

Through the Crater's Rim

A. Hyatt Verrill

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THROUGH the CRATER'S RIM

By A. Hyatt Verrill

Author of "Beyond the Pole."

In this story the author of "Beyond the Pole" gives another one of his amazing contributions to Scientifiction. Here we find a strange race living within an extinct volcanic crater somewhere in Central America.

When it is remembered that only a few years ago an entirely new race was discovered by scientists in Panama, which are now known better under the name of White Indians, it should be understood that Mr. Verrill is not taxing your credulity by the strange race which he pictures in this story.

We promise you a good half hour's reading in this well-told tale.

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CHAPTER I

Into the Unknown

"I tell you it's there," declared Lieutenant Hazen decisively. "It may not be a civilized city, but it's no Indian village or native town. It's big—at least a thousand houses—and they're built of stone or something like it and not of thatch."

"You've been dreaming, Hazen," laughed Fenton. "Or else you're just trying to jolly us."

"Do you think I'd hand in an official report of a dream?" retorted the Lieutenant testily. "And it's gospel truth I've been

telling you."

"Never mind Fenton," I put in. "He's a born pessimist and skeptic anyhow. How much did you actually see?"

We were seated on the veranda of the Hotel Washington in Colon and the aviator had been relating how, while making a reconnaissance flight over the unexplored and unknown jungles of Darien, he had sighted an isolated, flat topped mountain upon whose summit was a large city—of a thousand houses or more—and without visible pass, road or stream leading to it.

"It was rotten air," Hazen explained in reply to my question. "And I couldn't get lower than 5,000 feet. So I can't say what the people were like. But I could see 'em running about first time I went over and they were looking mightily excited. Then I flew back for a second look and not a soul was in sight—took to cover I expect. But I'll swear the buildings were stone or 'dobe and not palm or thatch."

"Why didn't you land and get acquainted?" enquired Fenton sarcastically.

"There was one spot that looked like a pretty fair landing," replied the aviator. "But the air was bad and the risk too big. How did I know the people weren't hostile? It was right in the Kuna Indian country and even if they were peaceable they might have smashed the plane or I mightn't have been able to take off. I was alone too."

"You say you made an official report of your discovery," I said. "What did the Colonel think about it?"

"Snorted and said he didn't see why in blazes I bothered reporting an Indian village."

"It's mighty interesting," I declared. "I believe you've actually seen the Lost City, Hazen. Balboa heard of it. The Dons spent years hunting for it and every Indian in Darien swears it exists."

"Well, I never heard of it before," said Hazen, "What's the yarn, anyway?"

"According to the Indian story there's a big city on a mountain top somewhere in Darien. They say no one has ever visited it, that it's guarded by evil spirits and that it was there ages before the first Indians."

"If they've never seen it how do they know it's there?" Fenton demanded. "In my opinion it's all bosh. How can there be a 'lost city' in this bally little country and why hasn't someone found it? Why, there are stories of lost cities and hidden cities and such rot in every South and Central American country. Just fairy tales—pure bunk!"

"I know there are lots of such yarns," I admitted. "And most of them I believe are founded on fact. Your South American Indian hasn't enough imagination to make a story out of whole cloth. It's easy to understand why and how such a place might exist for centuries and no one find it. This 'little country' as you call it could hide a hundred cities in its

jungles and no one be the wiser. No civilized man has ever yet been through the Kuna country. But I'm going. I'll have a try for that city of Hazen's."

"Well, I wish you luck," said Fenton. "If the Kunas don't slice off the soles of your feet and turn you loose in the bush and if you *do* find Hazen's pipe dream, just bring me back a souvenir, will you?"

With this parting shot he rose and sauntered off towards the swimming pool.

"Do you really mean to have a go at that place?" asked Hazen as Fenton disappeared.

"I surely do," I declared. "Can you show me the exact spot on the map where you saw the city?"

For the next half hour we pored over the map of Panama and while—owing to the incorrectness of the only available maps—Hazen could not be sure of the exact location of his discovery, still he pointed out a small area within which the strange city was located.

"You're starting on a mighty dangerous trip," he declared as I talked over my plans. "Even if you get by the Kunas and find the place how are you going to get out? The people may kill you or make you a prisoner. If they've been isolated for so long I reckon they won't let any news of 'em leak out."

"Of course there's a risk," I laughed. "That's what makes it so attractive. I'm not worried over the Kunas though. They're not half as bad as painted. I spent three weeks among them

two years ago and had no trouble. They may drive me back, but they don't kill people offhand. Getting out will be the trouble as you say. But I've first got to get in and I'm not making plans to get out until then."

"Lord, but I wish I were going too!" cried Hazen. "Say, I tell you what I'm going to do. I'll borrow that old Curtiss practice boat and fly over there once in a while. If you're there, just wave a white rag for a signal. Maybe the people'll be so darned scared if they see the plane that they'll not trouble you. Might make a good play of it—let 'em think you're responsible for it you know."

"I don't know but that's a mighty good scheme, Hazen," I replied, after a moment's thought. "Let's see. If I get off day after tomorrow I should be in the Kuna country in a week. You might take your first flight ten days from now. But if things go wrong I don't see as you can help me much if you can't land."

"We'll worry over that when the time comes," he said cheerfully. A few days later I was being paddled and poled up the Cañazas River with the last outposts of civilization many miles behind and the unknown jungles and the forbidden country of the wild Kunas ahead.

It was with the greatest difficulty that I had been able to secure men to accompany me, for the natives looked with the utmost dread upon the Kuna country and only two, out of the scores I had asked, were willing to tempt fate and risk their lives in the expedition into the unknown.

For two days now we had been within the forbidden district—the area guarded and held by the Kunas and into which no outsider is permitted to enter—and yet we had seen or heard no signs of Indians. But I was too old a hand and too familiar with the ways of South American Indians to delude myself with the idea that we had not been seen or our presence known. I well knew that, in every likelihood, we had been watched and our every movement known since the moment we entered the territory. No doubt, sharp black eyes were constantly peering at us from the jungle, while bows and blowguns were ever ready to discharge their missiles of death at any instant. As long as we were not molested or interfered with, however, I gave little heed to this. Moreover, I believed, from my brief acquaintance with the Kunas of two years previously, that they seldom killed a white man until after he had been warned out of their country and tried to return to it.

At night we camped beside the river, making our beds upon the warm dry sand and each day we poled the cayuca up the rapids and deeper into the forest. At last we reached the spot where, according to my calculations, we must strike through the jungle overland to reach the mountain seen by Hazen. Hiding our dugout in the thick brush beside the river we packed the few necessities to be carried with us and started off through the forest.

If Hazen were not mistaken in his calculations, we should reach the vicinity of the mountain in two days' march, even though the going was hard and we were compelled to hew a way with our machetes for miles at a stretch.

But it's one thing to find a mountain top when flying over the sea of jungle and quite another to find that mountain when hidden deep in the forest and surrounded on every side by enormous trees. I realized that we might easily pass within a few hundred yards of the spot and never suspect it and that we might wander for days, searching for the mountain without finding it. It was largely a matter of luck after all. But Hazen had described the surrounding country so minutely, that I had high hopes of success.

By the end of the first day in the bush we had reached rough and hilly country, which promised well, and it was with the expectation of reaching the base of the mountain the following day that we made camp that night. Still we had seen no Indians, no signs of their trails or camps, which did much to calm the fears of my men and which I accounted for on the theory that the Kunas avoided this part of the country through superstitious fears of the lost city and its people.

At daybreak we broke camp and had tramped for perhaps three hours when, without warning, José, who was last in line, uttered a terrified cry. Turning quickly I was just in time to see him throw up his hands and fall in a heap with a long arrow quivering in his back. The Kunas were upon us.

Scarcely had the realization come to me when an arrow thudded sharply into a tree by my side and Carlos, with a wild yell of deadly fear, threw down his load and dashed madly away. Not an Indian could be seen. To stand there, a target for their missiles, was suicidal, and turning, I fled at my utmost speed after Carlos. How we managed to run through that tangled jungle is still a mystery to me, but we

made good time, nevertheless. Fear drove us and dodging between the giant trees, leaping fallen trunks, tripping over roots and scrambling over rocks, we sped on.

And now, from behind, we could hear the sounds of the pursuing Indians; their low guttural cries, the sounds of breaking twigs and branches; constantly they were drawing nearer. I knew that in a few minutes they would be upon us—that at any instant a poisoned blowgun dart or a barbed arrow might bury itself in my body; but still we strove to escape.

Then, just as I felt that the end must be at hand—just as I had decided to turn and sell my life dearly—the forest thinned. Before us sunlight appeared and the next moment we dashed from the jungle into a space free from underbrush but covered with enormous trees draped with gnarled and twisted lianas. The land here rose sharply and, glancing ahead between the trees, I saw the indistinct outlines of a lofty mountain against the sky.

Toiling up the slope, breathing heavily, utterly exhausted, I kept on. Then, as a loud shout sounded from the rear, I turned to see five hideously painted Kunas break from the jungle. But they did not follow. To my utter amazement they halted, gave a quick glance about, and, with a chorus of frightened yells, turned and dashed back into the shelter of the jungle.

But I had scant time to give heed to this. The Kunas' cries were still ringing in my ears when a scream from Carlos drew my attention. Thinking him attacked by savages I rushed towards him, drawing my revolver as I ran.

With bulging, rolling eyes, blanched face and ghastly, terror stricken features he was struggling, fighting madly, with a writhing, coiling gray object which I took for a gigantic snake. Already his body and legs were bound and helpless in the coils. With his machete he was raining blows upon the quivering awful thing which slowly, menacingly wavered back and forth before him, striving to throw another coil about his body.

And then, as I drew near, my senses reeled, I felt that I was in some awful nightmare. The object, so surely, relentlessly, silently encircling and crushing him was no serpent but a huge liana drooping from the lofty branches of a great tree!

It seemed absolutely incredible, impossible, unbelievable. But even as I gazed, transfixed with horror, paralyzed by the sight, the vine threw its last coil about the dying man and before my eyes drew the quivering body into the trees above.

Then something touched my leg. With a wild yell of terror I leaped aside. A second vine was writhing and twisting over the ground towards me!

Crazed with unspeakable fear I struck at the thing with my machete. At the blow the vine drew sharply back while from the gash a thick, yellowish, stinking juice oozed forth. Turning, I started to rush from the accursed spot but as I passed the first tree another liana writhed forward in my path.

Utterly bereft of my senses, slashing madly as I ran, yelling like a madman, I dodged from tree to tree, seeking

the open spaces, evading by a hair's breadth the fearful, menacing, serpent-like vines, until half-crazy, torn, panting and utterly spent I dashed forth into a clear grassy space.

Before me, rising like a sheer wall against the sky was a huge precipitous cliff of red rock.

Now I knew why the Kunas had not followed us beyond the jungle. They were aware of the man-killing lianas and had left us to a worse death than any they could inflict. I was safe from them I felt sure. But was I any better off? Before me was an impassable mountain side. On either hand and in the rear those awful, blood-thirsty, sinister vines and, lurking in the jungles, were the savage Kunas with their fatal poisoned darts and powerful bows. I was beset on every side by deadly peril, for I was without food, I had cast aside my gun and even my revolver in my blind, terror-crazed escape from those ghastly living vines, and to remain where I was meant death by starvation or thirst.

But anything was better than this nightmare-like forest. At the thought I glanced with a shudder at the trees and my blood seemed to freeze in my veins.

The forest was approaching me! I could not believe my eyes. Now I felt I must be mad, and fascinated; hypnotized, I gazed, striving my utmost to clear my brain, to make common sense contradict the evidence of my eyes. But it was no delusion. Ponderously, slowly, but steadily the trees were gliding noiselessly up the slope! Their great gnarled roots were creeping and undulating over the ground while the pendant vines writhed and swayed and darted forth in all

directions as if feeling their way. And then I saw what had before escaped me. The things were not lianas as I had thought. They were parts of the trees themselves—huge, lithe, flexible tentacles springing from a thick, fleshy livid-hued crown of branches armed with stupendous thorns and which slowly opened and closed like hungry jaws above the huge trunks.

It was monstrous, uncanny, supernatural. A hundred yards and more of open ground had stretched between me and the forest when I had flung myself down, but now a scant fifty paces remained. In a few brief moments the fearsome things would be upon me. But I was petrified, incapable of moving hand or foot, too terrified and overwhelmed even to cry out.

Nearer and nearer the ghastly things came. I could hear the pounding of my heart. A cold sweat broke out on my body. I shivered as with ague. Then a long, warty, tentacle darted towards me and as the loathsome stinking thing touched my hand the spell was broken. With a wild scream I turned and dashed blindly towards the precipice, seeking only to delay, only to avoid for a time the certain awful death to which I was doomed, for the cliff barred all escape and I could go no farther.

CHAPTER II

Amazing Discoveries

A dozen leaps and I reached the wall of rock beyond which all retreat was cut off. Close at hand was an outjutting buttress, and thinking that back of this I might hide and thus prolong my life, I raced for it.

Panting, unseeing, I reached the projection, ducked behind it, and to my amazement and unspeakable delight, found myself in a narrow canyon or defile, like a huge cleft in the face of the precipice.

Here was safety for a time. The terrible man-eating trees could not enter, and striving only to put a greater distance between myself and the vegetable demons I never slackened my pace as I turned and sped up the canyon.

Narrower and narrower it became. Far above my head the rocky walls leaned inward, shutting out the light until soon it was so dim and shadowy that, through sheer necessity, I was forced to stop running and to pick my way carefully over the masses of rock that strewed the canyon's floor. Presently only a narrow ribbon of sky was visible between the towering walls of the pass. Then this was blotted out and I found myself in the inky blackness of a tunnel—an ancient watercourse—leading into the very bowels of the mountain.

But there was no use in hesitating. Anything was preferable to the cannibal trees, and groping my way I pressed on. Winding and twisting, turning sharply, the passageway led, ever ascending steeply and taxing my exhausted muscles and overwrought system to the utmost. Then, far ahead, I heard the faint sound of dripping, falling water and with joy at thought of burying my aching head in

the cold liquid, and of easing my parched, dry throat, I hurried, stumbling, through the tunnel.

At last, I saw a glimmer of light in the distance and in it the sparkle of the water. Before me was the end of the tunnel and sunlight and with a final spurt of speed I rushed towards it. Then, just as I gained the opening, and so suddenly and unexpectedly that he seemed to materialize from thin air, a man rose before me.

Unable to check my speed, too thunderstruck at the apparition to halt, I dashed full into him and together we rolled head over heels upon the ground.

I have said he was a man. But even in that brief second that I glimpsed him, before I bowled him over, I realized that he was unlike any man I or anyone else had ever seen. Barely three feet in height, squat, with enormous head and shoulders, he stood shakily upon the tiniest of bandy legs and half supported his weight by his enormously long muscular arms. Had it not been that he was partly clothed and that his face was hairless, I should have thought him an ape. And now, as I picked myself up and stared at him, my jaws gaped in utter amazement. The fellow was running from me at top speed upon his hands, his feet waving and swaying in the air!

So utterly dumbfounded was I at the sight that I stood there silently gazing after the strange being until he vanished behind a clump of bushes. Then as it dawned upon me that no doubt there were others near, and, that as he had shown no sign of hostility, they were likely peaceable, I hurried after him.

A narrow trail led through the brush and running along this I burst from the shrubbery and came to an abrupt halt, utterly astounded at the sight which met my eyes. I was standing at the verge of a little rise beyond which stretched an almost circular, level plain several miles in diameter. Massed upon this in long rows, compact groups and huge squares, were hundreds of low, flat-roofed, stone buildings, while upon a smooth green plot at a little distance, stood a massive truncated pyramid.

Unwittingly I had reached my goal. Before me was the lost city of Darien. Hazen had been right!

But it was not this thought nor the strange city and its buildings that held my fascinated gaze, but the people. Everywhere they swarmed. Upon the streets, the housetops, even on the open land of the plain, they crowded and each and every one an exact counterpart of the one with whom I had collided at the mouth of the tunnel. And, like him too, all were walking or running upon their hands with their feet in air!

All this I saw in the space of a few seconds. Then, to add to my astonishment, I saw that many of the impossible beings actually were carrying burdens in their upraised feet! Some bore baskets, others jars or pots, others bundles, while one group that was approaching in my direction, held bows and arrows in their toes, and held them most menacingly at that!

It was evident that I had been seen. The excitement of the beings, their gestures and the manner in which they peered

towards me from between their arms, left no doubt of it, while the threatening defensive attitude of the bowmen proved that they were ready to attack or defend at a moment's notice.

No doubt, to them, my appearance was as remarkable, as inexplicable and as amazing as they were to me. The greater portion were evidently filled with terror and scurried into their houses, yet many still stood their ground, while a few were so overcome with curiosity and surprise that they dropped feet to earth and rested right side up in order to stare at me more intently.

I realized that it behooved me to do something. To stand there motionless and speechless, gazing at the strange folk while they stared back, would accomplish nothing. But what to do, what move to make? That was a serious question. If I attempted to approach them a shower of arrows might well end my career and my investigations of the place then and there. It was equally useless to retrace my steps, even had I been so minded, for only certain death lay back of me. By some means I must win the confidence or friendship of these outlandish beings if only temporarily. A thousand ideas flashed through my mind.

If only Hazen would appear the creatures of the city might think I had dropped from the sky and so look upon me as a supernatural being. But it was hopeless to expect such a coincidence or to look for him. I had told him to fly over on the tenth day and this was only the seventh. If only I had retained my revolver the discharge of the weapon, might frighten them into thinking me a god. But my firearms lay

somewhere in the demon forest. I had heard no sounds of voices, no shouting, and I wondered if the beings were dumb. Maybe, I thought, if I should speak—should yell—I might impress them. But, on the other hand, the sound of my voice might break the spell and cause them to attack me. A single mistake, the slightest false move, might seal my doom. I was in a terrible quandary. All my former experiences with savage unknown tribes passed through my mind, and I strove to think of some incident, some little event, which had saved the day in the past and might be put to good use now.

And as I thus pondered I unconsciously reached in my pocket for my pipe, filled it with tobacco and placing it between my lips, struck a match and puffed forth a cloud of smoke. Instantly, from the weird creatures, a low, wailing, sibilant sound arose. The archers dropped their bows and arrows and, with one accord, the people threw themselves grovelling on the ground. Unintentionally I had solved the problem. To these beings I was a fire-breathing, awful god!

Realizing this, knowing that when dealing with primitive races full of superstitions one must instantly follow up an advantage, I hesitated no longer. Puffing lustily at my pipe I strode forward and approached the nearest prostrate group. Motionless they buried their faces in the dust, bodies pressed to earth, not daring to look up or even steal a surreptitious glance at the terrible, smoke-belching being who towered over them. Never had I seen such a demonstration of abject fear, such utter debasement. It really was pitiful to see them, to view their trembling, panting bodies quivering with nameless terror; terror so great they dared not flee, even though they knew by my footsteps that I was among them,

and feared that at any moment an awful doom might descend upon them.

But their very fright defeated my purpose. I had won safety and even adoration perhaps, but there could be no amity, no intercourse, no means of mingling with them, of securing food, of learning anything if they were to remain cowering on the ground. By some means I must win a measure of their confidence, I must prove that I was a friendly beneficent deity and yet I must still be able to impress them with my powers and control them through fear.

It was a delicate matter to accomplish, but it had to be done. Almost at my feet lay one of the archers—a leader or chieftain I thought from the feather ornaments he wore—and stooping, I lifted him gently. At my touch he fairly palpitated with terror, but no frightened scream, no sound save an indrawn snake-like hiss, escaped his lips, and he offered no resistance as I lifted him to a kneeling position.

Hitherto I had had no opportunity to obtain a good view of these people, but now I saw this fellow close at hand I was amazed at his repulsive ugliness. I have seen some rather ugly races, but all of them combined and multiplied a hundredfold would be beauties compared to these dwarfed, topsy-turvy, denizens of the lost city. Almost black, low browed, with tiny, shifty eyes like those of a reptile, with enormous, thick lipped mouths, sharp, fang-like teeth and matted hair, the bowman seemed far more like an ape than like a human being. And then I noticed a most curious thing. He had no ears! Where they should have been were merely round, bare spots covered with light colored thin membrane

like the ears of a frog. For an instant I thought it a malformation or an injury. But as I glanced at the others I saw that all were the same. Not one possessed a human ear! All this I took in as I lifted the fellow up. Then as he tremblingly raised his head and eyed me I spoke to him, trying to make my tones gentle and reassuring. But there was no response, no sign of intelligence or understanding in his dull, frightened eyes. There was nothing to do but to fall back on sign language and rapidly I gestured, striving to convey to him that I would do no injury or harm, that I was friendly and that I wished the people to rise.

Slowly a look of comprehension dawned upon his ugly face and then, to prove my friendship, I fished in my pocket, found a tiny mirror and placed it in his hand. At the expression of utter astonishment that overspread his ugly features as he looked in the glass I roared with laughter. But the mirror won the day. Uttering sharp, strange, hissing sounds, the fellow conveyed the news to his companions and slowly, hesitatingly and with lingering fear still on their faces, the people rose and gazed upon me with strangely mingled awe and curiosity.

Mainly they were men, but scattered among them were many who evidently were women, although all were so uniformly repulsive in features that it was difficult to distinguish the sexes. All too, were clad much alike in single garments of bark-cloth resembling gunnysacks with holes cut at the four corners for legs and arms and an opening for the head.

But while there was no variation in the form or material of the clothing yet some wore ornaments and others did not. Leg and arm bands of woven fibre were common. Many of the men had decorations of bright hued feathers attached to arms or legs or fastened about their waists and many were elaborately tattooed. That such primitive dwarfed, ugly, degenerate creatures could have built the city of stone houses, could have laid out the broad paved streets and could have developed so much of civilization, seemed incredible.

But I had little time to devote to such thoughts. The fellow I had presented with the mirror was hissing at me like a serpent and by signs was trying to indicate that I was to follow him. So, with the crowd trailing behind us, we started up the road towards the centre of the city.

CHAPTER III

Before the King

Truly no stranger procession had ever been seen by human eyes.

Before me, the chief archer led the way, walking upon his great calloused hands and with his bow grasped firmly in one prehensile foot and his precious mirror in the other. On either side and in the rear were scores of the weird beings hurrying along on their hands, keeping up an incessant hissing sound

like escaping steam; black legs and feet waving and gesticulating in air and, at first glance, appearing like a crowd of headless dwarfs. How I wished that Fenton might have been there to see!

Apparently my actions had been closely watched from the safe retreats of the houses and word passed that I was not to be feared, for as we reached the first buildings, the edges of the roofs and the tiny window slits were lined with curious, ugly faces peering at us. It was then that I noticed that none of the buildings had doors, the walls rising blank to the roofs save for the narrow windows, while ladders, here and there in place, proved that the inhabitants, like the Pueblo Indians, entered and left their dwellings through the roofs.

Now and then as we passed along, some of the more venturesome beings would join the procession, scrambling nimbly down the ladders, sometimes upside down on their hands, often using both hands and feet, but always using hands only as soon as they reached the ground.

How or why they had developed this extraordinary mode of progression puzzled me greatly, for there seemed no scientifically good reason for it. Among tribes who habitually use boats, weak legs and enormously developed shoulders, chests and arms are common, and I could well understand how a race, depending entirely upon water for transportation, might, through generations of inbreeding and isolation, lose the use of legs.

But here was a people who apparently had no conveyances of any kind, who must of necessity travel about to cultivate

their crops, who must carry heavy burdens in order to construct their buildings and to whom legs would seem a most important matter, and yet with legs and feet so atrophied and arms so tremendously developed that they walked on their hands and used their feet as auxiliaries. It was a puzzle I longed to solve and that I would have investigated thoroughly had fate permitted me to dwell longer in the strange city. But I am getting ahead of my story.

Presently we reached a large central square surrounded by closely set buildings. Approaching one of these, my guide signalled that I was to follow him as he swiftly ascended the ladder to the roof. Rather hesitatingly, for I doubted if the frail affair would support my weight, I climbed gingerly up and found myself upon the broad, flat roof. Before me were several dark openings with the ends of ladders projecting from them and down one of these my guide led the way. At the bottom of the ladder I was in a large, obscure room, lit only by the slits of windows high in the walls, and for a moment I could see nothing of my surroundings, although from all sides issued the low hissing sounds that I now knew were the language of these remarkable people. Then, as my eyes became accustomed to the dim light, I saw that a score of beings were squatted about the sides of the room, while, directly before me, on a raised dais or platform, was seated the largest and ugliest individual I had seen.

That he was a ruler, a king or high priest, was evident. In place of the sack-like garment of his people he was clad in a long robe of golden green feathers. Upon his head was a feather crown of the same hue. About his wrists and ankles

were golden bands studded with huge uncut emeralds, and a string of the same stones hung upon his chest.

The throne, if such it could be called, was draped with a green and gold rug and everywhere, upon the walls of the chamber, were paintings of strange misshapen, uncouth creatures and human beings all in the same green and yellow tints. Something in the surroundings, in the drawings and the costume of the king, reminded me of the Aztecs or Mayas and while quite distinct from either I felt sure that, in some long past time, these dwellers of the lost city had been influenced by or had been in contact with these ancient civilizations.

As I stood before the dais my guide prostrated himself before the green robed monarch and then, rising, carried on what appeared to be an animated account of my arrival and the subsequent happenings.

As he spoke, silence fell upon those present and the king listened attentively, glancing now and then at me and regarding me with an expression of combined fear, respect and enmity. I could readily understand what his feelings were. No doubt he was a person of far greater intelligence than his subjects, and while more or less afraid of such a strange being as myself, and superstitious enough to think me supernatural, yet in me he saw a possible usurper of his own power and prominence and, if he had dared, he would have been only too glad to have put me out of the way.

At the end of the archer's narrative the fellow handed his mirror to the king who uttered a sharp exclamatory hiss as he

saw his own ugly countenance reflected in it. Forgetting court etiquette and conventions in their curiosity, the others gathered about and as the mirror passed from hand to hand their amazement knew no bounds.

All of these men I now saw were clad in green or green and white and were evidently of high rank, priests or courtiers I took it, but otherwise were as undersized and repulsive as the common people on the streets.

Suddenly I was aroused from my contemplation of the room and its occupants by my guide who came close and by signs ordered me to perform the miracle of smoking. Very ceremoniously and deliberately I drew out my pipe, filled it and struck a match. At the bright flare of the flame king and courtiers uttered a wailing hiss of fear and threw themselves upon the floor. But they were of different stuff from their people, or else the guide had prepared them for the event, for the king soon raised his head, and glancing dubiously at me and finding I had not vanished in fire and smoke, as he no doubt expected, he resumed his sitting posture and in sharp tones ordered his fellows to do likewise.

But despite this it was very evident that he and his friends were in dread of the smoke from my mouth and nose while the tobacco fumes caused them to sputter and cough and choke. This at last was more than even the king could stand, and by signs he made it clear that he wished me to end the demonstration of my fire eating ability. Then he rose, and, to my unbounded surprise, stood erect and stepped forward like an ordinary mortal upon his feet. Here was an extraordinary thing. Was the king of a distinct race or stock or was the use

of nether limbs for walking confined to the royal family or to individuals?

It was a fascinating scientific problem to solve. I had no time to give it any consideration, however, for the king was now addressing me in his snake-like dialect and was trying hard to make his meaning clear by signs. For a moment I was at a loss, but presently I grasped his meaning. He was asking whence I had come, and from the frequency with which he pointed upward I judged he thought I had dropped from the sky.

Then a brilliant idea occurred to me as I remembered Hazen's story and his suggestion regarding his return by plane. Pointing upward I made the best imitation of a motor's exhaust that I could manage. There was no doubt that the monarch grasped my meaning. He grinned, nodded and swept his arm in a wide semicircle around his head, evidently to represent the course of the plane when Hazen had flown over the city.

Seemingly satisfied and, I judged, deeply impressed as well, he resumed his seat, gave a few orders to his fellows and summoning my guide spoke a few words to him. Thereupon the archer signalled me to follow and led the way across the room. But I noticed that the king had not returned the mirror.

Ascending the ladder to the roof the fellow hurried across to a second building, scrambled down another ladder and we entered a large room. In one corner swung a large fiber hammock; in the centre was spread a cloth decorated in

green and gold, and as we entered two women appeared, each carrying handsome earthenware dishes of food whose savory odors whetted my already ravenous appetite.

Marvelous as it was to see these impossible beings carrying food in their uplifted feet and walking on their hands, yet I had now become somewhat accustomed to the people and I was so famished that I hardly gave the upside down serving maids a second glance.

The food was excellent—consisting of vegetables, some sort of fricasseed game and luscious fruits—and as I ate my guide squatted near and regarded me with the fixed, half adoring, half frightened look that one sees on the face of a strange puppy.

I judged that he had been appointed my own personal guard or valet—it mattered little which—and I was not sorry, for he seemed a fairly decent specimen of his race and we already had become pretty well accustomed to each other's signs and gestures. Wishing to still further establish myself in his confidence, and feeling rather sorry for him because of the loss of his treasured mirror, I searched my pockets for some other trinket. My possessions however were limited. They consisted of a stub of a leadpencil, a note book, a few coins, my handkerchief, my watch, my pocketknife, a few loose pistol cartridges, my pipe and tobacco and a box of matches. As I drew all these out a sudden fear gripped me. I had barely a dozen matches remaining and my supply of tobacco was perilously low. What would happen when I could no longer produce fire and smoke when called upon to do so?

But I controlled my fears and comforted myself with the thought that possibly, after having felt the effects of tobacco smoke, the king would not soon demand another miracle at my hands and that, before either matches or tobacco was exhausted, something might well happen to solve any problems that might arise. Nevertheless I heartily wished that I had arranged with Hazen to bring supplies in case they were needed and which he could have easily dropped as he flew over.

It would, I now realized, have proved an extremely impressive thing for the people to have seen me secure my magic from the giant roaring bird in the sky. But I had never of course dreamed of such adventures as I had met and could not possibly have foreseen the need of such things. Just the same I cursed myself for a stupid fool for not having provided for any contingency and especially for not having arranged a series of signals with Hazen. However, I was familiar with wigwagging and decided that, if necessity arose, it would be quite feasible for me to signal to him by means of my handkerchief tied on a stick. Also, I felt a bit easier in my mind from knowing that near the city was a splendid landing place for the plane and that Hazen, if signalled, would unquestionably attempt a descent.

Truly it was not every explorer in a predicament like mine who could count on being able to summon aid from the clouds if worst came to worst or who knew that a friend in an airplane would keep track of his whereabouts. Indeed, I almost chuckled at the thought of being in this long lost city among these incredible folk and yet within two hundred miles of the Canal and civilization and with another

American due to hover above—and even communicate with me—within the next three days. It was all so dreamlike, so utterly preposterous that I scarcely could force myself to believe it and, having dined well and feeling desperately tired, I flung myself into the hammock and almost instantly dropped off to sleep.

It was still daylight when I awoke and the room was empty. Ascending the ladder to the roof without meeting anyone, I climbed down the other ladder to the street. Many people were about and while a few, especially the women and children, threw themselves on their faces or scampered into their houses at my approach, yet the majority merely prostrated themselves for a moment and then stood, supporting themselves in their ape-like way, and stared curiously at me. I had gone but a short distance when my valet came hurrying to my side. But he made no objections to my going where I wished and I was glad to see that my movements were not to be hampered as I was anxious thoroughly to explore the city and its neighborhood. Curious to learn the purpose of the pyramidal structure I had noticed I proceeded in that direction and was soon in a part of the town given over to stalls, shops and markets. There were also several workshops, such as pottery makers', a woodworking shop and a weaver's shop and I spent some time watching the artizans at their work. Somehow, from seeing the people walk upon their hands, I had expected to see them perform their tasks with their feet and it came as something of a surprise to see these fellows using their hands like ordinary mortals.

Beyond this portion of the city the houses were scattered, the outlying buildings were more or less patched and out of repair and were very evidently the abode of the poorer classes, although the inhabitants I saw, and who retreated the instant they saw me, were exactly like all the others as far as I could see, both in dress and feature. Passing these huts, I crossed the smooth green field, which I now saw was a perfect landing place for the plane. Tethered to stakes and grazing on the grass were a number of animals which, as I first noticed them, I had taken for goats and cattle. But now I discovered that they were all deer and tapirs. It was a great surprise to see these animals domesticated but, after all, it was not remarkable, for I should have known, had I stopped to give the matter thought, that goats, sheep and cattle were unknown to the aboriginal Americans and that this city and its people, who had never been visited and had never communicated with other races, would of necessity be without these well known animals.

Moreover, I knew that the Mayas were supposed to have used tapirs as beasts of burden, and while I was standing there watching the creatures a man approached riding astride a big tapir and driving a second one loaded with bags of charcoal and garden produce. Here then was a partial solution of the manner by which these weak, dwarfed people built their stone houses. For with the powerful elephant-like tapirs—and I noticed all were the giant Baird's tapir which reaches a weight of seven or eight hundred pounds—they could easily haul the blocks of stone from a quarry and by means of tackle and inclined planes, could readily hoist the stones to the tops of the walls.

I had now reached the base of the pyramid and found it a massive structure of the same flinty stone as the other buildings. Running from base to summit was a spiral path or stairway and instantly I knew that it was a sacrificial pyramid exactly like those used by the Aztecs and on which unfortunate beings were killed and sacrificed. This discovery still further confirmed my suspicions that these people were either of Aztec or Maya blood or had been influenced by those races. Filled with curiosity to see the altar on the summit I started up the sloping stairs. I was at first doubtful if my companion would permit this, for the structure was sacred and doubtless only priests of the highest order were permitted upon it. Evidently, however, my guide thought that such a supernatural being or god as myself had every right to invade the most sacred places, and he offered no objection, but prostrated himself at the base of the pyramid as I ascended.

At the summit I found, as I had expected, the sacrificial stone, a huge block elaborately carved in hieroglyphs and with channels to permit the blood to drain off, while, close at hand, was a massive carved stone collar or yoke exactly like those which have been found in Porto Rico and have so long puzzled scientists. From the blood stains upon this I felt sure it was used to hold down the victim's head and neck, while strong metal staples, set into the stone, indicated that the man destined for sacrifice was spread-eagled and his ankles and wrists bound fast to the rings.

It was a most interesting spot from a scientific standpoint, but decidedly gruesome, while the stench of putrefied blood and fragments of human flesh clinging to the stones was

nauseating and I was glad to retrace my steps and descend to the ground.

From the top of the pyramid I had obtained a fine view of the plain and city and I had noted that the former was surrounded on all sides with steep cliffs, and I realized that the plain was not a flat topped mountain as I had thought but the crater of an extinct volcano.

I saw no path, pass or opening by which the crater-valley could be entered, but I knew there was the one by which I had arrived. As the sun, here on the mountain top, was still well above the horizon I decided to visit the entrance to the tunnel, for I was anxious to know why the people should leave this avenue open when, on every other side, they were completely cut off from the outer world. Possibly, I thought, they knew of those horrible man-eating trees and trusted to them to guard the city from intruders. Or again, they might keep the entrance guarded, for the fellow I had knocked over as I dashed in had been at the tunnel mouth and for all I knew he might have been an armed guard and was merely so thunderstruck at my precipitate appearance that he forgot his duties and his weapons.

With such thoughts running through my mind I strolled across the plain, past well-tilled gardens and fields, in several of which I saw men ploughing with well made plows drawn by tapirs. Even the farmers stopped their work and prostrated themselves as I passed, and it was evident that word of my celestial origin and supernatural character had gone forth to every inhabitant of the valley.

Following the path, I reached the little rise from which I had first viewed the city and soon came to the spot where I had entered. Imagine my utter surprise when I saw no sign whatever of the opening. I was positive that I had not missed my way. I recognized the clumps of bushes and the forms of the rocks, but there was no dark hole, no aperture in the cliff. Then, as I drew near to the precipice, I made an astounding discovery. Closely fitted into the rock and so like it that it had escaped my attention, was an enormous stone door. How it was operated, whether it was hinged or slid or whether it was pivoted, I could not determine. But that it covered and concealed the entrance to the tunnel I was convinced. Why the people had left the tunnel open as though to clear the way for me, why they should have fitted a door to it, why they should ever use the tunnel which could bring them only to the death-dealing forest, were problems which I could not solve.

At any rate there was nothing to be gained by staying there and I started back towards the city. Thinking to return by another route, I took a path that led towards the opposite mountain side and presently from ahead, I distinctly heard the sound of metal striking stone.

Oddly enough my mind had been so filled with other matters that I had hardly wondered how these people cut or worked the hard stone. But now that my attention was attracted by the sound my curiosity was aroused and I hurried forward. What metal I wondered, did these people use? For metal I knew it must be from the ringing, clinking noise. Was I about to see hardened bronze tools in actual use or had these marvelous folk discovered the use of iron or

steel? So astounding had been all my experiences, so paradoxical and incredible everything I had seen, that I was prepared for almost anything. I, or rather we, soon came to the verge of a deep pit wherein, laboring at great masses of white stone, were scores of workmen. Standing like skeletons among the blocks were derricks; hitched to sledge-like drags loaded with stone were teams of tapirs and on the farther side was a big outjutting ledge from which the stone was being quarried. Hurrying down the steep trail I reached the bottom of the pit to find every man flat on the ground.

Signalling to my companion that I wished to have the fellows go on with their work, I approached the nearest slab of rock. It was the same fine grained whitish rock of which the city was built, and, lying upon it where they had been dropped by the stone cutters, were several small hammers, chisels and an adze-like tool. That they were not bronze or any alloy of copper I knew at the first glance. Their color was that of tempered steel and they seemed ridiculously small for the purpose of working this hard stone. If these people used steel then I had indeed made a discovery, and intent on this matter I picked up one of the tools to examine it. No sooner had I lifted it that I uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise. The hammer, although hardly larger than an ordinary tack hammer, weighed fully ten pounds! It was heavier than if made of solid gold. There was only one known metal that could be so heavy and that was platinum. But platinum it could not be, for that metal is softer than gold and would be of no more use for cutting rock than so much lead. The tools, however, were undoubtedly hard—the polished surface of the hammer-head and the chisels, and the unscarred keen edges of the latter, showed this, and, anxious

to test their hardness, I held a chisel against the rock and struck it sharply with a hammer.

Once more I cried out in wonder, for the chisel had bitten fully half an inch into the stone! It had cut it as easily as if the rock were cheese! What marvel was this? What magic lay in these tools? And then the secret dawned upon me and a moment's examination of the stone confirmed my suspicions. It was not that the tools were so very hard or keen but that the rock was soft—so soft that I could readily cut it with my pocket knife, a wax-like earthy rock which no doubt became hard upon exposure to the air exactly like the coral rock of Bermuda, which may be quarried with saws and even planed, but becomes as hard as limestone after exposure to the elements. Still, the tools were far harder than any metal except tempered steel, and for some time I puzzled over the matter as I watched the workmen, now over their fright and adoration, skilfully cutting and squaring the blocks of stone. It was one more conundrum I could not solve, and it was not until long afterwards, when a careful analysis of the metal was made, that I knew the truth. The metal was an alloy of platinum and iridium—the latter one of the hardest of all known metals.

As we left the quarry and made our way toward the city I noticed an immense aqueduct stretching across the land from the apparently solid mountain side just above the quarry. I had given little thought to how the people secured water here in the crater. But it was now apparent that it was brought from some source by the stone conduit. Keenly curious to know whence it came, for I could not imagine how a river, lake or spring could exist on the crater rim, I wished to

investigate, but darkness was coming on, I was tired and I deferred further exploration until another day.

Although I suppose I should have been grateful for being able to communicate with the people at all, yet I keenly felt the lack of a common medium of conversation, for the sign language was limited and I could not secure the information I so much desired about many matters that puzzled me.

Nothing further of interest transpired that night. I was supplied with food, I slept soundly and did not awaken until roused by the women with my breakfast. Very soon afterwards I was summoned to the throne room by Zip, as I called my companion, and once more I had to strike a match and smoke my pipe for the king's benefit. This time a second personage of high rank was beside him, a villainous looking hunchbacked dwarf with red, vicious eyes and cruel mouth but who, like the king, walked on his feet. From his elaborately decorated white robes and the mitre-like crown of quetzal feathers on his gray head, I concluded he was a high priest, for in the designs upon his costume and the form of his crown, I saw a decided resemblance to the Aztec priests as shown in the picturegraph of that race. Moreover, the quetzal or resplendent trogon was, I knew, the sacred bird of the Aztecs and Mayas, and while I was aware that it was common in the northern portions of Panama, I had never heard of its occurrence in Darien, a fact which still further confirmed my belief that these people were of Aztec stock. But if this were the case it was a puzzle as to why they should be so undersized, malformed and physically degenerate, for both the Aztecs and Mayas were powerful, well-formed races. The only solution I could think of was the

supposition that isolation and intermarriage through centuries had brought about such results.

But to return to my audience with the king. I was not all pleased at thus having to use my precious matches and tobacco and I foresaw some very unpleasant development in store for me if the performance was to be of daily occurrence. It was manifest that I must devise some new and startling exhibition of my powers if I were to retain my prestige and my freedom, for I well knew, from past experiences with savage races, and from the character of these potentates, that if I failed to perform miracles, and became, in their eyes, an ordinary mortal, my career would come to an abrupt end.

To be sure, there was the reassuring fact that Hazen would or should appear within the next forty-eight hours, but it was decidedly problematical as to whether I could communicate with him or could receive any aid from the air. However, there was nothing to be done but obey and puff away at my pipe. With the idea of cutting the exhibition short I stepped closer to the throne and blew the smoke towards the faces of the king and the priest. The monarch was soon coughing and spluttering, but he was game, while the priest, to my amazement, sniffed the smoke and seemed to enjoy it. Here was trouble. Evidently he had a natural taste for tobacco and this fact caused me a deal of worry, for if the old rascal took it into his head to acquire the habit and demanded I should let him try a puff at the pipe I would be in a pretty fix indeed.

However, my fears on this score were groundless, and presently the king, who could stand it no longer, signalled for

me to depart, which I did most gladly.

I still had it in mind to investigate the water supply, and with Zip—reminding me of an acrobatic clown—beside me, headed for the aqueduct. This I found was of stones, dovetailed together in water tight joints, and built like an open trough and the speed of the water flowing through it proved the supply well above the city's level. It was an easy matter to follow the conduit, for a well-trodden path was beside it, but it was a steep up-grade climb for nearly a mile before I gained the spot where the aqueduct tapped the mountain rim. Here the water gushed from a hole in the solid rock and from its volume I knew it must come from some large reservoir. From where I stood I could look directly down into the quarry and the thought flashed through my mind that if the people continued to quarry in the place for many more years they would undermine and weaken the foundations of the aqueduct.

It was their lookout not mine, however, and still intent on tracing the water to its source I turned up a trail that appeared to lead to the mountain top. In places this was excessively steep and here Zip exhibited a new habit of his people. Dropping his feet he proceeded to climb the path on all fours, his feet first and his prehensile toes grasping every projection and bit of rock to draw him along while his immense, powerful hands supported his weight and pushed him onward. He looked more like a gigantic spider than anything, and not in the least human. Panting and blown I at last gained the summit and looked down upon a lake of dismal black water filling a circular crater about half a mile in diameter. Close by was an aperture in the rock and half-filled with

water, and it was evident that this was connected with the outlet below by means of a shaft. Whether this was a natural formation or had been laboriously cut by hand I could not tell, but I was prepared for almost anything by this time and was not greatly surprised to find a cleverly constructed sluice gate arranged above the opening to regulate the flow of water. I had seen similar crater lakes in the extinct volcanoes of the West Indies, but I was surprised that Hazen had not mentioned it. But on second thought I realized that when flying over it, the dark water surrounded by vegetation would hardly be visible and might easily be mistaken for heavy shadow or an empty crater, while the aviator's surprise at the city would fix his attention upon it to the exclusion of all surroundings.

Standing upon the rock ridge several hundred feet above the city I had almost the same view as Hazen had from his plane and I could understand how, at an elevation of 5000 feet or more, he had been unable to obtain any very accurate idea of the buildings or people. I also realized, with a sinking of my heart, that it would be next to impossible for him to recognize me or to see any signals I might make.

The most prominent spot in the entire valley was the pyramid, for this was isolated upon the green plain and the sun, striking through a gap in the eastern rim of the crater, shone directly upon the altar's summit, thus bringing it out in sharp relief. Indeed, it looked for all the world like a pylon on an aviation field. If I expected to make my presence known to Hazen or to signal to him, my best point of vantage would be the summit of the pyramid and I determined to

climb there and await his arrival when he should be due, two days later.

Little did I dream at the time of the conditions under which I would await him upon that gruesome altar.

CHAPTER IV

The Sacrifice

By the time we had descended the mountain and had reached the city it was noon, and going to my quarters I was glad to find an excellent meal. Having finished eating I threw myself into the hammock and despite my scarcity of matches and tobacco, indulged in a smoke. Then, feeling drowsy, I took off my coat, placed it on the floor beside my hammock and closed my eyes.

I awoke refreshed and reached for my coat only to leap from the hammock with a cry of alarm. The coat was gone! Quickly I searched the room, thinking Zip might have placed the garment elsewhere while I slept, but the place was bare. Zip was nowhere to be seen, and even the rug on which meals were served had been removed.

Here was a pretty state of affairs. My coat contained my matches, pipe, tobacco, pocket knife and handkerchief. Without it I was lost, helpless, incapable of maintaining my

prestige of position. Death or worse hovered over me. My life depended on regaining my precious garment and its contents. Who could have taken it? What could have been their object? And instantly the truth flashed upon my mind. It was that rascally high priest. He had seen me take pipe, tobacco and matches from my coat pocket. He had watched me narrowly, perhaps had kept his eyes upon me through some hidden peep-hole or opening, and had seen me remove my coat, and while I slept had seized it. Or perhaps he had ordered Zip to secure it for him. It made little difference which, for if it were in his possession he would have me in his power. He could order me to smoke and when I failed he could perform the miracle himself and denounce me as an impostor. My only hope was to regain my possessions by fair means or foul, and knowing that every second I delayed increased my peril, I rushed to the ladder and across the roofs to the throne room.

From beneath me, as I started to descend, came the sounds of the hissing language in excited tones, and as my head came below the level of the roof my heart sank. The dark air of the room was heavy with tobacco smoke!

The next instant my feet were jerked from beneath me, I was seized, tumbled on the floor, and before I could strike or rise I was bound hand and foot. Dazed, startled and helpless I glanced about. Surrounding me were a dozen of the repulsive dwarfs. Gathered about the sides of the room were crowds of people, and seated upon the throne, pulling great clouds of smoke from my pipe, a wicked leer upon his ugly face, and thoroughly enjoying himself, was the priest, while beside

him the king coughed and sneezed and looked very miserable.

All this I took in at a glance. Then I was seized and dragged roughly before the throne. I fully realized my doom was sealed. I was no longer a supernatural being to be feared and adored—my treatment proved that—but merely a prisoner, an ordinary mortal. Oddly enough, however, I was no longer frightened. My first fears had given place to anger, and I raged and fumed and prayed that the grinning fiend before me might be stricken with all the torturing sickness, which usually follows the beginner's first smoke.

But apparently he was immune to the effects, and as soon as I was dragged before the throne he rose, and pointing at me, addressed the crowd before him. That he was denouncing me as an imposter and at the same time tremendously increasing his own importance was evident by his tones, his gestures and the expression on his black face. Moreover, he had another card to play. Pointing upward and waving his arm and making quite creditable imitation of an airplane's exhaust, he spoke vehemently and then pointed to a man who crouched on the dais.

At first I was at a loss to grasp his meaning, and then, as the trembling creature beside the throne spoke in frightened tones and gesticulated vividly, I realized he was the chap I had bumped into upon my arrival. He had spilled the beans and had informed the old scarecrow of a priest that I had arrived via the tunnel and not from the sky.

I felt sure now that my doom was sealed. But there was nothing I could do or say. There was one chance in a million that I might be escorted from the valley and turned loose in the tunnel; but that gave me no comfort, for I knew that hideous certain death awaited me on that slope covered with the devilish man-eating-trees.

The chances, however, were, all in favor of my being tortured and butchered. Strangely enough my greatest regret, the matter which troubled me the most and made me curse my carelessness in removing my coat while I slept, was not that I should be killed—I had faced death too often for that—but the fact that I would be unable to report the wonderful discoveries I had made or give my knowledge of the city and its people to the world. Indeed, my thoughts were so concentrated on this that I gave little attention to the priest, until he stepped forward, and, with a nasty grimace, struck me savagely across the face. Maddened at the blow I lunged forward like a butting ram. My head struck squarely in the pit of his stomach, and with a gasping yell he doubled up and fell sprawling on the dais while the pipe flew from his lips and scattered its contents far and near. Before I could roll to one side, my guards seized and pulled me across the room. Despite my plight and the fate in store for me I laughed loudly and heartily as I saw the priest with hands pressed to stomach, eyes rolling wildly and a sickly greenish pallor on his face. The blow plus the tobacco had done its work. I had evened up the score a bit at any rate.

The next moment I was hauled through a low doorway hidden by draperies, and, bumping like a bag of meal over the rough stones, was pitched into an inky black cell.

Bruised, scratched and bleeding I lay there unable to move or see while the occasional sounds of shuffling footsteps, or rather handsteps, told me a guard was close at hand. For hour after hour I lay motionless, expecting each minute that I would be dragged out to torture or death and wondering dully what form it would take, until at last—numb, exhausted and worn out, I lost consciousness.

I was brought to my senses by being seized and jerked to a sitting posture, and found the cell illuminated by a spluttering torch, while two of the men supported my shoulders and a third held a gourd of water to my lips. My throat was parched and the liquid was most welcome, and a moment later, a fourth man appeared with food. It was evident that the priest had no intention of letting me die of thirst or starvation, and I wondered why he should be so solicitous of my comfort if I were doomed to an early death.

As soon as I had eaten, the guards withdrew, taking the torch, and I was once more left in stygian blackness with my thoughts. I wondered whether it were day or night, but I had no means of judging. It had been the middle of the afternoon when I had missed my coat, and, reasoning that the food served was probably the evening meal, I decided that it was now about sundown. In that case I should probably be put out of the way the next morning. That would be a full twenty-four hours before Hazen was due and I wondered what he would think when he saw no sign of me in the valley—whether he would surmise that I had not reached the city and had been killed by the Kunas, and what he would report to my friends in Colon.

But Colon, friends and Hazen seemed very far away as I thought of them there in that black hole awaiting death at the hands of the strange black dwarfs and, as far as any aid they could give me, was concerned I might as well have been in Mars.

My thoughts were interrupted by my guards reappearing with the torch. Lifting me to my feet they loosened the bonds about my legs and urged me through a small doorway, where I was compelled to bend low to pass, and along a winding, narrow, low-ceilinged stone tunnel. That I was on my way to my execution I was sure, and vague thoughts of selling my life dearly and of overpowering my puny guards crossed my mind. But I dismissed such ideas as useless, for even were I to succeed I would be no better off. There were thousands of the tiny men in the city, it was impossible to escape from the valley unseen, and I had not the least idea where the underground passage led. To attempt to escape meant certain death, and there still remained a faint chance, a dim hope that I might yet be spared and merely deported. So, ducking my head and with stooping shoulders, I picked my way along the tunnel by the fitful glare of the flaming torch.

For what seemed miles the way led on and I began to think that the entrance was outside the valley and that I was being led to freedom, when a glimmer of light showed ahead, the floor sloped upward, and, an instant later, I emerged in the open air.

For a moment my eyes were blinded by the light after the darkness of the passage and I could not grasp where I was. I had thought it evening, but my first glance told me it was

early morning and I knew the night had passed and another day had come. Then, as I looked about at my surroundings and it dawned upon me where I was, a shudder of horror, a chill of deadly fear swept over me. I was on the summit of the pyramid. The sacrificial altar was within three paces. Beside it stood the fiendish priest and his assistants, and gathered upon the green plain were hordes of people with faces upturned towards me. I was about to be sacrificed, to be bound fast to the bloodstained awful stone, to have my still-beating heart torn from my living body!

Anything were preferable to that and with a sudden bound I strove to gain the altar's edge and hurl myself to certain death. But to no avail. Two of the dwarfs held me fast by the cord which fastened my wrists and I was jerked back to fall heavily upon the stones. Before I could struggle up, four of the priest's assistants sprang forward and, grasping me by legs and shoulders, lifted me and tossed me upon the stinking sacrificial stone. I was helpless, and instantly my ankles were tied fast to the metal staples, the bonds of my wrists were severed, my arms were drawn apart and securely lashed to other staples, the stone collar was placed about my neck forcing my head far back and I was ready for the glowering priest to wreak his awful vengeance.

Stepping close to the altar he drew a glittering obsidian knife—and even in my terrible predicament I noted this, and realized that he was adhering strictly to Aztec customs—and, raising his arms, he began a wailing, blood-curdling chant. Up from the thousands of throats below came the chanting chorus, rising and falling like a great wave of sound. How long I wondered, would this keep on? How much longer

must this agony, this torture of suspense be borne? Why did he not strike his stone dagger into my chest and have it over with?

And then, from some dormant cell in my brain, came the answer. I was to be sacrificed to the sun god, and I remembered that, according to the Aztec religion, the blow could not be struck until the rising sun cast its rays upon the victim's chest above the heart. The priest was awaiting that moment. He was delaying until the sun, still behind the crater's rim, should throw its first rays upon me.

How long would it be? How many minutes must pass before the fatal finger of light pointed to my heart? With a mighty effort I turned my head slightly towards the east. Above the rugged mountain edge was a blaze of light. Even as I looked with aching eyes a golden beam shot across the valley and flashed blindingly into my face. It was now only a matter of seconds. The priest raised his knife aloft. The chant from the multitude ceased and over city and valley fell an ominous, awful silence. Upon the sacrificial knife the aim gleamed brilliantly, transforming the glass-like stone to burnished gold. With his free hand the priest tore open my shirt and bared my bosom. I felt that the end had come. I closed my eyes. And then, at the very instant when the knife was about to sweep down, faint and far away, like the humming of a giant bee, I caught a sound. It was unmistakable; unlike anything else in all the world—the exhaust of an airplane's engines!

And my straining ears were not the only ones that heard that note. Over the priest's face swept a look of deadly fear.

The poised knife was slowly lowered. He turned trembling towards the west and from the waiting throng below rose a mighty sigh of terror.

A new hope sprang up in my breast. Was it Hazen? He was not due until the next day and it might be only some army plane that would pass far to one side of the valley. No, the sound was increasing, the plane was approaching. But even were it Hazen would it help me any? Would he see my plight and descend or would he fly too far above the city to note what was taking place? For a space my life was saved. The fear of that giant, roaring bird would prevent the sacrifice. The priest feared he had made a mistake, that I was a god, that, from the sky, vengeance would swoop upon him and his people for the contemplated butchery. But if the plane passed? Or would his dread of it be greater than his fear of defying the sun god by failing in the sacrifice?

Now the roar of the motor sounded directly overhead and the next moment I glimpsed the plane speeding across the blue morning sky. Then it was gone. The exhaust grew fainter and fainter. All hope was lost. Whoever it was had flown on, all unsuspecting the awful fate of a fellow man upon that sunlit pyramid.

And now the priest was again towering over me. Once more he raised his knife. I could feel the warm sun beating upon my throat and shoulders. I could feel it creeping slowly but surely downward. The knife quivered in the impatient hand of the priest, I saw his muscles tense themselves for the blow, I caught the grim smile that flitted across his face as he prepared to strike.

An instant more and my palpitating heart would be held aloft for all to see.

But the blow never fell. With a deafening roar, that drowned the mighty shout of terror from the people, the airplane swooped like an eagle from the sky and clove the air within a hundred feet of the altar. With a gurgling cry the priest flung himself face down, and his knife fell clattering with the sound of broken glass upon the stones.

Was it Hazen? Would he see me? Would he alight? Was I saved?

The answer was a thunderous, fear maddened cry from below, a swishing whirr as of a gale of wind and a dark shadow sweeping over me.

And then my overwrought senses, my frazzled nerves could stand no more and all went black before my eyes.

Dimly consciousness came back. I heard the sounds of rushing feet, the panting labored breaths of men, sharp, half uttered exclamations and grunting noises. Then a shrill scream of mortal terror and a deep drawn sigh of relief. Above my wondering eyes a figure suddenly loomed. A weird uncanny figure with strangely smooth and rounded head and great goggling, glassy eyes. With a jerk the stone collar was lifted from my strained neck and as full consciousness came back I gasped. It was Hazen! By some miracle he was ahead of time!

From somewhere, muffled behind that grotesque mask, came a hoarse: "My God, are you hurt?"

Before I could speak the bonds were slashed from my ankles and wrists. A strong arm raised me and pulled me from the slab.

"For God's sake, hurry!" cried Hazen, as half supporting me he rushed toward the altar stairs. "I've got 'em buffaloed for a minute, but the Lord alone knows how long it'll hold 'em."

Rapidly as my numbed limbs would permit I rushed down the sloping, spiral way. Half carried by Hazen I raced across the few yards of grass between the base of the pyramid and the plane, and as I did so I caught a fleeting glimpse of a huddled, shapeless, bloody bundle of green and white. It was all that remained of the priest whom Hazen had hurled from the altar top!

The next moment I was in the plane and Hazen was twirling the propeller. There was a roar as the motor started. Hazen leaped like an acrobat to his seat and slowly the machine moved across the plain.

Everywhere the people were prostrate, but as the machine started forward one after another glanced up. Ere we had traveled a score of yards the creatures were rising and with frightful screams were scattering from our pathway. It was impossible to avoid them. With sickening shocks the whirring propeller struck one after another. Blood spattered our faces and becrimsoned the windshield and the wings. But

uninjured the plane gathered headway; the uneven bumping over the ground ceased; we were traveling smoothly, lifting from the earth.

Then with a strange wild roar the people rushed for us. Racing on their hands they came. Rocks and missiles whizzed about us. An arrow whirred by my head and struck quivering in a strut. But now we were rising rapidly. We were looking down upon the maddened hosts, their arrows and sling-flung stones were striking the under surface of the fuselage and wings. We were safe at last. A moment more and we would be above the crater rim.

A sudden exclamation from Hazen startled me. I glanced up. Straight ahead rose the precipitous mountain side above the quarry. To clear it we must ascend far more rapidly than we were doing.

"Must have splintered the blades!" jerked out Hazen. "She's not making it. Can't swing her. Rudder's jammed. Heave out everything you can find. Hurry or we'll smash!"

Before us loomed the ragged, rocky wall. We were rushing to our doom at lightning speed. At Hazen's words I grasped whatever I could find and tossed it over the side. A box of provisions, a roll of tools, a leather jacket, a thermos bottle, canteens, an automatic pistol and a cartridge belt all went. I glanced up. We were rising faster. A few pounds more overboard, a few feet higher and we would be clear. Was there anything else I could throw out? Frantically I searched. I saw a can-like object resting on a frame. Spare gasoline I

decided, but fuel was of no value now. With an effort I dragged it out I lifted it and hurled it over.

With a sudden jerk the plane sprung upward. There was a terrific muffled roar from below and with barely a yard to spare we rose above the crater rim.

"Lord, you must have dropped that old bomb!" cried Hazen. "The concussion jarred the rudder free."

I glanced over the side. Far beneath, a cloud of smoke and dust was drifting slowly aside exposing the aqueduct, broken, smashed and in ruins. From the opening in the mountain side a mighty stream of water was roaring in a rushing, tearing torrent. The bomb had landed squarely in the quarry. The aqueduct had fallen, the shock had let loose the gates of the lake and the whole vast crater reservoir was pouring in a mighty flood across the valley.

In a wide arc Hazen swung the plane about. "Poor devils!" he muttered as we soared above the doomed city.

Already the green plain was shimmering with the glint of water. We could see the frantic, frenzied people running and scrambling up their ladders. Again we wheeled and circled far above them and now only the roof tops of the houses were above the flood. Presently these too sank from sight and above the sunlit waters only the sacrificial stone remained.

"It's all over!" exclaimed Hazen, and heading northward we sped beyond the encircling mountain sides.

Beneath us now was forest, and with a shudder I recognized it as that death-dealing, nightmare grove of cannibal trees. Fascinated I gazed down and suddenly from the mountain side behind us burst a frothing yellow torrent. The pressure of the flood had been too great. The overwhelming waters had forced the stone door of the tunnel by which I had entered that incredible valley. Before my wondering eyes the devastating deluge swept down the slope. I saw the monstrous trees shiver and sway and crash before the irresistible force. They gave way and like matchsticks went tossing, tumbling, bobbing down the hillside.

Higher and higher we rose. The water-filled crater was now but a silvery lake. The slope up which I had fought and raced from the ravenous, blood-sucking trees was bare, red earth scarred deep by the plunging stream that flowed over it. Far to the west gleamed the blue Pacific. Like a vast map Darien was spread below us. Northward we sped. Before us was civilization. Behind us death and destruction. The man-eating trees were a thing of the past. The lost city was lost forever.

THE END

[The end of *Through the Crater's Rim* by Alpheus Hyatt
Verrill]