hidden passage from Wizard Pond. Each one of the four, as his share of the blue pearl, and the sea-otter pelt brought back from Akotan, had received fifteen thousand dollars. Fred had invested his money in his brother's business in Boston, left Cornwall, and bade fair to settle down into a successful business man. Will and Joe had both set aside from their share enough to take them through Yale. As for Jud, the day after he received his winnings in the game which the four had played against danger and death, he had a short interview with his old friend Mr. Donegan.

"All my life long," began Jud, "I've been makin' money; but so far, I haven't got a cent saved up. I know how to tame 'most any other kind of wild animal, but money allers gets away from me. They do say, Jim," went on the old man, "that you've got the knack of keepin' it. Probably you wouldn't be worth your salt out in the woods, but every man's got somethin' that he can do better 'n most. So you just take my share of the blue-pearl money an' put it into somethin' safe an' sound that'll bring me an income. You see, Jim," he went on confidentially, "I ain't so young as I used to be."

"I should say you ain't!" exclaimed Big Jim, knowing how Jud hated to be called old. "You're 'most a hundred now."

"I ain't! I ain't!" howled Jud, indignantly. "I ain't a day over fifty – or thereabouts."

"Well, well," said his friend, soothingly, "we won't quarrel over it. I'll take care of your money and see that you get all that's comin' to you for the two or three years which you've got left"; and with mutual abuse and affection the two parted as good friends as ever.

To-night the old trapper and his guests had just finished supper when the telephone rang.

"Jud," came Mr. Donegan's voice over the wire, "what would you and Bill and Joe think of another expedition – after emeralds this time?"

"We'd think well of it," returned Jud, promptly. "The kids are here at my house now."

"Good work!" exclaimed the lumber-king. "All three of you come right over. I've got a scientist here who's going to guide you to where the emeralds grow."

"You got a what?" queried Jud.

"A scientist!" shouted Big Jim, "a perfesser. One of those fellows who know all about everything except what's useful."

"We'll be right over," said Jud, hanging up the receiver and breaking the news to his friends.

"Listens good," said Will, while Joe grunted approvingly.

"It's a pity old Jim ain't young and supple enough to go on these trips with us himself," remarked Jud, complacently.

"He ten years younger than you," suggested Joe, slyly, who always delighted in teasing the old trapper about his age.

"Where do you get such stuff?" returned Jud, indignantly. "Jim Donegan's old enough to be my father – or my brother, anyway," he finished, staring sternly at his grinning guests.

"You're quite right, Jud," said Will, soothingly. "Let's go, though, before that scientist chap gets away."

"He no get away," remarked Joe, sorrowfully, who had listened to the telephone conversation. "He go with us."

"I don't think much of that," said Jud, wagging his head solemnly. "The last perfesser I traveled with was while I was prospectin' down in Arizona. He sold a cure for snakebites an' small-pox, an' one night he lit out with all our cash an' we never did catch him."

Half an hour later found the whole party in Mr. Donegan's study, where they were introduced to Professor Ditson.

"What might you be a perfesser of?" inquired Jud, staring at him with unconcealed hostility.

The other stared back at him for a moment before he replied.

"I have specialized," he said at last, "in reptiles, mammals, and birds, besides some research work in botany."

"Didn't leave out much, did you?" sneered Jud.

"Also," went on the professor, more quietly, "I learned early in life something about politeness. You would find it an interesting study," he went on, turning away.

"Now, now," broke in Mr. Donegan, as Jud swallowed hard, "if you fellows are going treasure-hunting together, you mustn't begin by scrappin'."

"I, sir," returned Professor Ditson, austerely, "have no intention of engaging in an altercation with any one. In the course of collecting-trips in the unsettled portions of all four continents, I have learned to live on good terms with vagabonds of all kinds, and I can do it again if necessary."

"Exactly!" broke in Mr. Donegan, hurriedly, before Jud could speak; "that certainly shows a friendly spirit, and I am sure Jud feels the same way."

"I do," returned the latter, puffingly, "just the same way. I got along once with a perfesser who was no darn good, and I guess I can again."

"Then," said Mr. Donegan, briskly, "let's get down to business. Professor Ditson, show us, please, the map and manuscript with which you located Lake Eldorado."

For reply, the gaunt scientist produced from a pocket a small copper cylinder, from which he drew a roll of yellowed parchment. Half of it was covered with crabbed writing in the imperishable sepia ink which the old scribes used. The other half was apparently blank. The lumber-king screwed his face up wisely over the writing.

"H'm-m," he remarked at last. "It's some foreign language. Let one of these young fellers who're going to college try."

Will took one look at the paper.

"I pass," he said simply; while Joe shook his head without even looking.

"You're a fine lot of scholars!" scoffed Jud, as he received the scroll. "Listen now to Perfesser Adams of the University of Out-of-Doors."

Then, to the astonishment of everybody, in his high-pitched voice he began to translate the labored lines, reading haltingly, like a school-boy:

"I, Alvarado, companion of Pizarro, about to die at dawn, to my dear wife Oriana. I do repent me of my many sins. I am he who slew the Inca Atahualpa and many of his people, and who played away the Sun before sunrise. Now it comes that I too must die, nor of the wealth that I have won have I aught save the Secret of Eldorado. On a night of the full moon, I myself saw the Golden Man throw into the lake the great Emerald of the Incas and a wealth of gold and gems. This treasure-lake lies not far from Orcos in which was thrown the Chain. I have drawn a map in the way thou didst show me long years ago. Take it to the king. There be treasure enough there for all Spain; and through his justice, thou and our children shall have a share. Forgive me, Oriana, and forget me not.

Alvarado"

There was a silence when he had finished. It was as if the shadow of the tragedy of that wasted life and vain repentance had drifted down the centuries and hung over the little company who had listened to the reading of the undelivered letter. The stillness was broken by Mr. Donegan.

"Where did you learn to read Spanish, you old rascal?" he inquired of Jud.

"Down among the Greasers in Mexico," chuckled the latter, delightedly.

"What does he mean by 'playing away the Sun' and the 'Chain'?" asked Will, of the scientist.

"When the treasures of the Incas were divided," explained Professor Ditson, precisely, "Alvarado had for his share a golden image of the sun over ten feet in diameter. This he gambled away in a single night. The Chain," continued Professor Ditson, "surrounded the chief Inca's residence. It was made of gold, and was two hundred and thirty-three yards long. It was being carried by two hundred Indians to Cuzco to form part of the chief's ransom – a room filled with gold as high as he could reach. When the gold came to his shoulder, he was killed. At the news of his death, the men who were bringing the Chain threw it into Lake Orcos."

"But – but," broke in the lumber-king, "where is the map? If you've got it with you, let's have a look at it."

Without speaking, Professor Ditson reached over and took the match from the table. Lighting it, he held the flame for an instant close to the parchment. On the smooth surface before their eyes, suddenly appeared a series of vivid green lines, which at last took the form of a rude map.

"What he learned from Oriana," explained Professor Ditson, "was how to make and use invisible ink."

"Fellows," broke in Mr. Donegan, earnestly, "I believe that Professor Ditson has found Eldorado, and I'm willing to go the limit to get one of the emeralds of the Incas. I'll finance the expedition if you'll all go. What do you say?"

"Aye," voted Will.

"Aye," grunted Joe.

"I assent," said Professor Ditson, with his usual preciseness.

Jud alone said nothing.

"How about it, Jud?" inquired Big Jim.

"Well," returned Jud, doubtfully, "who's goin' to lead this expedition?"

"Why, the professor here," returned the lumber-king, surprised. "He's the only one who knows the way."

"That's it," objected Jud. "It's likely to be a rough trip, an' treasure-huntin' is always dangerous. Has the perfesser enough pep to keep up with us younger men?"

Professor Ditson smiled bleakly.

"I've been six times across South America, and once lived among the South American Indians for two years without seeing a white man," he remarked acidly. "Perhaps I can manage to keep up with an old man and two boys who have never been in the country before. You should understand,"

he went on, regarding the old trapper sternly, "that specialization in scientific investigation does not necessarily connote lack of physical ability."

Jud gasped. "I don't know what he means," he returned angrily, "but he's wrong – specially that part about me bein' old."

"I feel it is my duty to warn you," interrupted Professor Ditson, "that this trip may involve a special danger outside of those usual to the tropics. When I was last in Peru," he went on, "I had in my employ a man named Slaughter. He was an expert woodsman, but sinister in character and appearance and with great influence over the worst element among the Indians. One night I found him reading this manuscript, which he had taken from my tent while I was asleep. I persuaded him to give it up and leave my employ."

"How did you persuade him?" queried Jud, curiously.

"Automatically," responded Professor Ditson. "At least, I used a Colt's automatic," he explained. "His language, as he left, was deplorable," continued the scientist, "and he declared, among other things, that I would have him to reckon with if I ever went again to Eldorado. I have no doubt that through his Indian allies he will be advised of the expedition when it reaches Peru and make trouble for us."

"What did he look like?" inquired Mr. Donegan.

"He was a giant," replied Professor Ditson, "and must have been over seven feet in height. His eyebrows made a straight line across his forehead, and he had a scar from his right eye to the corner of his jaw."

"Scar Dawson!" shouted Will.

"You don't mean the one who nearly burned you and Joe alive in the cabin?" said the lumbering, incredulously.

"It must be," said Will. "No other man would have that scar and height. I'll say 'some danger' is right," he concluded, while Joe nodded his head somberly.

"That settles it!" said Jud. "It's evident this expedition needs a good man to keep these kids out of trouble. I'm on."

CHAPTER II

A New World

A week later found the whole party aboard of one of the great South American liners bound for Belem. The voyage across was uneventful except for the constant bickerings between Jud and Professor Ditson, in which Will and Joe acted sometimes as peace-makers and sometimes as pace-makers. Then, one morning, Will woke up to find that the ocean had changed overnight from a warm sap-green to a muddy clay-color. Although they were not within sight of land, the vast river had swept enough earth from the southern continent into the ocean to change the color of the water for a hundred miles out at sea. Just at sunrise the next day the steamer glided up the Amazon on its way to the old city of Belem, seventy miles inland.

"The air smells like a hot, mouldy cellar!" grumbled Jud; and soon the Cornwall pilgrims began to glimpse things strange and new to all three of them. Groups of slim assai-palms showed their feathery foliage; slender lianas hung like green snakes from the trees; and everywhere were pineapple plants, bread-fruit trees, mangos, blossoming oranges and lemons, rows of enormous silk-cotton trees, and superb banana plants, with glossy, velvety green leaves twelve feet in length curving over the roof of nearly every house. Beyond the city the boys had a sight of the jungle, which almost without a break covers the greater part of the Amazon basin, the largest river-basin on earth. They landed just before sunset, and, under Professor Ditson's direction, a retinue of porters carried their luggage to the professor's house, far down the beach, the starting-point for many of his South American expeditions.

As the sun set, the sudden dark of the tropics dropped down upon them, with none of the twilight of higher latitudes. Jud grumbled at the novelty.

"This ain't no way to do," he complained to Professor Ditson. "The sun no more than goes down, when bang! it's as black as your hat."

"We'll have that seen to at once," responded the professor, sarcastically. "In the meantime, be as patient as you can."

With the coming of the dark, a deafening din began. Frogs and toads croaked, drummed, brayed, and roared. Locusts whirred, and a vast variety of crickets and grasshoppers added their shrill note to the uproar, so strange to visitors and so unnoticed by natives in the tropics.

"Hey, Professor!" shouted Jud, above the tumult, "what in time is all this noise, anyway?"

"What noise?" inquired Professor Ditson, abstractedly.

The old trapper waved both hands in a circle around his head and turned to the boys for sympathy. "Sounds like the Cornwall Drum and Fife Corps at its worst!" he shrieked.

"What do you mean, Jud?" said Will, winking at Joe.

"Poor Jud!" chimed in the latter, shaking his head sadly, "this trip too much for him. He hearing noises inside his head."

For a moment, Jud looked so horrified that, in spite of their efforts to keep up the joke, the boys broke down and laughed uproariously.

"You'll get so used to this," said Professor Ditson, at last understanding what they were talking about, "that after a few nights you won't notice it at all."

At the professor's bungalow they met two other members of the expedition. One of these was Hen Pine, a negro over six feet tall, but with shoulders of such width that he seemed much shorter. He had an enormous head that seemed to be set directly between his shoulders, so short and thick was his neck. Hen had been with Professor Ditson for many years, and, in spite of his size and strength, was of a happy, good-natured disposition, constantly showing his white teeth in irresistible smiles. Pinto, Professor Ditson's other retainer, was short and dark, an Indian of the Mundurucu tribe, that warlike people which early made an alliance of peace with the Portuguese pioneers of Brazil which

they had always scrupulously kept. Pinto had an oval aquiline face, and his bare breast and arms had the cross-marks of dark-blue tattooing which showed him to have won high rank as a warrior on the lonely River of the Tapirs, where his tribe held their own against the fierce Mayas, those outlawed cannibals who are the terror of the South American forest.

That evening, after dinner, Professor Ditson took Jud and the boys out for a walk along the beach which stretched away in front of them in a long white curve under the light of the full moon. The night was full of strange sounds, and in the sky overhead burned new stars and unknown constellations, undimmed even by the moonlight, which showed like snow against the shadows of the jungle. Professor Ditson pointed out to the boys Agena and Bungula, a noble pair of first-magnitude stars never seen in the North, which flamed in the violet-black sky. As they looked, Will remembered the night up near Wizard Pond before the bear came, when Joe had told him Indian stories of the stars. To-night, almost overhead, shone the most famous of all tropical constellations, the Southern Cross.

Professor Ditson told them that it had been visible on the horizon of Jerusalem about the date of the Crucifixion. From that day, the precession of the equinoxes had carried it slowly southward, and it became unknown to Europeans until Amerigo Vespucci on his first voyage saw and exultantly wrote that he had seen the "Four Stars," of which the tradition had lingered. The professor told them that it was the sky-clock of the tropics and that sailors, shepherds, and other night-wanderers could tell the time within fifteen minutes of watch-time by the position of the two upper stars of this constellation.

"It looks more like a kite than a cross," interjected Jud. "What's that dark patch in the Milky Way?" he inquired, pointing to a strange black, blank space showing in the milky glimmer of the galaxy.

"That must be the Coal-sack," broke in Will, before Professor Ditson could reply.

"I remember reading about it at school," he went on.

"When Magellan sailed around Cape Horn, his sailors saw it and were afraid that they would sail so far south that the sky wouldn't have any stars. What cheered them up," went on Will, "was the sight of old Orion, which stays in the sky in both hemispheres," and he pointed out the starry belt to Jud and Joe, with the sky-king Sirius shining above it instead of below as in the northern hemisphere.

As Jud and the boys stared up at the familiar line of the three stars, with rose-red Betelgeuse on one side and fire-white Rigel on the other, they too felt something of the same comfort that the old-time navigators had known at the sight of this constellation, steadfast even when the Great Bear and the Pole Star itself had faded from the sky. As they continued to gaze upward they caught sight of another star, which shone with a wild, blue gleam which rivaled the green glare of the dog-star, Sirius. Professor Ditson told them that it was Canopus, Mohammed's star, which he thought led him to victory, even as Napoleon believed that the planet Venus, seen by daylight, was his guiding star. Then the professor traced for them that glittering river of stars, Eridanus, and showed them, guarding the southern horizon, gleaming Achernar, the End of the River, a star as bright as is Arcturus or Vega in the northern sky. Then he showed them Fomalhaut, of the Southern Fish, which in the North they had seen in the fall just skipping the horizon, one of the faintest of the first-magnitude stars. Down in the southern hemisphere it had come into its own and gleamed as brightly near this northern horizon as did Achernar by the southern. It was Will who discovered the Magellanic Clouds, like fragments of the Milky Way which had broken up and floated down toward the South Pole. These had been also seen and reported by Magellan on that first voyage ever taken around the world four hundred years ago.

Farther up the beach, Jud and the boys came to a full stop. Before them towered so high that the stars seemed tangled in its leaves a royal palm, one of the most magnificent trees on earth. Its straight, tapered shaft shot up over a hundred and twenty-five feet and was crowned with a mass of glossy leaves, like deep-green plumes. As it touched the violet sky with the full moon rising back of its proud head, it had an air of unearthly majesty.

Beneath their feet the beach was covered with "angel-wings," pure white shells eight inches long, shaped like the wings of angels in old pictures. With them were beautifully tinted tellinas, crimson olivias with their wonderful zigzag, tentlike color patterns, large dosinias round as dollars, and many other varieties, gold, crimson, and purple.

Some distance down the beach the professor kept a large canoe, in which the whole party paddled out into the bay. As they flashed over the smooth surface, the clamor of the night-life dwindled. Suddenly, from the bushes on a little point, sounded a bird-song which held them all spellbound, a stream of joyous melody, full of rapid, ringing notes, yet with a purity of tone which made the song indescribably beautiful. It seemed to include the ethereal quality of the hermit-thrush, the lilt and richness of the thrasher, and the magic of the veery's song, and yet to be more beautiful than any or all of them together. On and on the magic melody flowed and rippled, throbbed and ebbed in the moonlight. Suddenly it stopped. Then from the same thicket burst out a medley of different songs. Some of them were slow and mellow. Others had silvery, bell-like trills. There were flutelike calls, gay hurried twitterings, and leisurely delicious strains – all of them songs of birds which the Cornwall visitors had never even heard. Then Will, the ornithologist of his party, began to hear songs which were familiar to him. There was the musical chuckle of the purple martin, the plaintive call of the upland plover, the curious "kow-kow" of the yellow-billed cuckoo, and the slow, labored music of the scarlet tanager. Suddenly all of them ceased and once again the original song burst out.

"That thicket must be chuck-full of birds," whispered Jud.

Professor Ditson shook his head.

"It's only one bird," he said, "but the greatest singer of all the world – the white banded mocking bird."

Even as he spoke, the songster itself fluttered up into the air, a brown bird with a white throat, and tail and wings broadly banded with the same color. Up and up it soared, and its notes chimed like a golden bell as its incomparable song drifted down through the moonlight to those listening below. Then on glistening wings the spent singer wavered down like some huge moth and disappeared in the dark of the thicket. In the silence that followed, Will drew a deep breath.

"I'd have traveled around the world to hear that song," he half whispered.

Professor Ditson nodded his head understandingly.

"Many and many an ornithologist," he said, "has come to South America to listen to that bird and gone away without hearing what we have heard to-night. Between his own two songs," went on the professor, "I counted the notes of seventeen other birds of both North and South America that he mimicked."

They paddled gently toward the shore, hoping to hear the bird again, but it sang no more that night. As they neared the beach, the moonlit air was heavy with the scent of jessamine, fragrant only after darkness, and the overpowering perfume of night-blooming cereuses, whose satin-white blossoms were three feet in circumference. Suddenly, just before them, the moon-flowers bloomed. Great snowy blossoms five inches across began to open slowly. There was a puff of wind, and hundreds of them burst into bloom at once, glorious white salvers of beauty and fragrance.

"Everything here," said Will, "seems beautiful and peaceful and safe."

Professor Ditson smiled sardonically. "South America is beautiful," he said precisely, "but it is never safe. Death and danger lurk everywhere and in the most unexpected forms. It is only in South America," he went on, "that you can be eaten alive by fish the size of small trout, or be killed by ants or little brown bats."

Jud listened with much scorn. "Professor," he broke out at last, "I don't take much stock in that kind of talk. Your nerves are in a bad way. My advice to you is – "

What Mr. Judson Adams's advice was, will never be known, for at that moment a dreadful thing happened. Into the beauty of the moonlight, from the glassy water of the bay soared a shape of horror, a black, monstrous creature like a gigantic bat. It had two wings which measured a good

twenty feet from tip to tip, and was flat, like an enormous skate. Behind it streamed a spiked, flexible tail, while long feelers, like slim horns, projected several feet beyond a vast hooked mouth. Like some vampire shape from the Pit, it skimmed through the air across the bow of the canoe not ten feet from where Jud was sitting. The old trapper was no coward, but this sudden horror was too much even for his seasoned nerves. With a yell, he fell backward off his thwart, and as his legs kicked convulsively in the air, the monster came down with a crash that could have been heard a mile, raising a wave which nearly swamped the canoe. A moment later, the monstrous shape broke water again farther seaward, blotting out for an instant with its black bulk the rising moon.

"What kind of a sea-devil is that, anyhow?" queried Jud, shakily, as he righted himself, with the second crash of the falling body still in his ears.

"That," responded Professor Ditson, precisely, "is a well-nourished specimen of the manta-ray, a fish allied to the skate family – but you started to speak about nerves."

Jud, however, said nothing and kept on saying the same all the way back to the house. Arriving there in safety, he went down to the spring for some water with Pinto, but a moment later came bolting back.

"What's the matter now, Jud?" inquired Will, solicitously. "Did you find another water-devil in the spring?"

"That's just what I did!" bellowed Jud. "When I started to dip out a pail of water, up pops about six feet of snake. Now you know, boys," he went on, panting, "I hate snakes, an' I jumped clear across the spring at the sight of this one; but what do you suppose that Injun did?" he continued excitedly. "Pats the snake's head an' tells me it's tame an' there to keep the spring free from frogs. Now what do you think of that?"

"He was quite right," observed Professor Ditson, soothingly. "It is a perfectly harmless, well-behaved serpent, known as the mussarama. This one is a fine specimen which it will be worth your while to examine more carefully."

"I've examined it just as carefully as I'm goin' to," shouted Jud, stamping into the house as Pinto came grunting up the path carrying a brimming bucket of water.

As they sat down for supper, a long streak of black and white flashed across the ceiling just over Jud, who sat staring at it with a spoonful of soup half-way to his mouth.

"Professor Ditson," he inquired softly, "is that thing on the ceiling another one of your tame snakes?"

"No, sir," responded the professor, impatiently; "that is only a harmless house-lizard."

"I just wanted to know," remarked Jud, rising and taking his plate to a bench outside of the door, where he finished his supper, in spite of all attempts on the part of the boys to bring him back.

In front of Will stood a pitcher of rich yellow cream. "You have a good cow, Professor Ditson," he remarked politely as he poured some into a cup of the delicious coffee which is served with every meal in Brazil.

"Yes," agreed the scientist, "I have a grove of them." Then he explained to the bewildered Will that the cream was the sap of the cow tree.

Will was not so fortunate with his next investigation. Taking a second helping of a good-tasting stew which Pinto had brought in from the kitchen, he asked the Indian what it was made of.

"Tinnala," replied the Mundurucu.

"What is it in North American?" persisted Will.

The Indian shook his head. "I not know any other name," he said. "Wait, I show you," he went on, disappearing into the kitchen to return a moment later with a long, hairy arm ending in a clenched fist. Will started up and clasped his stomach frantically, remembering all that he had read about cannibalism among the South American Indians. Even when Professor Ditson explained that the stew was made from a variety of monkey which was considered a great delicacy, he was not entirely reassured and finished his meal on oranges.

Jud was much amused. "You always were a fussy eater, Bill," he remarked from the porch. "I remember you wouldn't eat mountain-lion meat up in the North when we were after the pearl. You ought to pattern after Joe. He don't find fault with his food."

"All I want about food," grunted Joe, "is enough."

That night the whole party slept side by side in hammocks swung in a screened veranda in the second story.

During the night, Jud, who was always a light sleeper, was awakened by a curious, rustling, crackling sound which seemed to come from the storeroom, which opened into the sleeping-porch. After listening awhile he reached over and aroused Professor Ditson, who was sleeping soundly next to him.

"Some one's stealin' your grub," he whispered.

The professor stepped lightly out of his hammock, followed by Jud and the boys, who had been waked up by the whispering. Opening the door noiselessly, the scientist peered in. After a long look, Professor Ditson turned around to find Jud gripping his revolver and ready for the worst.

"You can put up your gun," the scientist growled. "Bullets don't mean anything to thieves like these, and he flashed a light on a strange sight. On a long table stood native baskets full of cassava, that curious grainlike substance obtained from the root of the poisonous manihot and which takes the place of wheat in South America. The floor was covered with moving columns of ants, large and small, which had streamed up the legs of the table and into the baskets. Some of them were over an inch long, while others were smaller than the grains they were carrying. The noise which had aroused Jud had been made by their cutting off the dry leaves with which the baskets were lined, to use in lining their underground nest. Professor Ditson told them that nothing could stop an ant-army. Once on the march, they would not turn back for fire or water and would furiously attack anything that tried to check them. "A remarkably efficient insect," concluded the professor, "for it bites with one end and stings with the other."

"This is what I call a nice quiet night!" murmured Jud, as he went back to his hammock. "Sea-devils, snakes, lizards – and now it's ants. I wonder what next?"

"Next," however, was daylight, blazing with the startling suddenness of the tropics, where there is no dawn-light. With the light, the tumult of the night ceased, and in place of the insect din came a medley of bird-notes. When Jud opened his eyes Professor Ditson's hammock was empty, for the scientist usually got up long before daylight, and through the open door strutted a long-legged, wide-winged bird, nearly three feet tall, with a shimmering blue breast and throat. Without hesitating, she walked over to Jud's hammock and, spread her wings with a deep murmuring note, made a low bow.

"Good morning to you," responded Jud, much pleased with his visitor.

The bird bowed and murmured again and allowed him to pat her beautiful head as she bent forward. Then she went to the next hammock and the next and the next, until she had awakened all of the sleepers, whereupon, with deep bows and courtesies and murmurings, she sidled out of the room.

"Now, that," said Jud, as he rolled out of the hammock and began to look for his shoes, "is an alarm-clock worth having!"

Pinto, the Mundurucu, who appeared at this moment with a pail of spring water, told them that the bird was a tame female trumpeter which he had picked up as a queer, frightened little creature, all legs and neck, but which had become one of the best-loved of all of his many pets. Each morning the tame, beautiful bird would wander through the house, waking up every sleeper at sunrise. When Pinto took trips through the forest the bird always went with him, traveling on his back in a large-meshed fiber bag; and when he made camp it would parade around for a while, bowing and talking, and then fly up into the nearest tree, where it would spend the night. Tente, as it was named, was always gentle except when it met a dog. No matter how large or fierce the latter might be, Tente would fly at it, making a loud, rumbling noise, which always made the dog turn tail and run for its life.

As Pinto started to fill the pitchers, Will, the bird expert of the party, began to ask him about some of the songs which were sounding all around the house. One bird which squalled and mewed interested him.

"That bird chestnut cuckoo," said Pinto. "It have the soul of a cat."

And as Will listened he could well believe it. A little farther off, another bird called constantly, "Crispen, Crispen, Crispen."

"One time," narrated the Indian, "a girl and her little brother Crispen go walking in the woods. He very little boy and he wander away and get lost, and all day and all night and all next day she go through the woods calling, 'Crispen! Crispen! Crispen!' until at last she changed into a little bird. And still she flies through the woods and calls 'Crispen!'"

At this point, Jud finally found his missing shoes and started to put one on, but stopped at a shout from the Mundurucu.

"Shake it out!" warned Pinto. "No one ever puts on shoes in this country without shaking out."

Jud did as he was told. With the first shoe he drew a blank. Out of the second one, however, rattled down on the floor a centipede fully six inches long, which Pinto skillfully crushed with the heavy water-pitcher. Jud gasped and sank back into his hammock.

"Boys," he said solemnly, "I doubt if I last out this trip!"

CHAPTER III

The Vampires

After breakfast, Professor Amandus Ditson called the party together for a conference in a wide, cool veranda on the ground floor.

"I should like to outline to you my plan of our expedition," he announced precisely.

Jud gave an angry grunt. The old adventurer, who had been a hero among prospectors and trappers in the Far North, was accustomed to be consulted in any expedition of which he was a member.

"It seems to me, Professor Ditson," he remarked aggressively, "that you're pretty uppity about this trip. Other people here have had experience in treasure-huntin'."

"Meaning yourself, I presume," returned Professor Ditson, acidly.

"Yes, sir!" shouted Jud, thoroughly aroused, "that's exactly who I do mean. I know as much about —*ouch!*" The last exclamation came when Jud brought down his open hand for emphasis on the side of his chair and incidently on a lurid brown insect nearly three inches in length, with enormous nippers and a rounded body ending in what looked like a long sting. Jud jerked his hand away and gazed in horror at his threatening seat-mate.

"I believe I'm stung," he murmured faintly, gazing anxiously at his hand. "What is it?"

"It would hardly seem to me," observed Professor Ditson, scathingly, "that a man who is afraid of a harmless arachnid like a whip-scorpion, and who nearly falls out of a canoe at the sight of a manta-ray disporting itself, would be the one to lead an expedition through the unexplored wilds of South America. We are going into a country," he went on more earnestly, "where a hasty step, the careless touching of a tree, or the tasting of a leaf or fruit may mean instant death, to say nothing of the dangers from some of the larger carnivora and wandering cannibals. I have had some experience with this region," he went on, "and if there is no objection, I will outline my plan."

There was none. Even Jud, who had removed himself to another chair with great rapidity, had not a word to say.

"I propose that we take a steamer by the end of this week to Manaos, a thousand miles up the Amazon," continued the professor. "In the meantime, we can do some hunting and collecting in this neighborhood. After we reach Manaos we can go by boat down the Rio Negros until we strike the old Slave Trail which leads across the Amazon basin and up into the highlands of Peru."

"Who made that trail?" inquired Will, much interested.

"It was cut by the Spanish conquerors of Peru nearly four hundred years ago," returned the scientist. "They used to send expeditions down into the Amazon region after slaves to work their mines. Since then," he went on, "it has been kept open by the Indians themselves, and, as far as I know, has not been traversed by a white man for centuries. I learned the secret of it many years ago, while I was living with one of the wilder tribes," he finished.

The professor's plan was adopted unanimously, Jud not voting.

Then followed nearly a week of wonderful hunting and collecting. Even Jud, who regarded everything with a severe and jaundiced eye, could not conceal his interest in the multitude of wonderful new sights, sounds, and scents which they experienced every day. As for Will, he lived in the delightful excitement which only a bird-student knows who finds himself surrounded by a host of unknown and beautiful birds. Some of them, unlike good children, were heard but not seen. Once, as they pushed their way in single file along a little path which wound through the jungle, there suddenly sounded, from the dark depths beyond, a shriek of agony and despair. In a moment it was taken up by another voice and another and another, until there were at least twenty screamers performing in chorus.

"It's only the ypicaha rail," remarked the professor, indifferently.

Hen Pine, who was in the rear with Will, shook his head doubtfully.

"Dis ol' jungle," he whispered, "is full o' squallers. De professor he call 'em birds, but dey sound more like ha'nts to me."

Beyond the rail colony they heard at intervals a hollow, mysterious cry.

"That," explained Pinto, "is the Witch of the Woods. No one ever sees her unless she is answered. Then she comes and drives mad the one who called her."

"Nice cheery place, this!" broke in Jud.

"The alleged witch," remarked Professor Ditson severely, "happens to be the little waterhen."

Later they heard a strange, clanging noise, which sounded as if some one had struck a tree with an iron bar, and at intervals from the deepest part of the forest there came a single, wild, fierce cry. Even Professor Ditson could not identify these sounds.

"Dem most suttinly is ha'nts," volunteered Hen. "I know 'em. You wouldn't catch dis chile goin' far alone in dese woods."

One of the smaller birds which interested Will was the many-colored knight, which looked much like one of the northern kinglets. His little body, smaller than that of a house-wren, showed seven colors – black, white, green, blue, orange, yellow, and scarlet, and he had a blue crown and a sky-blue eye. Moreover, his nest, fastened to a single rush, was a marvel of skill and beauty, being made entirely of soft bits of dry, yellow sedge, cemented together with gum so smoothly that it looked as if it had been cast in a mold. Then there was the Bientevio tyrant, a bird about nine inches long, which caught fish, flies, and game, and fed on fruit and carrion indiscriminately. It was entirely devoted to its mate, and whenever a pair of tyrants were separated, they would constantly call back and forth to each other reassuringly, even when they were hunting. When they finally met again, they would perch close to each other and scream joyously at being reunited. Another bird of the same family, the scarlet tyrant, all black and scarlet, was so brilliant that even the rainbow-hued tanagers seemed pale and the jeweled humming-bird sad-colored in the presence of "coal-o'-fire," as the Indians have named this bird.

Jud was more impressed with the wonders of the vegetable kingdom. Whenever he strayed off the beaten path or tried to cut his way through a thicket, he tangled himself in the curved spines of the pull-and-haul-back vine, a thorny shrub which lives up to its name, or was stabbed by the devil-plant, a sprawling cactus which tries quite successfully to fill up all the vacant spaces in the jungle where it grows. Each stem of this well-named shrub had three or four angles, and each angle was lined with thorns an inch or more in length, so sharp and strong that they pierced Jud's heavy hunting-boots like steel needles. If it had not been for Hen, who was a master with the machete, Jud never would have broken loose from his entanglements. Beyond the cactus, the old trapper came to a patch of poor-man's plaster, a shrub with attractive yellow flowers, but whose leaves, which broke off at a touch, were covered on the under side with barbed hairs, which caught and clung to any one touching them. The farther Jud went, the more he became plastered with these sticky leaves, until he began to look like some huge chrysalis. The end came when he tripped on a network of invisible wires, the stems of species of smilax and morning-glory, and rolled over and over in a thicket of the plasters. When at last he gained his feet, he looked like nothing human, but seemed only a walking mass of green leaves and clinging stems.

"Yah, yah, yah!" roared Hen. "Mars' Jud he look des like Br'er Rabbit did when he spilled Br'er Bear's bucket o' honey over hissself an' rolled in leafs tryin' to clean hissself. Mars' Jud sure look like de grand-daddy ob all de ha'nts in dese yere woods."

"Shut up, you fool darky," said Jud, decidedly miffed. "Come and help unwrap me. I feel like a cigar."

Hen laughed so that it was with difficulty that he freed Jud, prancing with impatience, from his many layers of leaves. Later on, Hen showed himself to be an even more present help in trouble.

The two were following a path a short distance away from the rest of the party, with Jud in the lead. Suddenly the trapper heard the slash of the negro's machete just behind him, and turned around to see him cutting the head from a coiled rattlesnake over which Jud had stepped. If Jud had stopped or touched the snake with either foot, he would most certainly have been bitten, and it spoke well for Hen's presence of mind that he kept perfectly quiet until the danger was over. This South American rattlesnake had a smaller head and rougher scales than any of the thirteen North American varieties, and was nearly six feet in length. Professor Ditson was filled with regret that it had not been caught alive.

"Never kill a harmless snake," he said severely to Hen, "without consulting me. I would have been glad to have added this specimen to the collection of the Zoölogical Gardens."

"Harmless!" yelled Jud, much incensed. "A rattlesnake harmless! How do you get that way?"

"He didn't do you any harm, did he?" retorted the professor, acidly. "It is certainly ungrateful of you to slander a snake just after he has saved your life."

"How did he save my life?" asked Jud.

"By not biting you," returned Professor Ditson, promptly.

A little later poor Jud had a hair-raising experience with another snake. He had shot a carancha, that curious South American hawk which wails and whines when it is happy, and, although a fruit-eater with weak claws and only a slightly hooked beak, attacks horses and kills lambs. Jud had tucked his specimen into a back pocket of his shooting-jacket and was following a little path which led through an open space in the jungle. He had turned over his shot-gun to Joe, and was trying his best to keep clear of any more tangling vines, when suddenly right beside him a great dark snake reared its head until its black glittering eyes looked level into Jud's, and its flickering tongue was not a foot from his face. With a yell, Jud broke the world's record for the back-standing broad-jump and tore down the trail shouting, "Bushmaster! bushmaster!" at the top of his voice. As he ran he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his back.

"He's got me!" he called back to Hen Pine, who came hurrying after him. "Ouch! There he goes again!" and he plunged headlong into a patch of pull-and-haul-back vine, which anchored him until Hen came up.

"Dat ain't no bushmaster, Mars' Jud," the latter called soothingly. "Dat was only a trail-haunting blacksnake. He like to lie next to a path an' stick up his ol' head to see who's comin', kin' o' friendly like."

"Friendly nothin'!" groaned Jud. "He's just bit me again."

As soon as Hen laid hold of Jud's jacket he found out what was the matter. The hawk had only been stunned by Jud's shot and, coming to life again, had promptly sunk his claws into the latter's back, and Jud had mistaken the bird's talons for the fangs of the bushmaster. Professor Ditson, who had hurried up, was much disappointed.

"If you ever meet a bushmaster, you'll learn the difference between it and a harmless blacksnake," he observed. "Probably, however," he went on thoughtfully, "it will be too late to do you much good."

"Why do all the snakes in South America pick on me?" complained Jud. "There don't seem to be nothin' here but snakes an' thorns."

It was Pinto who gave the old trapper his first favorable impression of the jungle. They had reached a deserted bungalow in the heart of the woods, which Professor Ditson had once made his headquarters a number of years before. There they planned to have lunch and spend the night. At the meal Jud showed his usual good appetite in spite of his misfortunes, but he complained afterward to Hen, who had attached himself specially to the old man, about the absence of dessert.

"I got a kind of a sweet tooth," he said. "You ain't got a piece of pie handy, have you?"

"No sah, no sah," replied Hen, regretfully. "You's about three thousand miles south ob de pie-belt."

"Wait," broke in Pinto, who had been listening. "Wait a minute; I get you something sweet," and he led the way to an enormous tree with reddish, ragged bark. Some distance up its trunk was a deep hollow, out of which showed a spout of dark wax nearly two feet long. In and out of this buzzed a cloud of bees.

"I get you!" shouted Jud, much delighted, "a bee-tree! Look out, boy," he went on, as the Indian, clinging to the ridges of the bark with his fingers and toes, began to climb. "Those bees'll sting you to death."

"South American bees hab no sting," explained Hen, as Pinto reached the wax spout, and, breaking it off, thrust his hand fearlessly through the cloud of bees into the store of honey beyond. A moment later, and he was back again, laden with masses of dripping honeycomb, the cells of which, instead of being six-sided, as with our northern bees, resembled each one a little bottle. The honey was clear and sweet, yet had a curious tart flavor. While Jud was sampling a bit of honeycomb, Pinto borrowed Hen's machete and cut a deep gash through the rough red bark of the tree. Immediately there flowed out from the cut the same thick, milky juice which they had seen at their first breakfast in South America. The Indian cut a separate gash for each one of the party, and they all finished their meal with draughts of the sweet, creamy juice.

"It sure is a land flowing with milk an' honey," remarked Jud, at last, after he had eaten and drunk all that he could hold.

"This vegetable milk is particularly rich in gluten," observed Professor Ditson, learnedly.

"I guess it'd gluten up a fellow's stomach all right if he drank too much of it," remarked Jud, smacking his lips over the sweet, sticky taste which the juice of the cow-tree left in his mouth.

After lunch, most of the party retired to their hammocks in the cool dark of the house for the siesta which South American travelers find an indispensable part of a tropical day. Only the scientist and Will stayed awake to catch butterflies through the scented silence of the forest where the air, filled with the steam and perfume of a green blaze of growth, had the wet hotness of a conservatory. When even the insects and the untiring tree-toads were silenced by the sun, Professor Ditson, wearing a gray linen suit with a low collar and a black tie, was as enthusiastic as ever over the collecting of rare specimens, and was greatly pleased at Will's interest in his out-of-door hobbies.

Together they stepped into the jungle, where scarlet passion-flowers shone like stars through the green. Almost immediately they began to see butterflies. The first one was a magnificent grass-green specimen, closely followed by others whose iridescent, mother-of-pearl wings gleamed in the sunlight like bits of rainbow. On a patch of damp sand a group made a cloud of sulphur-yellow, sapphire-blue, and gilded green-and-orange. The professor told Will that in other years he had found over seven hundred different kinds within an hour's walk from this forest bungalow, being more than double the number of varieties found in all Europe.

Deep in the jungle, they at last came to a little open stretch where the Professor had often collected before and which to-day seemed full of butterflies. Never had Will imagined such a riot of color and beauty as there dazzled his eyes. Some of the butterflies were red and yellow, the colors of Spain. Others were green, purple, and blue, bordered and spangled with spots of silver and gold. Then there were the strange transparent "glass-wings." One of these, the *Hetaira esmeralda*, Will was convinced must be the most beautiful of all flying creatures. Its wings were like clear glass, with a spot of mingled violet and rose in the center of each one. At a distance, only this shimmering spot could be seen rising and falling through the air, like the wind-borne petals of some beautiful flower. Indeed, as the procession of color drifted by, it seemed to the boy as if all the loveliest flowers on earth had taken to themselves wings, or that the rainbow-bridge of the sky had been shattered into fragments which were drifting slowly down to earth.

The largest of them all were the swallowtails, belonging to the same family as the tiger, and blue and black swallowtail, which Will had so often caught in Cornwall. One of that family gleamed in the sunlight like a blue meteor as it flapped its great wings, seven inches from tip to tip and of a

dazzling blue, high above the tree-tops. Another member of the same family, and nearly as large, was satiny white in color. Professor Ditson told Will that both of these varieties were almost unknown in any collection, as they never came within twenty feet of the ground, so that the only specimens secured were those of disabled or imperfect butterflies which had dropped to the lower levels.

"Why couldn't I climb to the top of one of those trees with a net and catch some?" inquired Will, looking wistfully up at the gleaming shapes flitting through the air so far above him.

"Fire-ants and wasps," returned the professor, concisely. "They are found in virtually every tree. No one can stand the pain of an ant's bite, and one sting of a Maribundi wasp has been known to kill a strong man."

That night, tired out by their long day of hunting, the whole party went to bed early. Will's sleeping-room was an upper screened alcove, just large enough to hold a single hammock. Somehow, even after his long hard day, he did not feel sleepy. Great trees shadowed his corner, so thick that even the stars could not shine through their leaves, and it seemed to Will as if he could stretch out his hands and lift up dripping masses of blackness, smothering, terrifying in its denseness. From a far-away tree-top the witch-owl muttered over and over again that mysterious word of evil, "Murucututu, murucututu," in a forgotten Indian tongue. He had laughed when Pinto told him a few nights before that the owl was trying to lay a spell on those who listened, but to-night in the dark he did not laugh.

Then close at hand in a neighborhood tree-top sounded a beautiful contralto frog-note slowly repeated. "Gul, gul, gul, gul, guggle, gul, guggle," it throbbed. The slow, sweet call gave the boy a sense of companionship, and he fell asleep with the music of it still sounding in his ears.

Toward midnight he woke with a vague sense of uneasiness. It was as if some hidden subconsciousness of danger had sounded an alarm note within his nerve centers and awakened him. Something seemed to be moving and whispering outside of the screened alcove. Then a body struck the screen of mosquito-netting, and he heard the rotten fiber rip. Another second, and his little room was filled with moving, flitting, invisible shapes. Great wings fanned the air just above his face. There was the faint reek of hot, furry bodies passing back and forth and all around him. For a moment Will lay thinking that he was in a nightmare, for he had that strange sense of horror which paralyzes one's muscles during a bad dream so that movement is impossible. At last, by a sudden effort, he stretched out his hand and struck a match from a box which stood on a stand beside his hammock. At the quick spurt of flame through the dark, from all parts of the little room came tiny, shrill screeches, and the air around him was black with whirling, darting shapes. Suddenly into the little circle of light from the match swept the horrible figure of a giant bat, whose leathern wings had a spread of nearly two and a half feet, and whose horrible face hovered and hung close to his own. Never had the boy believed that any created thing could be so grotesquely hideous. The face that peered into his own was flanked on each side by an enormous leathery ear. From the tip of the hairy muzzle grew a spearlike spike, and the grinning mouth was filled with rows of irregular, tiny, gleaming sharp teeth, gritting and clicking against each other. Deep-set little green eyes, which glistened and gleamed like glass, glared into Will's face. Before he could move, a great cloud of flying bats, large and small, settled down upon him. Some of them were small gray vampire-bats with white markings, others were the great fruit-eating bats, and there were still others dark-red, tawny-brown, and fox-yellow. Whirling and wheeling around the little point of flame, they dashed it out, and crawled all over the boy until he felt stifled and smothered with the heat of their clinging bodies.

Suddenly he felt a stinging pain in his bare shoulder and in one of his exposed feet. As he threw out his hands desperately, tiny clicking teeth cut the flesh of wrists and arms. The scent of blood seemed to madden the whole company of these deaths-in-the-dark, and, although the actual bites were made by the little vampire-bats, yet at the sight of them feasting, the other night-fliers descended upon the boy like a black cloud and clustered around the little wounds, as Will had seen moths gather around syrup spread on trees of a warm June night.

The sting of their bites lasted for only a second, and the flapping of their wings made a cool current of air which seemed to drug his senses. Dreamily he felt them against him, knew that they were draining his life, yet lacked the will-power to drive them away. Suddenly there flashed into his mind all that he had heard and read of the deadly methods of these dark enemies of mankind. With a shriek, he threw out his arms through the furry cloud that hung over him and sprang out of his hammock.

At his scream, Professor Ditson rushed in with a flash-light, followed by Pinto, Hen, and Joe, while Jud slept serenely through the whole tumult. They found Will dripping with blood from a dozen little punctures made by the sharp teeth of the bats, and almost exhausted from fright and the loss of blood. Then came pandemonium. Seizing sticks, brooms, machetes, anything that came to hand, while Will sank back into his hammock, the others attacked the bats. Lighted by the flash of Professor Ditson's electric light, they drove the squeaking, shrieking cloud of dark figures back and forth through the little room until the last one had escaped through the torn netting or was lying dead on the floor.

Twenty-seven bats altogether were piled in a heap when the fight was over.

CHAPTER IV

Death River

At last their first week in this new world of beauty and mystery came to an end. At Belem they boarded a well-appointed steamer and embarked for the thousand-mile voyage to Manaus, which is only six degrees from the equator and one of the hottest cities of the world. There followed another week of a life that was strange and new to the travelers from Cornwall. There were silent, steaming days when the earth seemed to swoon beneath the glare of the lurid sun, and only at night would a breath of air cross the water, which gleamed like a silver burning-glass. For their very lives' sake, white men and Indians alike had learned to keep as quiet and cool as possible during those fiery hours. Only Hen, coming from a race that since the birth of time had lived close to the equator, moved about with a cheerfulness which no amount of heat or humidity could lessen. At night, when the fatal sun had reluctantly disappeared in a mass of pink and violet clouds, the life-bringing breeze would blow in fresh and salt from the far-away sea, and all living creatures would revive. The boys soon learned that, in the mid-heat of a tropical summer, the night was the appointed time for play and work, and they slept during the day as much as possible in shaded, airy hammocks.

One evening, after an unusually trying day, the night wind sprang up even before the sun had set. Here and there, across the surface of the river, flashed snow-white swallows with dark wings. As the fire-gold of the sun touched the horizon, the silver circle of the full moon showed in the east, and for a moment the two great lights faced each other. Then the sun slipped behind the rim of the world, and the moon rose higher and higher, while the Indian crew struck up a wailing chant full of endless verses, with a strange minor cadence like the folk-songs of the Southern negro. Hen Pine translated the words of some of them, and crooned the wailing melody:

"The moon is rising,
Mother, Mother,
The seven stars are weeping,
Mother, Mother,
To find themselves forsaken,
Mother, Mother."

Down the echoing channels, through the endless gloomy forests, the cadence of the song rose and fell.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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