

ADVENTURE UNLIMITED

Captain W. E. JOHNS



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With a loud hiss it slithered out of its lair

ADVENTURE UNLIMITED

by
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated by Douglas Relf

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ADVENTURE UNLIMITED

CHAPTER 1

A COMPANY IS BORN

‘WHAT have you been doing with yourself lately, Pompey?’ ‘Digger’ Driscoll’s bright blue eyes came to rest on the broad, ugly face of the man sitting on his left at a table for four in one of the smaller London restaurants.

Pompey moved uncomfortably under the scrutiny. ‘Well—er—just drifting around the docks, to see if I could spot any old shipmates.’

‘In other words, you’ve done nothing but loaf about killing time,’ challenged Digger.

‘What else was there to do?’ inquired Pompey plaintively.

Digger shifted his gaze to the boy who sat opposite. ‘What about you, Tommy?’

‘I haven’t been doing anything either,’ confessed Tommy unashamedly.

‘Why not?’

‘What was there to do? Didn’t seem much sense working when I had more money than I could spend.’

Again Digger’s eyes shifted, this time to the young man on his right. ‘How about you, Batty?’

The ex-soldier shook his head sadly. ‘You’ve got me, chum. My answer’s the same as the others. What could I do by myself, any old how?’

Digger considered his guests collectively. ‘Just as I thought,’ he averred. ‘Wasting your time. Going to seed, the lot of you. Presently you’ll be so soft you’ll sneeze if the wind blows.’

‘Easy on your oars, mate,’ protested Pompey. ‘How about you? Suppose we ask what *you’ve* been a’doing of?’

‘I’ve been working,’ informed Digger evenly.

Pompey looked astonished. ‘Wot ’ave you got to work for? Lost your dough?’

‘No. That’s put away for a rainy day when I *can’t* work.’ Digger finished his coffee, filled his pipe and sat back. ‘Now listen here,’ he adjured. ‘Do you remember my telling you soon after we first met, when the talk was of gold hunting, that the worst thing that could happen to a prospector was to

strike it rich? The reason being that having knocked out his main interest in life, which was *finding* the stuff, having nothing to do he gets so bored that he's soon ready to dig his own grave.'

Tommy nodded. 'Yes. I remember. You said most of the lucky ones got rid of their money *pronto* in order to have a reason for hitting the trail again.'

'Exactly. To some people that wouldn't make sense; but the fact is, people who live that sort of life, the sort of life I've led, find it mighty hard to settle down. I'm an old hand, and I know what I'm talking about. I've seen too many fellers end up as pub crawlers, ruining their health and having their money taken off them by a mob of sycophants.'

Pompey looked amazed. 'Where do the elephants come from?'

'I didn't say anything about elephants,' came back Digger curtly. 'I said sycophants—hangers-on; oily types who do a lot of back-patting for what they can get out of you. But let me finish. A couple of months ago we struck lucky when we dropped on a parcel of yellow metal, with the result that, in spite of my warning, as far as I can see you're all on the way to becoming a lot of overfed loafers.'

'Half a mo', chum,' protested Batty. 'What's the use of money if you don't use it?'

'It's useful to have by you when something happens to prevent you from ever getting any more. That's why I've put mine away, keeping only enough to grub-stake me for my next trip. I asked you to meet me here tonight to tell you I'm on my way out.'

'Out where?' demanded Pompey.

'I haven't finally decided. I thought I'd have a word with you first. I've got my affairs tidied up, and I've been round the raw material markets to find out what's in most demand. That's everything I can do here, so tomorrow I shall start packing my kit.'

'For somewhere dangerous?' put in Tommy eagerly.

'Listen, kid,' answered Digger earnestly. 'We're in the most dangerous place on earth right now. This traffic has got my nerves on the jump faster than anything I've ever met in any jungle. I'm pulling out of it before some lunatic on wheels flattens me on the pavement. Does anyone who hasn't had enough adventure want to come with me? Don't all speak at once.'

Pompey slapped his thigh. 'Now you're a'talking. Up comes the mudhook.'

'That goes for me,' declared Batty.

‘I’m ready when you are,’ stated Tommy. ‘Now tell us, what exactly is the idea?’

‘First, forget the romantic angle. This is serious business, so to start with anyone who wants to come with me will put a sum of money into a common fund from which all expenses will be paid. In other words, we form a company.’

‘That means it’ll have to have a name,’ asserted Batty. ‘How can we give ourselves a name till we know what we’re going to do?’

‘Aw shucks!’ growled Pompey. ‘What does it matter what we do?’

‘Years ago companies like ours gave themselves high-sounding names, like the Honourable Company of Merchant Adventurers Trading into Hudson’s Bay——’

‘Here, hold hard,’ protested Pompey. ‘That’s too much of a mouthful. Let’s have something short and sweet.’

‘How about the Gold Syndicate,’ suggested Batty, lighting a cigarette.

‘And tell everyone what we’re doing?’ queried Digger sarcastically. ‘The less we say about gold the better. Besides, I shan’t necessarily be looking for gold. How about Adventure, Limited? That would cover everything without telling anybody anything.’

‘Seems to me,’ said Tommy, ‘judging from what happened last time, Adventure *Unlimited* would be nearer the mark.’

‘The boy’s right—hit the nail on the head,’ asserted Pompey.

‘Adventure Unlimited, sounds just the thing,’ agreed Batty.

‘Right,’ assented Digger. ‘Adventure Unlimited it is.’

‘But we must have some definite object to look for,’ went on Tommy. ‘What about a treasure? Are there any treasures left to be found, Digger?’

‘Plenty,’ admitted Digger. ‘And plenty of people who have spent most of their lives looking for them,’ he added grimly.

‘Do you know about them?’ asked Tommy.

‘Every globe-trotting adventurer knows about them.’

‘Then let’s look for one,’ said Tommy. ‘Tell us about them and we’ll choose one to go for.’

Digger shook his head sadly. ‘Still romancing! Although there are many treasures which exist beyond dispute, and probably a great many more about which nothing is known—the gold we found could well have come into that category—do you know how long it is since one was found? Getting on for three hundred years—and that in spite of hundreds of expeditions, some of

them fitted out with the most modern equipment. That should give you an idea of the chances of success. Forget it.'

'Who was the last man to find a treasure?' pressed Tommy.

'A sailor named Captain Phips, away back in 1687. He found an old Spanish galleon that had gone down off the coast of Hispaniola, and arrived back in London with gold worth three hundred thousand pounds. That would be worth more than a million today. Incidentally, he'd formed a company, so the people who had put money into it came out with a handsome profit.'

'There you are!' cried Tommy. 'You see, it *can* be done.'

'Strangely enough, most of the authentic treasures are on or around the continent where we found ours—South America,' resumed Digger. 'There's a whole string of them. Perhaps the best known is the famous Cocos Island treasure, possibly because of its comparatively recent date. In 1821, when the South American states were fighting for independence, the people of Lima, in Peru, fell into a panic on the approach of hostile forces, and put all their gold and treasure into a brig named *Mary Dear*, commanded by a Captain Thompson. He bolted with what must have been the most fantastic treasure of all time—gold statues, ornaments, gems and coin reckoned to be worth around twenty million pounds. He didn't get away with it. The brig was overtaken at Cocos Island, off the coast of Costa Rica, and the crew put to death. But the treasure had disappeared. Thompson said it had been hidden on the island, but from that day to this no-one has been able to find it.'

'That'd be a nice little packet to drop on,' said Batty.

'It would,' conceded Digger. 'So would the equally famous Inca treasure, which disappeared when the Incas learned that the invading Spaniards under Pizarro had murdered their king. Another lot of gold said to be worth twelve million vanished when the Jesuits were driven out of Bolivia. There's another nice collection on the island of Trinidad—not the Trinidad in the West Indies, but another in the South Atlantic, seven hundred miles from the coast of Brazil. It consisted of gold and silver plate from the cathedral of Lima, in Peru, and was on its way to Spain for safety when it was captured by a pirate named Benito de Soto, who hid it on Trinidad, which must be one of the most horrible lumps of land in any ocean. It's a mass of volcanic rock on which the seas lash with such fury that it's only possible to land on it once or twice a year. As if that wasn't enough it swarms with gigantic crabs that make the place a nightmare. Later the pirates were caught and hanged, since when all attempts to locate the hoard have failed.' Digger tapped his pipe gently in the ashtray. 'I could go on like

this half the night, but what's the use of talking? I'm not wasting my time or money on what has proved to be less productive of results than chasing wild geese.'

Tommy looked disappointed. 'Then what about trying for one of the lesser treasures?' he suggested. 'Do you know of any?'

'I know of several,' admitted Digger. 'But before we go any further let me remind you that even if you find a treasure it doesn't mean you can keep it. You have to hand it over to the Government of the country concerned. Even here there's a law about what is called Treasure Trove, under which any treasure found must go to the Crown, the finder, admittedly, getting a share of the value.'

'Have you ever done any treasure hunting yourself?' asked Batty.

'No, but I once gave serious thought to looking for a lost gold mine, if you like to call that a treasure.'

'Was that in South America?'

'No. Central America. British Honduras, to be precise.'

'How did that come about?'

'I was up the Rio Hondo with a canoe worked by four Negro paddlers looking for anything that might be turned into money. I hadn't done very well so we turned into one of the small tributaries to try new ground. A couple of days later we met a dugout drifting downstream. In it was one man, a white. He was rotten with fever and had a wound in the arm that had turned septic. I did what I could for him but he died the next day. It turned out he was one of those people who believe that the ancient Mayas got their gold from mines which must still exist, and he had set off to find one.'

'Who were the Mayas?' questioned Tommy.

Digger sighed. 'I might have expected that. The Mayas were a mysterious race that occupied Central America from before the Christian Era until the fifteenth century. Where they came from we don't know, but they founded a great civilisation. They were ahead of Europe in some things. For example, they knew the world was round. Now the cities they built are overgrown with jungle. What happened to them is a mystery. They faded away, although some of the Indians there now may have descended from them. But I was telling you about this chap I found. He'd run into trouble. His men had bolted, he'd lost his stores—it's an old story. But the point is, he'd found gold. He assured me it was there, up the river, and to prove it he produced from under his shirt a bag with some dust and fair-sized nuggets. He was about to give me details when he went into a coma, from which he never came round. He said something about a waterfall and a portage; but he

was incoherent and I couldn't follow him. That's all. I buried him the next day, and that was that. I reported his death to the authorities when I got back to Belize, the capital.'



In it was one man, a white

'But surely you followed this up!' exclaimed Tommy.

'I did for as long as my stores lasted, and rain in the hills put the river in spate to prevent further progress. Moreover, Indians were watching us, and I

didn't like the look of them. I fancy they were a raiding party from over the border. It's dangerous country up there near the frontier for more reasons than one.'

'And did you never go back?' questioned Pompey.

'No. I always intended to, but what with reports of the natives being restless and Negro porters being unwilling to take the risks I never got around to it. I don't go about looking for trouble, and there were other places.'

'What were Negroes doing there?' asked Pompey. 'I thought they lived in Africa.'

'You'll find them all along that part of the American seaboard. They're mostly the descendants of the Africans who ran away from the plantations in the bad old days of the slave trade. Anyhow, I made a little profit on that trip, bringing back a few animal and bird skins for museums, a couple of bales of orchids and sundry flower seeds which were taken by horticultural institutions. I also found an extra large form of cacao, which grows wild there, and sold the seeds to a planter.'

'What's cacao?' murmured Tommy nervously.

'You should know,' retorted Digger. 'The plant that provides the world with chocolate. Talking of plants reminds me that aside from the gold incident another queer thing happened on that trip. I saw an Indian woman on the river bank with the most lovely blue flower stuck in her hair, and if it wasn't a rose I'll eat my hat. Think what a blue rose would be worth over here! When I tried to get near the lady for a closer look she bolted. I spent hours hunting for the plant but I never found it.'

'A blue rose?' muttered Batty. 'It doesn't seem possible.'

'Neither did a blue poppy until some were found in the Himalayas,' returned Digger dryly. 'That goes for a lot of other things too. There are still prizes to be collected in the back of beyond, although as time goes on it becomes harder to find anything new.'

'Okay,' broke in Pompey. 'Let's go. You pick the posies while I shovel the gold.'

Digger considered him pensively, slowly shaking his head. 'I think it's time I told you fellers to stop kidding yourselves about gold hunting. Prospecting is tied up with the science of geology, and none of you knows the first thing about it. Without me you wouldn't have a hope. You wouldn't know where to look and you wouldn't recognise the stuff if you saw it.'

'Wouldn't recognise it!' cried Tommy.

‘That’s what I said. Forget this idea of yours that gold always comes out of the ground in nice big yellow lumps. It can be black and it can be grey. The stuff that looks most like gold usually isn’t gold at all. It’s iron pyrites—fool’s gold, the old hands call it. You don’t find pure gold anyway. It’s always alloyed, to a more or less extent, with another metal—iron, copper, silver, platinum.’

‘Go on,’ urged Tommy. ‘I’ve always wanted to know about this.’

Digger looked at his watch. ‘All right, as we’re in no hurry. Gold is found in certain geographical localities in company with certain rocks. That includes sand and gravel, which are merely rocks that have decomposed or been ground small, usually by the action of water. So to start with, as gold doesn’t occur in every kind of rock you have to know the difference between quartz, porphyry, hornblende, gneiss, felspar, schist—and so on.’

‘Here, go easy,’ pleaded Pompey. ‘Do we have to know all this?’

Digger smiled. ‘It helps. It’s no use digging in the wrong place, is it? You see, originally the gold was held in rock of some sort, in the form of dust, flakes, or small pieces sometimes called nuggets. As the rock crumbles under the action of water or extremes of temperature the gold gets loose and falls out; so the best place to start looking is in an old river bed, dry or otherwise. Very well. As the gold falls out, being heavy it sinks into the silt, and it will continue to sink until it comes up against something hard, rock or slate, for instance, and there it stays. The prospector, therefore, finding indications of gold in sand or gravel, digs down to the hard layer, knowing that if there is any quantity of gold that’s where he’ll find it.’ Digger refilled his pipe.

‘Now then,’ he resumed. ‘The prospector, having found some dust, starts working his way uphill hoping to find the lode, or ‘matrix’—the original rock—from which the gold started. Normally, the nearer one gets to it the more gold one finds, the larger pieces having remained where they first fell. The hard layer I spoke about may be only just under the surface, or it may be some distance down, so you search the holes and crevices into which the gold may have fallen in times of flood. That’s the commonest way of finding gold. If you’re lucky enough to strike the mother lode you’ll find pieces of the stuff embedded in the rock.’ Digger grinned. ‘Of course, before you go to all this trouble it’s a good thing to make sure the stuff is really gold.’

‘How do you do that?’ inquired Tommy.

‘There are several simple tests. If it’s a flake or a nugget you can scratch it with the point of your knife. You won’t scratch iron pyrites. It’s too hard. I always carry mercury and nitric acid. Anything that sticks to mercury is

gold. Nitric acid won't touch gold, but it will act on any base metal, setting free some gas. Of course, there's a lot more to it, but that's enough to go on with. One day you may see all this in practice.'

'The sooner the better,' declared Tommy. 'I'm all for looking for this lost mine.'

'We could try it,' agreed Digger. 'At least we know the stuff is there, or thereabouts, and I have the advantage of knowing the country. Moreover, it's British territory.'

'Is there going to be a lot of walking on this jaunt?' asked Pompey anxiously.

'Not more than I can prevent, you may be sure,' replied Digger. 'There's only one way to get about, and that's by the rivers. Now that we have some capital I see no need to start paddling from the coast. A motor launch with a shallow draught, and a canoe in tow for up-river work, would be the ideal thing. With four of us we shouldn't need a native crew. Natives have their points, but they can also be a confounded nuisance if things don't go the way they want them.'

'Tell us more about this place Honduras,' said Tommy. 'All I know is I once had a Honduras postage stamp.'

'Not now,' protested Digger. 'There'll be plenty of time on the way. Let's get down to brass tacks. Are you all agreed that you want to go with me to look for this lost gold mine?'

There was a chorus of assent.

'You know what you're letting yourselves in for?'

Pompey grinned. 'Fever, starvation, and poisoned arrows.'

Digger shrugged. 'They may come into it, but I'm not thinking so much of the possible dangers as the certain discomforts.'

'If it was too cushy I wouldn't want to go,' declared Batty.

'You may change your mind about that,' stated Digger. 'There's an old saying that every man who goes into the jungle starts thinking of how soon he can get out of it.'

'I've heard that one,' asserted Pompey. 'Let's finish it. And as soon as he's out of it he starts planning to go back—which is just what you're a'doing of now.'

Digger smiled wanly. 'Okay. You win. But it isn't the big things that can make life a misery. There are a thousand insects, and they all sting or bite. Cover yourself at night and you sweat to death. Uncover yourself and you can be bitten to death, or bled by vampire bats. Jump into the river to cool

off and you may land on an anaconda, a sting ray, or an electric eel, but they won't make a skeleton of you as fast as a shoal of piranhas, which are only a few inches long. Do you still want to go?'

'Yes.'

'All right,' concluded Digger. 'There's a banana boat leaving for Jamaica on Saturday. In Jamaica we'll look for a launch to take us across the Caribbean to Honduras. I'd rather do it that way than make inquiries about a boat at Belize, which may start rumours of treasure hunting or a smuggling racket. The more quietly we can slip away the better, so no more babbling about gold. That's enough for tonight. I'll see about paying the bill.'

CHAPTER 2

THRESHOLD OF ADVENTURE

THE swampy delta of the tropic river lay placid under a crimson sun which, its daily task almost complete, was dropping swiftly behind the forest-girt horizon that fringed the western sky. There was still a little movement, for such waters, although they may fall quiet with the passing of the day, are never lifeless.

On the Honduras side of the main channel, up which a motor launch with a canoe in tow was chugging, a grove of coconut palms whispered as their fronds were caressed by the dying day-breeze. Near the bank a colony of snow-white birds stood knee-deep in the tawny water. On the other, the Mexican side, parades of crested egrets lined the several watercourses that crawled through a patchwork of jungle and morass. From the trees came the harsh cries of parrots. Brilliant butterflies of shimmering blue fluttered aimlessly from side to side.

Behind the launch lay the Sahumal Lagoon, spreading in an ever-widening expanse to the Caribbean Sea. Ahead, as far as Tommy was concerned, lay the unknown; at least, he liked to think it was unknown. That it was not unknown to Digger was revealed when, pointing to a village some distance away on the Mexican side, he was able to announce that its name was Sac Xas, in the province of Yucatan.

There were five persons on the launch, the company of adventurers having had their number increased by one, a Negro who could boast the curious name of Sunshine Bright, which for ordinary purposes automatically became Sunny. The name was at least in accord with his character, for his habitual expression was a broad smile, showing a mouth well filled with teeth of startling whiteness. A man of considerable physical strength, he had formed one of Digger's crew on a previous expedition. They had met by accident in Belize, and recalling that the black had proved a willing worker Digger had taken him on as a crew-man likely to be useful, for he knew the river and most of those who travelled regularly on it. He had provided the information that two expeditions were already up the river. One was an official party of American archaeologists, with a permit to excavate in Mexican territory. The other comprised two white—or nearly white—men, in a canoe with a native crew. What they were doing Sunny didn't know. There had been some secrecy about their movements.

Five weeks had passed since the dinner party in London, and the general plan had proceeded without a hitch. From a variety of small craft at Jamaica Digger had chosen a small but seaworthy motor launch named *Sprite*, which, he stated, was ideal for their purpose. It should, he thought, take them as far as the waterfall of which he had been told. Beyond that they would have to use a canoe.

Perfect weather had enabled them to cross the Caribbean to Belize in comfort. There, stores had been laid in, and a canoe, designed for river travel, bought. It was a native-built craft, with a shelter from sun and rain amidships, and thin timber tacked along the sides to give it a few more inches of freeboard. Such a conveyance, said Digger, would stand more knocking about, in the conditions that were to be expected, than the flimsy canoes designed for home waters.

All these arrangements had of course been left to Digger in view of his experience. He chose the stores with great care, pointing out that as it would be impossible to buy food on the river, all they were likely to require would have to be taken with them. Biscuits, rice, bully beef, and tea formed the bulk, but a few luxuries such as jam and pickles were included. They might, if they were lucky, augment the food supply with the rifle, deer and peccary being fairly common; but this was not to be relied on.

In the matter of weapons Tommy was surprised and a little disappointed, for he had supposed that such an expedition would be heavily armed. But Digger said that a rifle for hunting for food, a small-bore collector's gun for rare specimens, and one pistol for emergencies, would be ample. He told Tommy he could take an automatic if he liked, but advised against it, saying it was unlikely he would ever need it, and he would soon tire of carrying the extra weight in his pocket.

In short, now that the expedition was fairly launched, Digger proved to be a mine of information. It was not by accident, the others discovered, that the trip had started in January, for in Central America that is the beginning of the dry season, the best time of the year for bush travel.

The main facts about the country of their choice Tommy had learned on the way over. He knew that British Honduras is a Crown Colony on the Caribbean Sea, bordered by Mexico and Guatemala. It is not very big, comprising less than nine thousand square miles, more than half of which is still covered with primeval forest. The remainder is mostly savannah, open grassy plain with occasional trees. The ground rises as one travels inland from the coast, reaching a maximum height of four thousand feet in the Cockscomb Mountains. Only about sixty thousand acres are under cultivation, the chief crops being rubber, sugar, cacao, bananas, pineapples,

citrus fruits, and coconuts. With the price of coconuts down and a tree yielding only about eighty nuts a year, they were hardly worth the trouble of collecting, said Digger.

The capital of the colony is Belize, the seat of the Governor and his Administrative Council.

Digger had told them that for many years there had been trouble with Guatemala, which claimed the territory. The result was constant friction on the frontier, as was the case with most South American states, one reason for this being the impossibility of defining frontiers clearly in forest and jungle. That, said Digger, was about all, except that the whole country was littered with the ruins of towns, temples, pyramids, and other relics of the great Maya civilisation. They would, he assured them, see some of these remains as they went up the river.

Digger now announced that he could see the spot for which he had been making, a place where the water ran slowly and fairly deep against the bank, providing a good mooring. He had used the place before, having had it shown to him by his native crew.

‘We should just make it and get the tent up before dark,’ he averred, turning the nose of the launch towards the camping ground.

To Tommy the site revealed nothing to arouse enthusiasm. It was, in fact, a dreary-looking place, a few acres of flat, fairly open ground, dotted with an occasional tree and backed by scrub. Behind this rose the forest proper. As they drew near it seemed to Tommy that most of the trees were dead, or nearly so, and he made a remark to this effect.

‘They’re sapodillas,’ stated Digger, as if that in itself should be sufficient explanation.

‘Why do they die?’ questioned Tommy.

Pompey grinned. ‘I was waitin’ for that.’

Digger sighed. ‘The sapodilla is the tree from which chicle is derived, and chicle is—or was—the basic ingredient of chewing gum. Cut the tree and it yields a ‘latex’, a milky sap, like rubber. If the tree is cut too often it bleeds to death. That’s what’s happened to the trees you see here, and to most trees near the coast. They’re the easiest to get at. Don’t blame the chicleros. Their job is a hard one. We may be glad there are such men before this trip’s over.’

‘Why?’

‘Because they’re the fellers we have to thank for making paths through the jungle. As the easy trees become exhausted they push farther and farther in to find fresh ones; so if you strike a path you may be sure it was cut by a

chiclero. No-one else would do it. It's a queer thought that if gum-chewing hadn't become a habit there would have been no chicle collectors; and had there been no chicleros the great ruined cities in the jungles wouldn't have been discovered. They were the chaps who brought back the news. I used to collect the stuff myself; it helped to pay expenses. But now that a synthetic substitute for chicle has been discovered that line of business is about finished. The chicleros will die out; so, thanks to the chemists, the jungle paths will become overgrown and disappear like the men who made them. Native rubber collecting will end the same way.'

'Is there wild rubber here?'

'Hundreds of trees and plants produce a latex, and there are several sorts of rubber-producing trees in Central and South America. The old Mayas, and the Aztecs of Mexico, knew all about the bouncing qualities of the stuff. They were playing games with rubber balls a thousand years before rubber was known in Europe. They played a game, with a solid ball, rather like rugby. You can see the ruins of one of their courts a little higher up the river. They played between walls about twelve feet high, and the goal was a stone ring jutting out from the middle of each wall. They used to bet on the result too. There's nothing new about football—or football pools.'

'Why do trees produce latex?' asked Tommy.

'For the same reason that you produce blood. In the jungle it's war to the death between everything, and that includes the vegetable life. Everything fights to reach the sunlight. Cut yourself. You bleed. The blood congeals and closes the wound. If a tree is injured it closes the wound in the same way. A sapodilla will lose about four pounds weight of sap in closing the cut made by the chiclero. But you can't do that too often or you'll kill the tree. Remember, it isn't only men who do the damage. Insects are for ever boring holes, and birds dig out the insects.'

'What beats me,' put in Batty, 'is how you know all this.'

'I've told you before, the modern explorer has to know about plants as well as metals. If he doesn't—well, he's likely to have a thin time. Don't forget that trees and plants, as well as animals, insects, and reptiles, have developed their own methods of defence. Thorns and poison are the most common. I'll point out the first manchineel tree we see. It's deadly. One spot of sap in your eye and you're blind. The natives say the smoke of a manchineel fire will blind you if you sit in it. I don't know about that. I've never tried it. But I've seen plenty of Indians who have been blinded by the stuff.'

‘I’ve heard of trees poisoning people who sleep under ’em,’ said Pompey. ‘Is there any truth in that?’

‘I don’t know. The upas tree of Madagascar has that reputation. It’s certainly poisonous, and that goes for a lot of tropical trees. The upas probably got its reputation from the carbonic acid gas which in Madagascar rises from certain volcanic valleys. That’ll kill anything. There used to be talk of man-eating trees. I can show you plenty of carnivorous flowers, some of them strong enough to hold large insects, and, according to the natives, small humming birds. But I can’t imagine anything strong enough to hold a man, and I believe it’s now generally accepted that no such plant exists.’

‘It’s jolly decent of you to answer all these questions,’ said Tommy gratefully.

‘If you’re really going to be an explorer I’ll do my best to help,’ answered Digger. He smiled. ‘After all, it’s in all our interests that the party should keep fit and well. It’s easy to make mistakes in this sort of country. But here we are.’

Digger brought the launch alongside the bank. Pompey and Sunny jumped ashore and made fast. The tent was handed out and the work of erecting it began in haste, for the brief tropical twilight was fast giving way to night, and they were already being assaulted by myriads of insects.

Digger examined the ground closely inside and outside the tent.

‘What are you looking for—snakes?’ inquired Tommy.

‘Not in particular,’ replied Digger.

‘But there are snakes?’

‘Of course. But not so many that you need to worry about them. The one most common here is the *woula*—that’s its local name. It’s a fairly big one—ten or twelve feet long. But it isn’t poisonous, being a constrictor. You’ll see anacondas, too, before we get back, no doubt. They’re not bad either. The bushmaster is the really deadly one. Actually, I’m more concerned with scorpions. They grow to a fair size here—five or six inches long. They sit under a stone or a piece of wood, and you only know about it if you happen to pick it up. I was once stung by one, and I don’t want it to happen again. I was in agony for three days.’

‘Is that why you insisted that we all sleep in hammocks?’ asked Batty.

‘One reason. Everyone in this part of the world sleeps in a hammock. In fact, *hammock* is the native word. We borrowed it, and a lot of other words too. Canoe, moccasin, potato, coyote, banana. Even chocolate, which here, originally, was *chocolatl*.’

‘Aw shucks! Why use native words,’ snorted Pompey.

‘What other names were the early explorers to use when they came upon things hitherto unknown to them? Naturally, having no word of their own they used the native name, and took it home with them. It didn’t always happen. Take pineapple, for instance. Most countries in Europe took the native name, *ananas*; but apparently an Englishman decided to coin his own word and produced pineapple, having supposed that an apple would look like that if it grew on a pine tree. And talking of pineapples reminds me. Don’t try to eat one unless it’s quite ripe. A freshly cut green pineapple—and you may find some—can be a nasty thing.’

‘You mean—it’s poisonous?’ questioned Tommy.

‘Not actually poisonous. But it’s acid, and will give you a sore mouth. That can be uncomfortable, but the danger of a raw mouth in these parts is it provides a front door for germs and bacteria to get into your system. I can’t think of everything at once, but I’ll give you tips of that sort as we go along.’

‘One more question,’ pleaded Tommy. ‘After all, someone had to tell you all the things you know.’

‘True, but that didn’t happen in five minutes, or five years, if it comes to that,’ retorted Digger. ‘When you’ve travelled as long and as far as I have, if you keep your eyes and ears open you should know what I know—maybe more. Now, what’s the question?’

‘What in your opinion is the most dangerous animal we’re likely to meet?’

Digger considered the matter. ‘Some people might say the tiger, which in this part of the world is what we would call a jaguar. But I’d say the peccary, which as you probably know is a small bad-tempered wild pig. The tiger travels alone, but peccaries move in gangs of hundreds, and they’ll attack a man merely because he happens to be in the way. The beast isn’t very big—say, two to three feet long—but he has a formidable pair of tusks that point straight down, which he uses to tear up roots—or rip the entrails out of a jaguar if he tries any funny stuff. Fortunately he stinks like nothing on earth, and if the wind is right you can smell one of these herds a mile away, which gives you a chance to get clear. But your chances of being killed by a peccary are less than having a tree, or a bunch of nuts, fall on your head. There’s always a risk of that. Now, a little less talking while we have supper.’

The meal over, Tommy went outside to stretch his legs before turning in. In front of him lay the river, the heavens mirrored in its black surface. From

all around came strange sounds to remind him of where he was, and that the jungle never really rests. Bats wheeled. Frogs croaked. Woodpeckers hammered on the dying trees. A monkey chattered. Crickets chirped, and would, he was to learn, continue their monotonous song until sunrise.

Unfamiliar smells reached his nostrils. One had a wonderful fragrancy and, as a smell sometimes will, reminded him vaguely of something.

He turned back into the tent thrilled and happy, although perhaps a little apprehensive. This, he mused, was the beginning of a real adventure, the sort he had so often visualised. Whether or not they found gold was unimportant. The going might be hard, but it was better than walking on pavements. When he went in he asked Digger what it was that had such a fascinating smell.

‘Probably vanilla,’ answered Digger. He smiled. ‘Here you get not only the base of chewing gum, but one of the flavourings.’

‘Is it a flower?’

‘More or less. Actually it’s an orchid which grows on a vine thirty or forty feet high. The useful part, the article of commerce, is the seed pod. As it grows on the top, and the monkeys love it, it isn’t easy to find a quantity growing wild. The seed pod is shaped like a sword scabbard. The Spanish for scabbard is *vaina*, so they called the new plant *vainilla*—meaning little scabbard.’

‘Digger’s a blooming walking dictionary,’ declared Pompey admiringly.

‘I merely keep my ears and eyes open as I get around,’ returned Digger. ‘After all, as speech is something we must use every day of our lives, surely we should know a little about the words we trot out.’

‘We seem to have taken a lot from America,’ put in Tommy.

‘No more than from other places. It happens that being here you’ve come in contact with those originally used here. Had we been in India, you might have spotted native words like dinghy, khaki and pyjama, which we’ve borrowed. In Persia it would have been shawl, chess and caravan, which, instead of being a line of camels, means for us a house on wheels—an example of how words change their meanings. These are words travellers have brought home. On the other hand wars have brought words to us. The Danes gave us a lot—egg, dairy, skin, and sky, for example. The Normans brought their own names for meats—beef, pork, mutton, and veal. The Dutch, being a seafaring nation, gave us most of our nautical terms—skipper, yacht, cruise, keel, buoy, and so on.’

‘Strewth!’ exclaimed Batty. ‘Haven’t we any words of our own?’

Digger laughed softly. ‘A few. That tool you’ve got in your hand in good old English was a *thwitel*. You call the thing a knife, but you still whittle a stick. Mind you, we’ve presented other people with quite a few words. The first man to smear liquid rubber on fabric to make a waterproof garment was a Scot named Macintosh. Another Scot to put his name in the language was Macadam, who thought of using tar to give us dustless roads. Many of the words we use were originally names: sandwich, blanket, and shrapnel, for instance. There are dozens of them.’

CHAPTER 3

AN UNWELCOME ENCOUNTER

FOR five days the *Sprite* chugged her way up the river, slowly, for time was not of vital importance. In any case, the stream was running high, although it could be expected to fall quickly as the dry season advanced. The only other travellers so far encountered were chicleros on their way to the coast, for, as Digger told the others, the work of collecting was over for the time being, as the sap flows only in wet weather. The river, of course, had narrowed, and was now less than a hundred yards from bank to bank.

There had been no event of importance although there had been plenty of minor incidents to prevent interest from flagging, and those to whom the life was new had learned much, Digger making a point of passing on any information likely to prove useful. Sunny, who had spent most of his life on the river, was another source of jungle-lore. Spending most of the day in the bows watching for floating logs and other obstructions, he turned out to be a cheerful fellow who knew his job, and undertook willingly the chores which, in the steamy heat, might have become tiresome.

His eyes missed nothing. It was he who had spotted a tapir swimming across the river, and this had led to a graphic if dreadful demonstration of what a shoal of ferocious fish named piranhas could do. Digger, thinking of fresh meat, had snatched up his rifle and with a well-aimed shot killed the beast. The distance from the canoe to the tapir could not have been a hundred yards, and, moreover, the carcass was floating downstream. Yet before the canoe could reach it there was practically nothing left of the animal and, even as they watched, all that remained, the skeleton, had sunk out of sight. Tommy could not have imagined anything like it. He could see the fish tearing at the food like creatures demented.

It may have been the small size of the fish which, had it not been for swift action on the part of Sunny, would have tempted him into folly. He was reaching for a piece of the carcass, hoping to save it, when Sunny knocked him away.

Digger was angry. ‘What are you trying to do—lose your hand?’ he shouted, and went on to explain. ‘When those little brutes sink their razor-sharp triangular teeth into a thing they cut the whole piece away. The smell of blood seems to madden them. I’ve heard it said that you can swim across a river without being touched, although I wouldn’t care to try it; but should

you have a wound, even the scratch of a thorn, they're on you like a pack of wolves. For goodness sake be more careful in future, and think what you're doing.'

'I will,' answered Tommy, with such vehemence that Batty laughed. But Sunny didn't smile. Earning his living on the river he saw nothing funny in these little horrors, silver on top and orange underneath, with protruding lower jaws.

It was Sunny, too, who located the anaconda one evening as they were making camp. He suddenly stopped, sniffing the air like a spaniel. 'I smell snake,' he said, picking up a light axe used for chopping firewood. With this in his hand he advanced, while the others watched, towards a small area of reeds. But the reptile must have seen him approaching, for with a loud hiss it slithered out of its lair and disappeared into the river before Sunny could catch up with it.

It was the size of the creature that shook Tommy. 'It must have been forty feet long,' he declared.

'It was a big feller, but let's say twenty,' corrected Digger, grinning. 'I wouldn't call them dangerous. As you saw, that one was more afraid of Sunny than Sunny was of him.'

They often saw alligators, both large and small.

Tommy found that Digger had not exaggerated when he had said that the country was littered with relics of the past, for more than once camp had been made within sight of ancient burial mounds, some of which, Digger thought, had been excavated. There were so many, he averred, that it would take years to investigate all the ruins.

One evening they pitched the tent near some old walls of hand-worked stone, not so much from curiosity as because the site happened to be reasonably open ground. All too often the banks presented dense bush that was literally impenetrable. Wandering about the ruins while Sunny made camp, they came upon a round underground chamber which, from the heap of detritus near it, had recently been dug out. It was enough to start Tommy off again on the subject of buried treasure.

Digger shook his head. 'There's nothing to get excited about,' he said. 'You'll find plenty of these places. They're called "chultans". Sometimes they're round, sometimes oval. Nobody knows what they were for. The experts are still arguing about it. Some say they were tombs of important people, although one seldom finds bones in them. Some say they were for storing water, others say for grain. No-one really knows, and probably never will know. It's a queer thought, isn't it, that a thousand years ago this must

have been a flourishing town, with roads running in all directions for carrying on commerce with neighbouring peoples. How little could those who lived here have imagined that all their labour would come to this.'

Pottering about on the loose soil Tommy picked up his first find. It was a flat piece of material, sharply pointed, which had obviously been fashioned by hand. 'What's this?' he asked.

Digger took it. 'The blade of an obsidian knife. The Mayas used obsidian a lot for knives, weapons, tools, and so on. As you see, it's volcanic rock, rather like bottle glass. Break it and you get a sharp edge. You find it in different colours—black, grey, and green mostly; sometimes a mixture of colours. It's of no value, but at least you have a genuine souvenir.' Digger handed back the knife.

'How could it be anything but genuine?' asked Batty curiously.

'All over Central America you'll find these things offered for sale, but like many antiques at home, most of them are fakes, made for the tourist trade. There was a time when digging the ruins for curios, obsidian, jade, and pottery was quite a business; but now it's easier to mass-produce them at home. An Indian, finding a nice jade amulet, or some other ornament, instead of selling it sits down and makes copies of it. That's easier, and more certain of results, than sweating in the jungle. Really good genuine relics are not as common as they were. I've wasted a lot of time digging out chultans, but I've never found anything worth while.'

'No gold?'

'No. Gold is found, of course; and there must be a lot more; but you might spend your life digging in a place this size without ever finding anything more interesting than bits of broken pots. Actually, now I come to think of it, there's a well-known rumour of a treasure somewhere in this region. The story is that in 1860 an explorer named Carmichael saved the lives of two Indians. They, in return, said they'd show him the temple where Montezuma, one time king of the Aztecs of Mexico, had buried his treasure before he was murdered by the invading Spaniards. They went off into the jungle and Carmichael was shown a temple. Having no supplies he cut a cross in the stone and went to the coast to get some. When he returned he couldn't find the place. No-one has ever found it although plenty of people have tried. It doesn't sound a very likely story to me, but there it is.'

'Are we going to look for it?' asked Tommy.

'We are not,' returned Digger definitely.

They walked back to the tent and stood in the smoke of the fire, for the insects were busy.

In the matter of insects Tommy had discovered why fire-ants were so named. Walking past a bush, one of these minute red creatures had dropped on the back of his hand. He watched it with mild curiosity, admiring its brilliant colouring, until suddenly—as he put it—it gave him the works. It was as if a red-hot needle had been thrust through his skin. It seemed to him incredible that a thing so small could inflict so much pain. His yell brought the others along.

‘That was just one,’ said Digger soberly. ‘Now you can imagine what it’s like to have them all over you. They move about in armies. A few stings are enough to bring on a fever. The little devils have a habit of swarming on a liana. Touch it and they drop on you. There’s a blue wasp that does the same thing. The moral is, don’t touch a bough or a liana unless you have to—then have a good look at it first, as even Sunny does. He knows.’

Another unpleasant little beast to which he had been introduced was the chigoe, an insect rather like, but smaller than, a flea. One morning, as they were dressing, Digger saw him scratching a toe.

‘Never scratch,’ warned Digger. ‘You’ll make a sore place which in this climate may take some time to heal. I’ll bet you’ve collected a chigoe. Their favourite sport is to burrow between your toes or under a toe-nail. Sunny will get it out for you. He’s an expert.’

Tommy exposed his foot to the Negro who produced a sharp thorn. With this, using great care, he removed intact from between Tommy’s toes, a round blue object the size of a small pea.

‘That’s the egg sac,’ stated Digger, who had fetched a bottle of antiseptic, a spot of which he presently applied. ‘If you break it you’re certain to leave some eggs behind, in which case, instead of having one chigoe to deal with, you soon have a score. I should have told you to examine your feet every night.’

After that experience Tommy did.

Pompey appeared, looking ridiculous with an enormous orchid in a buttonhole. ‘What about this, chief,’ he asked. ‘Have I found something?’

‘No,’ returned Digger briefly.

‘But you said you collected orchids.’

‘So I do, but not that sort. It’s too big and clumsy for commercial use, by which I mean for bouquets and buttonholes. There’s a big market for the right sort in the United States, where thousands are sold every day in the florists’ shops.’

‘What’s wrong with growing ’em in hothouses,’ Batty wanted to know. ‘Why lug them home from here?’

‘They are grown in hothouses—millions of them,’ Digger informed him. ‘Lucky for some of us orchids grown commercially in hothouses slowly lose their vitality and their perfume, and from time to time must have fresh blood introduced into them from the wilds. It’s unlikely that you’ll see the best sorts unless I point them out to you. They don’t grow on the ground like the one Pompey is sporting; they’re well up in the trees, being parasites, like mistletoe—except that orchids hang their roots in the air. They fetch good money, but it’s quite a business picking the bulbs or tubers off the trees and packing them for export. They can’t be sent straight to market anyway; they have to be cleaned and fumigated to get rid of the bugs and things. I’ll tell you more about that if we collect any.’

By such conversations as these, as the launch had made its way up the river, Tommy had learned many things. Every day brought something new. Alligators were common, mostly small, but sometimes large. They did not interfere with them, nor were they interfered with by them; but before having a sponge down every evening, at a place chosen with care, Sunny made sure that the water was clear of the dangerous creatures that lived in it.

The birds and butterflies, with their brilliant plumage, were a never-ending source of joy to those who had not seen them before, the birds ranging from minute humming birds to gorgeous parrots and toucans with their fantastic beaks.

So the days had passed pleasantly, with little to suggest that they were soon to give way to a more strenuous existence.

As they made camp on the fifth evening Batty put the question to Digger: ‘Do you expect to have any difficulty in finding this tributary we’re making for?’ They had passed several.

‘There shouldn’t be any difficulty,’ replied Digger cautiously. ‘Although,’ he added, ‘on trips of this sort it doesn’t do to be too sure of anything. There is one risk. During the rains—and you know what tropical rain can be like—miles of country can become flooded, and the water may dig out new channels to reach the main river. Where there was one tributary there may be several, not actual streams but storm water draining from swamps or lakes. Either way, when we turn off you’ll find things different from this. A boat entering a small tributary vanishes into a sort of green cathedral, with the lianas hanging like bell-ropes.’

‘How far up do these lianas go?’ asked Tommy.

‘To the tree-tops, to get to the light. And as the trees may be three hundred feet tall, or more, the lianas must be taller, because instead of going up straight they have to wind their way up, hanging on to anything they can

reach. If a shoot can't get hold of anything it hangs down, which is why you so often see them in loops. I've heard it said that the liana, from root to tip, is the longest plant that grows. I don't know if anyone has ever actually measured one but some must run to five or six hundred feet.'

Pompey stepped in. 'A guy once told me, a scientific type he was, that the tallest vegetable on earth was seaweed—kelp, you know the stuff. I've seen it on the surface when its roots must have been in the sea bed a hundred fathoms down; which'd make it as tall as these 'ere lianas.'

'Could be,' agreed Digger. 'I shan't bother to do any measuring. We should reach the tributary tomorrow. I shall soon know if we're in the right one.'

'How?'

'I shall find my old camping ground. It may be overgrown, but the cross which marks the grave of the chap who told me about the gold should still be there. If . . . ' Digger broke off suddenly, staring up the river. 'Hullo, what's this coming?' he said slowly.

The others looked, and saw a big canoe being paddled fast down the middle of the stream. The several members of the crew were blacks. Two white, or nearly white, men sat in the stern.

'They're coming across to us,' observed Batty, as the canoe turned its nose towards the spot on which they stood.

'Do you know any of those men?' Digger asked Sunny, who had stopped work to watch.

'Yaas, boss,' answered the Negro. 'Dey's de two I told you 'bout. Dem no good niggers come from Belize.'

'No good?'

'I wouldn't have dat lot with me, no suh,' replied Sunny vaguely.

As the canoe pulled up against the bank it could be seen that it carried a black crew of eight. The white men stepped ashore. At this juncture it may have been prejudice, but Tommy did not like the look of them. Both were hard-bitten types, bearded, dark-skinned and unsmiling. One carried a rifle. The blacks looked a sullen surly lot. Sunny walked towards them while the white men approached Digger, whom they seemed to sense was the leader of the party.

'Got any grub to spare?' asked one without preamble. He spoke with an accent, which tended to confirm Tommy's impression that neither was British.

‘No,’ answered Digger. ‘We’re going upcountry and we shall need all we have. How do you come to be short?’

‘We’ve had a bit of trouble and stayed longer than we intended.’

‘I’ll give you enough to take you to Sac Xas. On this stream and with your crew you should make it in a couple of days.’

‘We’ve reasons for not wanting to call at Sac Xas. Moreover, we aim to stick around here a bit longer.’

Digger shrugged. ‘That’s your affair. You can’t expect us to deplete our stores so that you can carry on with your business, whatever that may be. If you’re out of grub surely the sensible thing would be for you to pull out and refit.’

‘We’d rather stay.’

‘Then you’ll have to make your own arrangements. I can let you have enough grub to see you down the river, but you can’t expect me to jeopardise my own expedition so that you can carry on with yours.’ Digger’s manner was firm, but not unfriendly.

The man changed the subject. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Primarily this is a pleasure cruise, but we hope to collect some natural-history specimens. What’s your line?’



‘Got any grub to spare?’

The man hesitated, glancing at his companion. ‘There’s gold somewhere about here and we reckon to locate it. If we do we’ll pay you well for anything you let us have.’

Digger smiled wanly. ‘That’s a big if. What gave you the idea there was gold here?’

‘A guy named Harwin struck it rich not so long ago, but the Indians got him before he could get out with it. I’ll tell you this much, to save you wasting your time. It ain’t on the main river.’

‘Well, good luck to you,’ said Digger evenly. ‘You thinking of staying the night here?’

‘No. We’d best pull on down.’

‘Okay.’ Digger handed over some tins of biscuits and corned beef, which were received, Tommy thought, with bad grace, considering the circumstances.

The men got back into their canoe, which went on down the river, soon to be lost to sight in the gathering darkness.

‘I don’t like that little lot,’ said Digger quietly, thumbing tobacco into his pipe as he watched them go. ‘I don’t know what they’ve been up to, but I’d say mischief of some sort. The real reason why they didn’t want to stay the night here, I fancy, is because it’s a bit too open.’

‘You mean—Indians?’ queried Tommy.

‘Possibly. More likely the Mexican authorities, which would account for them not wanting to call at Sac Xas. I can think of no other reason. Mexico is all right, but naturally they take a dim view of trespassers.’

‘They looked a phony lot to me,’ growled Pompey.

‘They were telling the truth about the gold,’ rejoined Digger. ‘Unfortunately, and I say unfortunately because it may lead to trouble, they’re looking for the same mine as we are.’

‘How do you know?’

‘You heard him mention the name of the prospector who struck it rich.’

‘Sure. Harwin.’

With slow deliberation Digger lit his pipe. ‘Harwin was the name of the man I found—and buried.’

There was a brief silence while this significant piece of information sank in.

It was broken by Pompey. ‘But how could they have got wind of that?’

‘The porters. Harwin told me his men had bolted and left him. One of them at least, perhaps all of them, must have got back to Belize. They talked. Those two whites must have heard the whisper. That’s why they’re here. And if I’m any good at guessing some of those blacks in the canoe were the very men who left Harwin in the lurch. They’d be brought along not only as paddlers, but as guides.’

‘Then how come they couldn’t find the place?’

‘Perhaps Sunny knows. I saw him talking to them.’

Sunny was standing by as if waiting to speak. Digger called him into the conference. 'Well,' he asked. 'What news?'

'Dey's lookin' for de gold mine, boss,' informed Sunny. 'Dat black trash ain't no use. Dey can't find de place. Dey stay so long lookin' de grub runs out. Dey say dey go home. White boss says no, so dey try to steal grub on de Mexican side. Peoples gets hurt and dat means trouble. Dat's a bad lot, boss.'

Digger drew a deep breath. 'So that's it. It's worse than I thought. You can't get away with that sort of thing, even here. I only hope those two toughs go on down the river, or we may be involved. Well, there's nothing we can do about it tonight, so we might as well get some sleep. But I'm afraid it means mounting a guard on our stuff. I wouldn't trust those two as far as I could see 'em. They might come back. But let's have some supper and turn in.'

CHAPTER 4

ANOTHER VISITOR

THE night passed without alarm, everyone having taken a watch of two hours. Sitting in the darkness, alone, was again a new experience for Tommy, who, for the first half-hour, perspired as much from nervousness as from the sticky heat. The forest was full of sinister sounds, stealthy rustlings and sudden outcries. Soft splashings and gurglings came from the river, too, as the inky water rolled on to the sea. However, as nothing emerged his nerves relaxed; but he breathed a sigh of relief when dawn put an end to his vigil.

Digger was early astir. ‘Those fellows must have gone on down the river as I advised,’ he said. ‘I was thinking about them after I’d gone to roost. I should have asked them exactly where the trouble occurred, because that’ll be a good place to keep clear of.’

‘We might have asked them their names,’ said Batty, smearing jam on a biscuit.

‘I asked Sunny, thinking he might have got them from the crew; but all they know is the names by which they call each other—Pedro and Louis. Pedro sounds Mexican. Sunny thinks Louis is a Guatemalan. But it doesn’t matter now. I shall do my best to stay on British territory, but that may not be easy on the main river, let alone a tributary.’

‘Shan’t we know where we are?’ asked Pompey, looking surprised. ‘We’ve got a map, ain’t we?’

‘Maps are one thing and the ground itself another,’ answered Digger. ‘As I believe I once told you, it isn’t easy to say for certain which country you’re in. The Hondo forms the boundary between Honduras and Mexico only for so far. It then turns south into Guatemala, but later swings north into Campeche, which is a province of Mexico, where it has its source. That’d be all right if there were signposts or fences; but how can anyone put up frontier posts through the jungle? The result is, while the frontiers are marked clearly enough on the map, when you get to them there’s nothing to show where they are. All you find is jungle, jungle, jungle. *Nobody* knows where they are.’

‘You mean, people don’t know what country they’re living in?’ interposed Batty.

‘That’s a fact,’ declared Digger. ‘All these countries have been arguing about their frontiers for years. Once in a while they go to war over them. Don’t ask me why. As if a few square miles of swamp or jungle could make any difference to anyone.’

‘Nuts,’ said Pompey. ‘That’s what they are. Nuts.’

‘Well, I only hope our tributary stays in British territory. If it doesn’t, we’d better pray there’s no-one there to argue about it. But let’s get moving. We should get there today. I have a feeling the sooner we’re off the main stream the better.’

The launch was just casting off when Sunny reached over the side and fished in a small square of paper which must have been floating downstream with the current. He handed it to Digger. Digger stared at it. Then, looking up, he muttered: ‘I don’t get this. Yes, by thunder, I do,’ he went on, a rising inflexion in his voice.

‘What is it?’ asked Tommy.

‘The label off a tin of biscuits—the sort I gave those fellers last night.’

‘How comes it floating down from upstream?’ questioned Pompey, his eyes narrowing, for the answer was self-evident.

‘They went downstream,’ muttered Digger. ‘We saw them go. But that was only for our benefit. They’d no intention of returning to the coast. That’s why they wanted the extra grub. They must have crept past our camp in the dark; which means that they’re now somewhere ahead of us.’

‘I heard noises on the river——’ began Tommy, but Digger waved him to silence.

‘So did I. We all did, no doubt, so you’ve nothing to blame yourself for. Those smart guys wouldn’t make any noise. But they’re not as smart as they think they are, or they wouldn’t have chucked a biscuit can overboard.’

‘Could they be watching us?’ queried Batty. ‘If they had a sniff of what we’re after, they would.’

‘I don’t see how they could know,’ returned Digger. ‘Unless,’ he corrected himself, ‘one of their crew *was* one of Harwin’s men, and saw me up the tributary. He’d guess where I was going and tell his bosses. But guessing won’t help us. The point is, they’re in front of us, and it’s as well we know it. Hello! Now what’s coming? Hold hard a minute, Sunny.’

Through the quiet air had come the chug-chug-chug of a motor launch. Now, round the next upstream bend, appeared the craft responsible. A white bow-wave indicated that it was travelling at speed.

‘Mexican flag,’ announced Digger. ‘We’re on our own ground here, but we’d better hang on in case they want to speak to us.’

The boat came straight over. A dapper Mexican officer jumped ashore. His expression was significant.

‘*Buenos días, caballero,*’ greeted Digger civilly.

‘*Buenos días.*’ The officer looked about him as if puzzled by what he saw.

‘Can I do something for you, *señor?*’ questioned Digger.

The officer considered him. ‘Have you been up the river?’ he inquired, speaking of course in Spanish.

‘No. But we are going up.’

‘Are you English?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you seen a canoe, with two white men and a black crew, go past?’

‘Yes. They came here last night asking for food. They went on down, but I have reason to think they went up again during the night.’

‘Are you associated with these men?’

‘Very definitely not.’ Digger showed the label and explained what it implied.

‘*Gracias, señor.*’ The officer’s official manner softened to one more friendly. ‘These men have been in Mexico and caused much trouble. They stole things from the camp of an American expedition which has a permit to dig.’

‘So I understand. My servant spoke to the crew, and they told him.’

‘What I do not understand is this,’ went on the Mexican. ‘We have come down the river. If the canoe is above you why did we not see it.’

‘I would say these men heard your engine and went into hiding until you passed. The trouble with engines is they make a noise.’

‘True. May I ask where you gentlemen are going?’

‘We are really *turistas* on a pleasure trip. We shall stay on British soil. If we leave it it will be by mistake, and that, as you know, is easily possible. In that case I hope you will be lenient with us. Should we wish to land in Mexico we shall of course apply for permission to do so at the nearest point where that is possible.’

‘*Gracias, señor. Adiós.*’ The officer returned to his boat, which, after turning, tore off again upstream.

‘He was all right,’ averred Tommy.

‘Most people are all right if you treat them right,’ asserted Digger. ‘These people who are for ever making complaints about ill treatment abroad usually have only themselves to blame. It’s no use throwing your weight about when you’re in the wrong. It doesn’t get you anywhere. I’ve always found the Mexican authorities polite, if a bit particular about whom they allow to land.’

‘Why did you say we were tourists?’ asked Tommy.

‘So we are, really. I mean, we’re here as much for the fun of it as for money. Mexico, like most countries today, is only too glad to have the right sort of tourists bringing their money in. But let’s get away. I reckoned on an early start. Instead, we’re making a late one.’

They went on board and the *Sprite* continued up the river, which now began to narrow with every passing mile; and while they kept a sharp look-out for the Mexican frontier patrol launch, and the canoe for which it was searching, they saw neither. About noon Digger pointed to the mouldering remains of an abandoned chiclero hut on the bank, and said he had camped there on his last trip. It was a landmark that told him they had not much farther to go.

In the event this did not appear to be so, for three o’clock came and there was still no sign of the opening for which they were seeking. Digger cut the motor and allowed the boat to drift. ‘We must have overshot it,’ he announced.

‘How could we do that?’ asked Pompey.

‘I don’t know; but I’ve never seen this part of the river before. We shall want every drop of fuel we have so I see no point in going on. We’ll go back.’ So saying Digger turned the boat, and with only enough power to keep it under control headed downstream.

It took them some time to find the tributary, the reason being that Nature had done its best to hide it. To make a rather long story short it was eventually discovered that a great tree, dragging with it others to which it was fastened by lianas, had fallen across the opening. High water had hung all sorts of rubbish on the branches and the lianas that festooned them, with the result that the entrance was blocked. The deception was made complete by living plants that had taken root on the dead tree. As Digger pointed out, it was a good example of the sort of thing that could happen to confound the explorer, particularly as, if the barrier was not burst by a spate, the river that lay behind it would have to find another exit.

It took them an hour to cut a way through it, during which time they were stung and bitten by all manner of insects. The work had to be done

carefully to prevent the gap being too conspicuous to others.



It took them an hour to cut a way through it

‘I see what you mean about the bugs,’ remarked Tommy ruefully, as he applied lotion to his smarting skin while the *Sprite* nosed its way up the tributary. He also remembered Digger’s remark about vanishing in a cathedral, for the water was now only about thirty yards wide, and with the trees interlacing their branches overhead they moved through a green gloomy world. He fell silent, subdued by the immensity of it.

‘We shan’t get far up here in this craft, if I know anything,’ observed Pompey, as the *Sprite* steered a sinuous course between fallen trees and the great flat plates of water-lily leaves.

‘If we can get to my old camping ground, where I buried Harwin, we shall be doing all right,’ stated Digger.

This they did, after a good deal of hot hard work, sometimes having to cut a passage through water lilies and other weeds which, stretching from bank to bank, barred their progress. More than once Pompey and Sunny had to free the propeller of stuff that had fouled it.

They arrived at their immediate objective, Digger’s old camp, as the green light that filtered through the distant tree-tops was turning grey. It was not much of a place, being no more than a few square yards of ground that had been levelled by the fall of a big tree that had since rotted away. The secondary growth that covered this had been cleared by Digger on the occasion of his previous visit, but a fresh lot had sprung up, and this would have to be cleared before camp could be made.

Digger pushed his way through a tangle of ferns and young palms to the fringe of the frowning forest and pointed to a rough wooden cross. ‘That’s where poor Harwin’s gold hunting ended,’ he said sombrely.

‘He must have been a fool to tackle a job like that on his own,’ remarked Batty.

‘That’s what most people would say,’ returned Digger pensively. ‘They’d say it because he failed. Had he been successful it would have been a different matter. He would then have been a brave intrepid explorer. The world passes judgment not on what a man is, but on his success or failure. Give me a man who has the courage of his convictions. Harwin was one. If he was a fool then so was Mungo Park, setting off to walk three thousand miles across Africa, when it really was the Dark Continent, in a top hat and frock coat, his Bible in his pocket and an umbrella under his arm. Such men have scattered their bones all over the world, but believe you me, they made their mark. Harwin has made his mark here. Because of him we’re here. Because of us others will come. That’s how it goes. But never mind philosophy. It’s time we were practical.’

Darkness fell before they could finish clearing the site, so Digger said the best thing they could do was sleep on board the launch and finish the job in the morning.

‘This will be our base camp,’ he announced. ‘We couldn’t get much farther in the launch anyway, so from here we shall probably go on in the canoe. I suggest that tomorrow we spend the day here. We could do with a

rest and a tidy up. Moreover, it might be a good thing to wait awhile to make sure we haven't been followed.'

This was agreed.

With the fall of night there fell the hush which in the wilds accompanies the departure of the sun, as if all creatures had been waiting and watching for the event.

As they sat on deck having their supper, with fireflies flickering round the trees, Tommy felt he was now really in one of those forests of which he had read so much but never expected to see.

Digger raised a hand. 'Listen,' he requested.

From somewhere a long way off came a low unbroken rumble to add a final touch of mystery to the scene.

'That's water,' said Digger. 'Must be the falls Harwin told me about. We should soon be seeing them.'

CHAPTER 5

A MEMORABLE CLIMB

THE next day was to be one which Tommy was to remember, although he had no reason to suspect it as he helped with the final work of establishing the base camp, which really meant no more than clearing the site and putting up the tent. This did not take long, and Digger then began equipping the canoe with such things as food and tools, and anything else that might be required for the continuation of the voyage upstream.

Tommy, with nothing in particular to do, wandered about, finding plenty to interest him in the vicinity of the camp.

‘Don’t you go far away,’ warned Digger.

Tommy had no intention of going far, for he still regarded the forest with respect. But as so often happens, finding nothing to cause alarm he did go a little farther than he intended. There was always something a little farther on to invite investigation—a fantastic growth of fungus, a strange plant or insect. He may have gone a hundred yards, at which distance he was still within earshot of the camp, so he felt quite safe.

He was about to turn back when he saw lying on the ground a small object of brilliant blue. He picked it up. It was a flower petal, thick and waxy. Instantly it recalled what Digger had said about a blue rose. He raised the petal to his nose but could discern no perfume. From where had it come? Thinking of the sensation it would cause if he returned to camp with a complete flower he looked about for the plant; but there was no sign of it. This gave him a qualm, for he remembered the circumstances in which Digger had seen the flower. Had Indians passed that way? Were they being watched? The petal was quite fresh.

The answer dropped from the sky. Another petal fluttered down to drop almost at his feet. He turned his eyes upward. He could see no flowers, blue or otherwise, but he could hear monkeys quarrelling so it required no great effort of the imagination to surmise what was happening. They were among the flowers. That, obviously, was the answer. Digger had often said that they would find few flowers at ground level. Everything strove to reach the sunlight, and it was at tree-top level that gardens were to be found.

Tommy now made his first ill-advised move, although, to be sure, in his anxiety to make a discovery, and at the same time please Digger, it was a natural one. He may not have realised how high the trees were, for the

interlacing branches, on which dead stuff had fallen, prevented him from following the trunks to their limit, but he knew he was in for a strenuous climb because the lowest branches were a good fifty feet above his head. This did not worry him, for there were plenty of lianas to enable him to reach them.

Giving one of these natural ropes a good shake to make sure there were no insects on it, and a hard pull to confirm that it would carry his weight, he set off.

The work was hard rather than difficult, for the higher he got the more lianas there were from which to choose, often with loops to offer a foothold. Anyway, without encountering serious opposition, he reached the first branch, and on this he sat for a while to recover his breath and wipe perspiration from his face. Looking down, he was a little startled to see how high he was. From below it hadn't looked so far. Looking up, he saw that he still had a long way to go. In fact at this stage he nearly gave up, perceiving that he had taken on a bigger task than he had anticipated. However, it was the old story—having come so far he would go on.



Looking down, he was a little startled to see how high he was

So off he went again, inspired by the fact that the light was getting brighter all the time. Indeed, there was now so much stuff below him that he could hardly see the ground. He had a shock when, again sitting astride a branch to mop his face, a monkey that could not have known he was there, landed close beside him. It fled instantly, screeching, and Tommy's heart missed a beat when he realised he had nearly fallen.

It was shortly after this that he made a discovery which alone made his labours worth while. Pushing his way through a mat of dead leaves and twigs he found himself surrounded by a wonderful display of huge mauve

and purple orchids, growing as thickly as buttercups in an English water meadow. Were these, he wondered, the sort that Digger wanted? He resolved to answer the question by sending some of them down, which he did by tearing up two clumps by their tuberous roots and dropping them.

After this he went on to the top, no great distance away, and there before his eyes was a spectacle that he could not have imagined. Around him was a sea of flowers of all colours, with the blue ones that he sought predominating. It was a wonderful sight, but disappointment awaited him, for he soon ascertained that the blue flowers were not roses, although there was a resemblance. They were, he thought, a sort of clematis, with a flower in the shape of a large buttercup. No matter, he mused, he had seen a sight worth seeing. He plucked some of the flowers and threw them down; in case these did not reach the ground he tucked some inside his shirt.

At this juncture two things occurred to disturb his equanimity. He could hear the others calling him, and realised they supposed him to be lost in the forest. The voices seemed to come from a long way off. He shouted back, of course, but some monkeys that had now discovered him were making such a din that he was by no means sure he would be heard. It was a situation that he had not foreseen.

The other thing was a wave of giddiness, followed by a slight feeling of sickness. For a moment he sat still, putting his discomfort down to the heat. But when instead of feeling better he discovered that he was getting worse he suspected another reason. All the time he had been there he had been aware of a pungent scent, given off, presumably, by the flowers; now, perhaps because they were being shaken, the perfume became almost overpowering, nauseating. He felt it was choking him.

Trembling a little from the knowledge of the distance he would fall should he faint, he started down, to discover, as others have done, that descent from a high altitude is more difficult than ascent. But as he went on, hand over hand from one liana to another, all the time getting farther away from the flowers, he had the consolation of feeling his sickness pass.

He could still hear the others calling him. They seemed to be farther away than ever, and he could only conclude that they were carrying their search deeper into the forest. He yelled back, and to his great relief got an answer. But the calling continued. What he did not realise, although he might have done so, was that he was being sought for everywhere except in the right place, which was in the air overhead.

A final difficulty arose just when he thought he was as good as on the ground. He was in fact below the lowest branches, going down a liana. It

ended in a loop nearly forty feet above the ground. Not another was in reach, so there he swung, seated in the loop, observing with dismay that he had lost his way coming down and had arrived at a different place. At this awkward moment the others appeared below him. They stopped and called. He answered. Their faces were upturned.

There was a brief silence. Then Digger said in a cold, calm voice, 'What do you think you're doing?'

'He's waiting for the birdies to sing,' declared Pompey, grinning.

'No, he's kidding himself he's the young man on the flying trapeze,' stated Batty.

Said Digger curtly, looking up at Tommy, 'Quit this Tarzan stuff and come down. We've been looking everywhere for you.'

'That's just it,' answered Tommy lugubriously, 'I can't get any farther. I've come to the end of my tether.'

'Why did you have to go up there?' demanded Digger. 'Isn't there enough room for you on the ground?'

Tommy's reply was to take his bunch of blue flowers, somewhat mangled, from his shirt and toss them down.

This caused a moment of excitement, and Tommy thought he really was going to cause a sensation.

Digger, seeing how he was fixed, gave instructions. 'You'll have to climb back up to the branch and come down another one. This one.' He shook a liana that reached the ground.

Tommy made his way wearily back to the branch, crawled along it to the liana indicated, and, climbing down it, completed his overhead journey, filthy, exhausted, and perspiring all over. After taking a minute or two to recover he told his story.

The rose part of it was disappointing, but Digger showed interest in the orchids. 'You say you threw some down?'

'Yes. They can't be far away.'

They were soon found. 'This is good stuff,' asserted Digger. 'They're *cattleyas*; fine colour too. One of these plants you threw down would be worth five pounds at home. Are there plenty?'

'Hundreds. I might say thousands.'

'Good. We'll bear it in mind. If we fail to find the metal we may have a little gold mine over our heads. Let's get back to camp. When we get there you'd better stay there. Bring those orchids, some of you.'

Digger started walking back, carrying the blue flowers Tommy had given him. From time to time he raised them to his nose. Also, Tommy noticed, he broke off a seed pod, crushed it in his hand, smelt it and put it in his pocket.

‘It has a terribly strong smell,’ said Tommy.

‘So I noticed. I’m more interested in the perfume than the flower. It may be something quite new.’

‘Would it be worth anything if it was?’

‘A new perfume in the United States can be worth up to a million dollars.’

‘How much?’ Tommy’s voice cracked with incredulity.

‘You heard me. Perfumery is big business. People get tired of the old scents. In fact, you can get so accustomed to them that you don’t notice them any more. A new one makes people sniff and turn their heads to see where it’s coming from. Which is why a wealthy woman will pay the high price demanded for a few drops. The price helps to keep it rare. Oh, yes, it’s expensive all right. Mind you, it isn’t only scent. It goes into soap, hair cream, face powder, and other toilet preparations. Perfumery isn’t just a luxury trade. Your nose should have told you we live in days when everything has to smell nice. Consequently the creation and production of basic aromas employ an enormous number of people.’

‘Where do all these scents come from?’ asked Batty.

‘Most of them have a vegetable base, an essential oil derived from flowers, leaves, roots, bark or seeds. Sometimes it’s an aromatic gum, like frankincense and myrrh, which were known to, and used by, the ancients in Biblical days. They’re resins which in the Old World served the same purpose as rubber latex here. If the tree is damaged they ooze out and gum up the wound. You must have seen resin on fir trees at home. Explorers are always on the look-out for something new, which is why I’m interested in your blue flower even if it isn’t a rose. We’ll take some seed pods home with us. I’ve told you before, gold isn’t the only thing in the jungle worth picking up.’

They had nearly reached camp when a warning whistle from Sunny, who was leading, brought them to a halt. The Negro pointed.

Words were unnecessary. Moving down the river bank and across the camping ground was a broad, black, swiftly-flowing stream. But it was not water. It was an army of ants on the march; insects a good half inch in length.

‘This is where we wait,’ said Digger philosophically. ‘Don’t worry. They won’t interfere with us if we don’t provoke them. Never try to cross their path. One bite is painful, so you can imagine what it would be like to have them crawling all over you. Everything has to give way to them except the anteaters that live on them. Size makes no difference. Even the jaguar treats them with respect.’

‘There must be millions of them,’ muttered Tommy, as he stood watching the column that seemed to have no end.

‘There *are* millions,’ returned Digger calmly.

‘What about our kit?’ asked Batty anxiously.

‘That’ll be all right,’ Digger assured him. ‘On the whole they do more good than harm, because they eat every living thing on their line of march. They clean up as they go.’

‘What you might call proper moppers-up,’ observed Batty.

Tommy could only stare aghast. There seemed to be something as relentless as death itself in this awful march past regardless of obstacles. It was about half an hour before the end of the column disappeared into the jungle, and they could go on to the camp.

‘What are you going to do about the launch if we’re going on in the canoe,’ asked Pompey later, as they sat over the midday meal. ‘Will it be safe to leave it without a guard, with those two scallywags nosing about?’

‘I was about to raise that question,’ answered Digger. ‘It’s one of two problems I’ve had on my mind. It would be dangerous to leave the launch for any length of time, so the answer really depends on how much farther we have to go. We can hear the falls so we can’t be any great distance from them. Harwin went beyond them, but from what he said I don’t think it could have been far. He tried to tell me something else, but he was too far gone and couldn’t get it out. Anyway, we certainly couldn’t get the launch past the falls. We may have a job to portage the canoe. We shall know more about that when we see them. We might get the launch a bit nearer—the closer the better.’

‘Anyone coming up the river would see her where she is,’ stated Pompey.

‘That’s what I don’t like about it,’ answered Digger. ‘If Indians found her they might loot her. I think a sound plan would be to make a sortie tomorrow in the canoe to find out what’s in front of us. Somebody could stay on guard. Even if we can’t get much farther we might find a place where she’d be less conspicuous.’

Everyone agreed that this was a good idea.

‘The other thing that worries me is the uncertainty of knowing which country we’re in,’ resumed Digger. ‘Even now I couldn’t swear we were still in British territory. Since leaving the Hondo our general course has been south-west, so there’s a chance we may be in Mexico or Guatemala. We’ve no way of checking it. As things are at the moment, if we ran into trouble with frontier officials we could probably talk ourselves out of it by honestly pleading ignorance. But if we struck gold it would be a different matter.’

‘So what?’ demanded Pompey belligerently.

‘Let’s put it like this,’ went on Digger. ‘If Harwin’s gold happens to be easy to get at we might take all we could find and pull out without making a song about it. But if it happens to be a mining job we should have to apply for a concession to work it, because sooner or later somebody would come along and spot what we were doing. You can imagine what the situation would be if we found a rich vein of gold, and three countries claimed it was in their territory. We should start a war and maybe find ourselves in the thick of it.’

‘Aw shucks!’ growled Pompey. ‘Let’s find the stuff and leave the Governor in Belize to do the arguing—if there is to be any.’

Digger smiled. ‘That’s one way of looking at it, and perhaps it’s the best. As you say, let’s find the stuff.’

And so it was decided.

CHAPTER 6

GOLD!

THE next morning dawned fine, but, as usual, gloomy; for, as Tommy had by this time realised, under the vast canopy of leaves and palm fronds there could never be anything but an eerie green twilight except where a forest giant had fallen, dragging down its neighbours by the lianas by which they were attached.

Pompey, who had a slight touch of fever, offered to stand guard over the launch, so Digger, having dosed him with quinine, and the others were soon on their way upstream in the canoe.

The going was slow, not so much on account of the current, which was in fact inclined to be sluggish, as from water lilies and other aquatic growths which, spreading sometimes across the stream, prevented the canoe from taking a straight course. However by midday they had made an estimated four miles, with the noise of the falls steadily becoming louder. No tributaries were seen, but by accident they made a discovery that was to affect their plans.

The river forked. As there was nothing to choose between the two waterways they took the right-hand one, only to find themselves, a few minutes later, in a cul-de-sac. Clearly they had struck a backwater. It ended in a small lagoon occupied by the inevitable water lilies and not a few alligators, reptiles to which they had by this time become accustomed. Parrots, with plumage of rainbow hue, flapped lazily from tree to tree, or clung to branches looking like flowers created by a mad magician. From a rotting branch, half submerged, sprang a spray of crimson orchids; an inch away, a humming bird, no less brilliant, hung motionless on invisible wings as it sipped the nectar from the flowers. There were no banks in the literal meaning of the word, the forest trees appearing to rise straight from the stagnant water. The trunks of the trees could not be seen, for over them, taking advantage of the sunlight, hung a thick curtain of vines to make a solid wall of green. Some of these climbers were in flower, making a picture that would have been enchanting had it not been for significant ripples in the water.

‘We shall have to go back,’ said Digger.

Returning to the fork they took the left-hand branch, a quickening current telling them they were on the real stream. Almost at once, rounding

a bend, they came upon their immediate objective. With one accord they stopped paddling to gaze at the breath-taking spectacle suddenly presented.

Straight in front rose a cliff perhaps two hundred feet high, the ridge clear cut against the sky. It was not straight, but semi-circular, giving the impression of a giant basin one half of which had been cut away. Over a point roughly in the middle water was falling into the broad black foam-covered pool, on which the canoe was gently rocking. The air, usually so silent, was filled with a noise like distant thunder. Spray from the collision rose in a smoke-like mist to lose itself in the blue dome overhead.

‘Well, there it is,’ shouted Digger. He had to shout to make himself heard above the noise.

‘You say Harwin went beyond the falls?’ queried Batty.

‘Yes.’

‘Then there must be a way round.’

‘Obviously. He and his crew must have cut a passage through the jungle and then carried the canoe up. It will be overgrown by now, no doubt, but we should be able to find the place. Just a minute. Let’s see how deep the water is.’ So saying, Digger tied a bullet on a length of string and took a sounding. ‘Thirty feet,’ he announced. ‘We might have expected it would be pretty deep. Pity.’



Straight in front rose a cliff

‘Why is it a pity?’ asked Tommy.

‘Because if there’s gold above the falls you may be sure that plenty has been washed over; and as that’s been going on for perhaps thousands of years you can imagine what the bottom of this pool must be like. Had it been shallow we might have done something about it, but as it is we might as well forget it. Let’s see if we can find the place where Harwin made his portage. He’d need rollers to get the canoe up, and they should still be there, even if they’re rotten.’ Digger’s eyes explored the base of the green wall of jungle

which everywhere, except at the cliff, hemmed them in. He pointed. 'There seems to be a bit of a beach over there. Let's go over.'

It turned out to be the right place, for mounting diagonally upwards from the narrow strip of gravel ran a passage, a narrow green tunnel which the jungle was doing its best to fill.

'Let's explore and see what the going is like,' suggested Digger.

They beached the canoe and began what turned out to be a hard, hot, but not impossible climb. Sunny went ahead and with deft strokes of his machete cleared the path.

'I have a feeling,' said Digger during a rest, 'that when we get to the top we may find that the country has entirely changed its character. In this part of the world a few hundred feet of height can make a lot of difference. So far, we've been on the floor of the jungle, on soil washed down through the ages from the higher ground. On top we may find ourselves on a plateau that is mostly rock.' And Digger turned out to be correct.

Actually the ground began to change before they reached the top, more and more rock outcropping through the soil and decaying vegetable matter. And as the ground changed so did the nature of the jungle. The undergrowth became sparse, and presently gave way to a forest of magnificent cedars that sprang from a carpet of luxuriant moss.

Digger whistled. 'Take a look at those trees,' he invited in a curious voice.

'What about them?' asked Batty wonderingly.

'This is the fortune we've been looking for—if we could get this timber to the coast. This is a treasure grove, as you might say; and here it's likely to remain. I've struck this sort of thing before, but there's nothing one can do about it. To get this timber to the coast would cost more than it's worth, valuable though it is.' Digger laughed suddenly. 'This reminds me of something. I once found a fine stand of mahogany. I sold it to a timber company who forgot to pay for it. But I had the last laugh. They cut it at the wrong time and lost the lot. It's a queer thing, but if you cut mahogany when the moon is full it splits. Worms get in and it's goodbye.'

'Are you telling us that the moon can affect a tree?' asked Tommy suspiciously.

'I am—in this part of the world anyway. Indians won't cut palms for house building when the moon is full, for the same reason. There's one tree that becomes so hard when the moon is full that you *can't* cut it. It'll turn the edge of an axe. But let's carry on.'

They continued the march to the top, the trees becoming smaller as they ascended, eventually to find themselves gazing across an open plain of stiff wiry grass, broken here and there by a group of pines. For some little distance the ground was reasonably level except for outcrops of rock that ran like waves across it; but then it began to rise sharply towards some distant hills, the summits of which cut a hard jagged edge against the turquoise heavens.

The relief at once more being able to see the sky and breathe clean fresh air, after the Turkish-bath atmosphere of the forest floor, to Tommy made the climb worth while.

‘Let’s find the river,’ said Digger, for they had emerged some little distance from it. With the noise of the falls guiding them they soon found it, flowing swiftly through a shallow gorge. ‘Harwin didn’t launch his canoe here; if he had, he’d have gone over the falls,’ asserted Digger. ‘It looks smooth enough, but there’s a head of water here. Let’s keep going.’

Following the river they walked forward for about two hundred yards, when they found themselves above the gorge, with the river, broader now, rippling over a shallow bottom. It was, moreover, clear, another pleasant picture after the swollen brown liquid of the lower levels. They all waded into it and splashed themselves, knowing that their clothes would soon dry.

Said Digger, as they sat on the bank, ‘I think we’ve come far enough for today. We’ve seen what we came to see. The thing now is to get the canoe up here, otherwise it will mean turning ourselves into packhorses with food, tools and so on. We’ll tackle that tomorrow.’

‘How about bringing the launch up to that lagoon we found,’ suggested Tommy. ‘There’s nothing on the river to stop us. Tucked away under those vines no-one would be likely to see it, so no guard would be necessary and the party could keep together.’

‘I think that’s the thing to do,’ agreed Digger. ‘It’ll need all hands to get the canoe up here. I must say I like the look of this country. We may be the first in the field except for Harwin, in which case anything is possible. Let’s get back.’

‘Aren’t you going to look for gold today?’ asked Tommy, in a disappointed voice.

‘We’ve plenty of time for that. Besides, we’ve no equipment with us.’ Digger smiled, and glanced at his watch. ‘We can spare a few minutes to see what the luck’s like. You never know. Remember the old prospectors’ slogan: “Where it is, there it is.”’

So saying Digger got up and waded a little way into the stream to where some flat-topped boulders of water-worn rock broke the surface. The others followed and watched with interest as he sought, and presently found, a cavity filled with sand. Scooping out a handful he examined it closely. There was a slight sparkle.

‘Diamonds!’ exclaimed Tommy.

Digger shook his head. ‘No. Diamonds are no use anyway.’

‘Why on earth not?’

‘They’re the most strictly controlled objects in the world. If we’re to find stones let them be emeralds. They’re not controlled. You can sell them for any price you can get.’

‘What have you in your hand?’

‘Just the sort of concentrates one would expect to find here, dropped in by the floods. I can see grains of quartz, jasper, and garnet. They’re good signs, but nothing more.’

Holding his hand in the water Digger allowed the contents to trickle out. He took another handful, digging deeper. ‘Nothing doing,’ he said presently. ‘If there’s colour here it’ll be at the bottom,’ he went on, scooping the pothole. The same procedure was followed. When the sand had nearly all gone, with a finger and thumb he picked out an object rather smaller than a pea. A slow smile spread over his face as he handed it to Tommy. ‘There’s a present for you.’

‘What is it?’

‘The stuff you’re crazy about. Gold. Gold never before touched by a human hand. You’ve got your first nugget. It’s small, but they usually are. It’s on the pale side. Probably contains some silver or platinum. We’d better test it.’

Tommy was pale with excitement. ‘Let’s get some more. Where there are little ’uns there must be big ’uns.’

‘Maybe. But you might spend the rest of your life digging without finding one. Remember what I told you at home? Now you’ve seen it in practice. This is the easiest way of winning gold, but it wouldn’t interest a mining engineer. It’s too slow, too haphazard. This piece of gold came from higher up—perhaps from those mountains we can see. It worked loose from the lode, as it’s called, and was washed down. Gold, being heavy, sinks; but sometimes a piece gets trapped in a pothole, like this one, and until it’s sucked out by a subsequent flood, there it stays. That little nugget of yours may have been in that hole for a thousand years, waiting for you to come along. As I say, it wouldn’t interest the big people, beyond showing them

that there is metal here. They wouldn't wait for the weather to do the work for them. They'd blast the mountains and pulverise the rock. I'd say it was in this way Harwin got his gold. He didn't dig a mine or find one. He worked his way up the river, getting it here and there. Maybe I can show you something else. Come up here.'

'There's more to this than I thought,' asserted Batty.

Digger laughed.

Without having the least idea of what he was going to do the others followed him to where the river made a sharp bend, the current having at one time struck against a vertical face of rock. This was now dry. Dropping on his knees Digger began scooping away the sand. 'Under this,' he explained, 'there will be either rock or clay. If it's clay some gold dust will have stuck to it. Here we are. It's clay.'

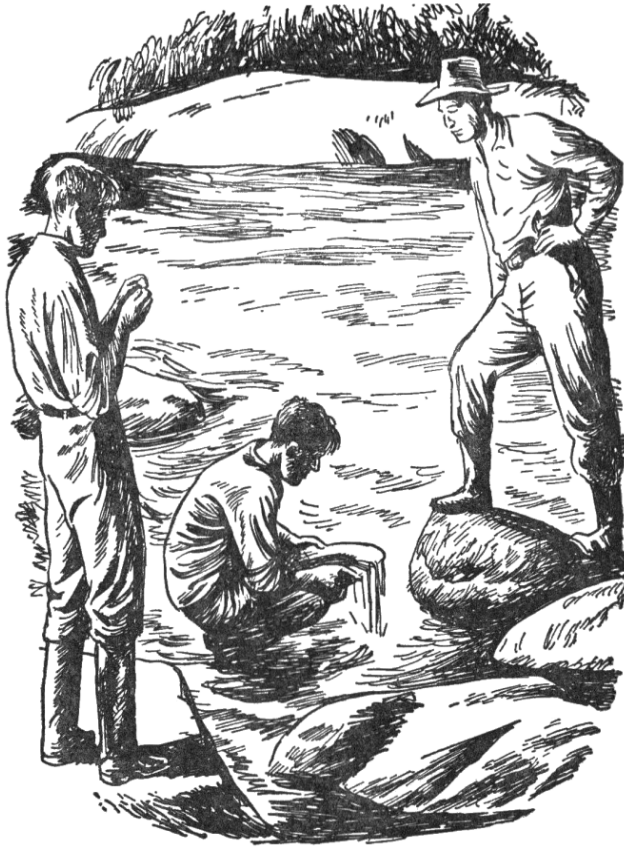
Digger clawed out two handfuls and put the stuff in his hat. This he carried to the stream and, holding it just below the water, crushed the mass with his fingers. From the hat flowed a stream of muddy water. This went on until only a little sediment was left in the hat. This he swished round once or twice, and then held the hat for the others to see the contents. Across the mud was a yellow streak.

'Gold dust.' Tommy could hardly get the words out.

'I'd say it came down there.' Digger pointed to a dry watercourse. 'Anyway, we know there's gold here. With the proper tools we shall work faster, but even so, gathering it like this, one would be a long time making a fortune, unless one was lucky enough to strike a pocket.' He walked to the bank and then stopped suddenly. 'Stand still, everybody,' he ordered in a different tone of voice.

'What is it?' asked Tommy.

'Indians. Two. There they go. I don't think they've seen us, and it would be better if they didn't. It must have been somewhere about here that Harwin ran into trouble.'



Across the mud was a yellow streak

Turning his eyes Tommy saw the Indians a quarter of a mile off, walking away from them. Each carried a spear and a bow.

‘Had they seen us they would either have come over to us or hidden themselves to watch us,’ said Digger. ‘White visitors up here can’t be an everyday occurrence.’

They sat down and watched the natives until they disappeared from sight in a ravine.

‘Let’s be getting back,’ said Digger, serious now. ‘This business may be fun, as you seem to think, but it can have its awkward moments.’

Saying little, keeping a watchful eye for Indians, they walked briskly to the cliff, and so down to the canoe, which they found as they had left it.

‘If we hurry we should be able to get the launch up here before nightfall,’ said Digger, as they started off down the river. ‘If we could do that we should be more or less on the spot to make an early start in the morning. We’ll try it anyway.’

‘What about these Indians?’ asked Batty a trifle anxiously. ‘Are they really wild? I mean, would they be likely to attack us?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. Whites must have made contact with them before. Their behaviour would probably depend on their mood, and what’s gone on here in the past. Some may have old scores to wipe out. Most of these up-river tribes are unreliable, so even if they appeared friendly I wouldn’t trust them too far. We have some trade-goods stuff for presents should we encounter any. One thing’s certain—if they turned against us we shouldn’t be able to stay on the plateau. But we shall see.’

They went on down to the launch, to find Pompey recovered from his bout of fever, with nothing to report. They told him of their intention, so without loss of time they cast off, and with the canoe in tow set off for the lagoon.

They arrived at sundown and, putting the Sprite behind the curtain of vines where it could not be seen from outside, just had time to make all snug for the night before darkness fell.

‘There’s just one little job we’d better do,’ said Digger, taking from his kit a small green bottle labelled poison.

‘What’s that?’ queried Tommy.

‘Nitric acid. Give me your nugget.’

The nugget was placed in a saucer. Digger poured a spot of the acid on it. There was no reaction. He handed it back to Tommy. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘That’s all we need to know. It’s gold all right.’

CHAPTER 7

ON AND ON

TOMMY was awakened the next morning after a rather uncomfortable night, for the flies and mosquitoes had been legion, by the harsh screaming of parrots greeting the sunrise. He was out of his hammock in a flash, for this, he felt, was going to be an exciting day.

Loading the canoe took some time, for in addition to the tent, tools and equipment, enough food for some days would be required; yet with the portage in mind everything had to be kept to a minimum. Getting everything to the plateau was likely to be hot work anyway. By eight o'clock, however, they were on their way and, having only a short distance to go to the falls, they were soon involved in the heaviest work they had so far undertaken.

As a result of Digger's planning it proceeded in an orderly manner. First, everything in the canoe was carried up. While the last loads were on their way Sunny cut short lengths of round timber over which it was intended the canoe should roll instead of having to be carried. They saw the poles used by Harwin but they were rotten. It was during this final operation, on the fringe of the cedar forest, that there occurred the only interruption.

It will of course have been realised that if the vertical height of the falls was in the order of two hundred feet, the path to the top, by traversing and zigzagging on a gentle gradient, was a fairly long one. It was, in fact, more than a quarter of a mile. They were resting at one of the hairpin bends, fortunately the one farthest from the falls, otherwise the matter would have been more serious in that they might not have heard the sound that gave them warning, when Sunny suddenly sprang to his feet, staring along a mossy glade in an attitude that could only mean danger. Conversation ceased, and the others then heard what the sharp-eared Negro had heard. To Tommy it sounded as if someone was rattling a lot of bones. The noise was continuous.

Digger was up in an instant. 'Peccaries!' he exclaimed. 'They're coming this way. Up the trees! Here's an easy one.'

A wild scramble followed, but in a few minutes they were all astride one or other of the branches of the tree Digger had indicated. They were only ten or twelve feet from the ground, but Digger said they were high enough. 'Luckily the little brutes can't climb trees,' he remarked grimly.

'Why do they make that noise?' asked Batty.

‘Don’t ask me, I’m not a pig,’ retorted Digger. ‘All I know is they have a habit of vibrating their lower jaws and the noise is made by their tusks knocking together. Here they come. Keep quiet now.’

The advance guard of the peccaries now appeared in a broad line, nosing the moss as without haste they made their way through the forest. Behind followed the main body, and so many were there that the ground was alive with their small dark bodies. The appalling smell of which Digger had previously spoken preceded them, and even Pompey made a grimace of disgust.

What caused the stampede they never knew. Sunny said afterwards that it was the taint of human beings on the canoe; and this might have been the right answer, for the pigs had nearly reached the canoe when they took fright. There were snorts and squeals, and the next instant the herd was in full flight down the slope, making a considerable noise as they crashed through the undergrowth lower down.

‘Okay,’ said Digger. ‘It’s all over. They won’t come back. Good thing none of us was in the path of that little lot. Guns wouldn’t have stopped ’em. Let’s get on.’

The hard labour continued, for it was not enough to carry everything to the plateau. It had to be carried on again to a point of safety above the gorge that ended in the falls. However, by noon, always keeping an eye open for Indians, with everything complete they were at the spot reached the previous day. Here they stopped to wash and have a meal.

Tommy was all for staying there and exploring potholes, but Digger said that it would be better to push on, for it was reasonable to suppose that the higher they got the nearer they would be to the matrix from which the gold had come; and the nearer they got to that the more gold they might expect to find. His advice was accepted and all went well for about an hour, the canoe making good progress, particularly over shallow sections of the river where they took turns to get out and tow. The river narrowed slowly, but the water was clear and ran for the most part over a gravel bottom, although boulders and outcrops of rock were frequent. On either side the banks rose steadily.

Disappointment awaited them. Pompey, who was on the tow rope with Sunny, stopped and, pointing ahead, shouted, ‘Say! Can you see what I see? We’ve come to a tunnel.’

This was true. A high mass of rock appeared at right angles to the river, and would have completely blocked its path had there not been, at the base, a dark arched tunnel from which it emerged.

‘We’ll carry on,’ decided Digger. ‘The tunnel may not be very long.’

Reaching it, Pompey and Sunny were forced to get into the canoe, which went on under the power of the paddles, with navigation becoming more and more difficult. For one thing it was dark. Again the river took several sharp bends and, sometimes narrowing, the current became faster. In places it became necessary to help the paddles by clawing along the rocky side of the subterranean passage with the aid of a torch. This showed that in times of flood the water filled the tunnel to the roof, for branches and weeds had been caught up at all levels overhead. However, after about twenty minutes of this, daylight appeared ahead, much to Tommy's relief, for while he was happy in the thought that this was real exploring it had been an uncanny experience, and the idea of being wrecked in the inky water was by no means a comfortable one.

Before them, as the canoe emerged, there appeared an even more remarkable formation. On each side of the stream rose rock walls, nearly perpendicular, of considerable height, ledged and ridged to provide a roothold for all manner of plants, ferns, creepers and flowering shrubs, and so presented an astonishing and unique spectacle. Caves, in almost regular lines, could also be seen. So evenly spaced were the ledges that Tommy remarked it was possible to imagine they had been made by hand.

'I don't think it needs much imagination,' returned Digger. 'It's my guess that at some time in the past a race of cave dwellers lived here. Similar places, not as beautiful as this, occur in the United States and in South America. This should be a paradise for an archaeologist.'

'Why didn't Harwin tell you about it?' queried Batty.

'Either because he didn't get as far as this, or because he died before he could go into details. I fancy he didn't go through the tunnel although he must have seen it.'

As there could be no question of landing on the sheer rock face the journey was continued, and it was not until an hour later that the walls slowly broke down once more to open savannah. Behind them towered the massif through which they had passed. A gravel beach at a bend in the river offered possibilities as a camping ground, and as Digger considered they had done enough for one day camp was accordingly made after a reconnaissance from the top of a short incline that backed the beach.

Batty ran up, and returned to say there was no-one in sight.

While things were being made ship-shape for the night Tommy tried his hand at prospecting on his own account by exploring the potholes as he had seen Digger do it. He had one tremendous thrill, but it ended in an even greater disappointment. While he was standing in the river a flash on a

landslide of rock on the far side caught his eye. His thoughts never being far from precious stones he went over to it. He stared. His hands, unaccountably, began to tremble. He hurried back to the others and, nearly incoherent with excitement, informed them that he had found a diamond as big as a coconut. It was sticking out of a rock.

Digger smiled with sympathetic toleration. 'I can guess what you've found,' he said without emotion. 'Where is it?'

Tommy pointed. They all went over.

Digger took one look and said nonchalantly, 'As I thought, it's a quartz crystal. You can find those at home. Sorry, laddie, but it's worth precisely nothing—except as a curio.'

Tommy returned to his pothole hunting, putting his finds in a small leather purse which he had taken for the purpose. At sundown, satisfied with results, he returned to camp and displayed his collection.

'Not bad,' said Digger, after examining several small nuggets, a few flakes and a little dust. 'But it's not good enough.'

'Not good enough!' Tommy looked pained.

'You've got nearly two ounces worth, let us say, after being refined, fifteen pounds. That would be very good in some places that are easy to get at; but if you work out what it has cost us to get here, and would cost to bring up stores to stay for any length of time, you'd only just about be paying expenses. But don't be discouraged. We shall do better than that when we really get going.'

A movement made Tommy turn. He looked round sharply. Ten yards away, on the edge of the incline that ran down to the river, stood two Indians. They did not move, but simply gazed with dull expressionless eyes. In each case their only garment was a loincloth. Both men carried a spear and a bow. Their faces and chests were roughly daubed with white lines.

'Look behind you, Digger,' said Tommy, in a voice that lacked its usual enthusiasm. Which was understandable, for these were the first natives he had seen close at hand in country which, as far as he knew, had not been charted.

Digger looked round. With no sign of surprise or fear he raised a hand in greeting, at the same time saying something in Spanish.

'They don't get it,' muttered Pompey, when neither savage moved nor answered.

'They will, presently, when it's had time to sink in,' answered Digger confidently. 'They're thinking, and when a native has to think about an

unusual situation it's usually a slow process.'

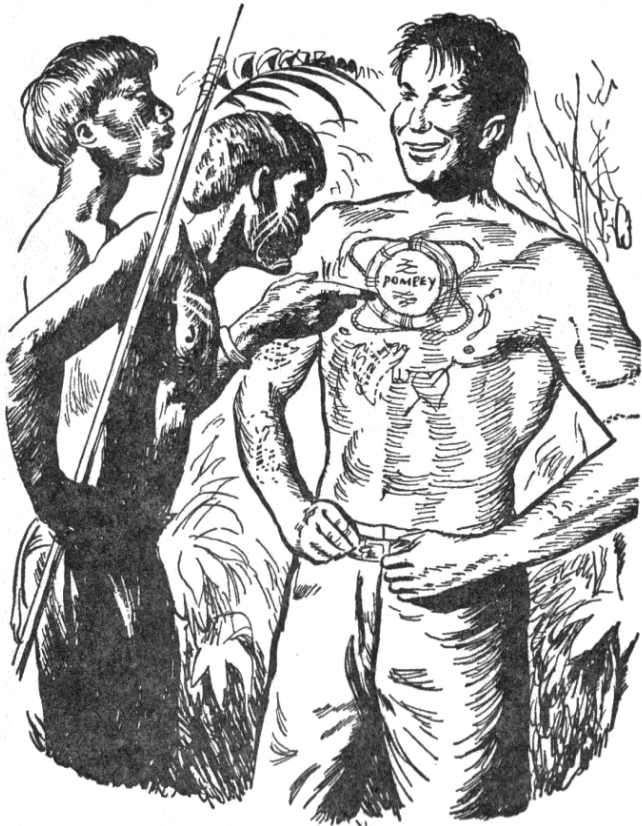
'Let's hope it ain't the lot that Harwin fell foul of.'

'I'd say Harwin's porters were in some way responsible for that,' said Digger. 'Take no notice of them. Tommy, on the top of my kitbag you'll find a package of trade stuff. Bring one or two things along. Don't let them see everything or they'll stay here till they've got the lot.'

'They seem to be fascinated by Pompey,' observed Batty.

'I'll bet it's my tattoo pictures they've got their eyes on,' returned Pompey, grinning. 'I've got theirs beaten into a cocked hat.' He had been working stripped to the waist, so that the many designs on his torso and arms were conspicuously displayed.

Tommy returned from the canoe with two small mirrors, two clasp knives and two gaudy cotton handkerchiefs. These he handed over, receiving no recognition, much less thanks.



One put out a finger and touched the word Pompey

‘I don’t mind ’em admiring my hide, but they’re not having *that*,’ stated Pompey. ‘I’ll give ’em a close view.’ So saying he walked up to the two men.

That his surmise had been correct was quickly revealed. With unwinking animal eyes the men stared at what must to them have been a marvel. One, plucking up courage, put out a finger and touched the word Pompey, in a lifebelt, that decorated the sailor’s chest. He said something to his

companion, assuming that a series of guttural sounds were words of a language.

The explorers resumed their occupations. The visitors watched them for about five minutes. Then, turning abruptly, they strode away.

‘Thank goodness they’ve gone,’ murmured Tommy. ‘They gave me the willies, just standing there, staring.’

‘They’ll be back tomorrow,’ predicted Digger. ‘They’ll come for more presents, bringing their pals. But if word of Pompey’s artistic embellishments gets around, and I’m afraid it will, the whole tribe is likely to roll up to see the show.’

‘Does that mean we’ll have to keep guard tonight?’

‘We should have had to do that in any case,’ rejoined Digger. ‘We’re really in the wilds now, and one can never afford to take chances. Let’s have supper. It hasn’t been a bad day.’

CHAPTER 8

THE SHOWDOWN

NOTHING happened during the night, and when the next morning no Indians were to be seen there was reason to hope that Digger had for once been wrong.

‘Of course their village could be some way off, in which case they might not have had time to get there and back,’ he said. ‘The pair we saw were probably on a hunting trip.’

‘So what’s the drill?’ asked Batty, as they washed their tin plates and mugs after breakfast.

‘I feel like pushing on to get the lie of the land,’ replied Digger. ‘That, in prospecting, is all important. Metal doesn’t travel uphill. We’ll leave everything as it is and survey the rising ground ahead. Our legs need a stretch, and it shouldn’t be necessary to go far. If the river remains navigable I’d feel inclined to move camp higher up.’

The river did not remain navigable, as was soon discovered. They had not gone more than a mile, travelling fairly easily along the river bank with open country on either side, watching for anything that looked like a mine or surface workings, when Digger stopped in a listening attitude. To their ears came a confused murmur of water. From the top of the next ridge the reason was revealed.

They had reached a point where the two banks that confined the river drew together to form a gorge with perpendicular sides. Out of this, with a roar, came the water, seething and surging round black jagged rocks which jutted up in midstream. For as far as they could see, to the next bend, a matter of half a mile, the water raced and boiled in the wildest turbulence. Spray flew high from rocks that did nothing to stem its furious passage.

Digger said in a resigned voice, ‘No boat ever has gone, or ever will go, up through those rapids; and I’d be very sorry indeed to have to come down them.’

‘Does that mean this is as far as we can go?’ asked Tommy.

‘It does. This is the limit of water travel on this river, and as we’re not equipped for marching overland we’ve shot our bolt.’

‘It seems a pity, having come so far,’ murmured Batty.

Digger shrugged. ‘That’s how it is. These conditions might persist all the way back to those mountains on the sky line, and they’re a good fifty miles away. Long before we got to them we should have reached the point of no return.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘One of the first rules of exploring is, never go beyond the point from which you wouldn’t have enough food or water to get back. If you do you can only go forward, which means staking your life on the chance of finding what you lack. In other words, you’re gambling on luck. That may sound brave, but it isn’t clever. The source of the gold here is probably in those mountains, and when you see the state of the river you can understand how it’s washed down. There can be no question of going on to the mountains, especially as they are certainly not in British territory.’

‘So what do we do?’ asked Pompey, biting a ‘chew’ from his twist of tobacco.

‘We can either go straight back home or, as I suggest, go back to camp and do some serious digging while our stores last. We should at least be able to win enough gold to cover the cost of the expedition.’

‘Then let’s do that,’ said Tommy. ‘It’ll be fun, and that’s really what we came for.’

The others agreed, so turning their backs on the rapids they marched back to camp, arriving soon after midday. A quick meal and Digger began making ready for panning while Tommy resumed his pothole hunting. During the afternoon, having watched Digger pan a little dust, he, too, took a pan—a shallow metal dish a little larger than a dinner plate—and began washing on his own account.

For the next two days this went on without incident or interruption, the only excitement being when a streak of good pay-dirt was struck or someone found a nugget. Batty held the record with one of nearly half an ounce. On the evening of the second day Digger got out his scales, and was able to report that they had fourteen ounces, worth something in the order of a hundred pounds. Tests had of course been made at the outset, a rough assay revealing that the gold held a small percentage of silver, which Digger had predicted on account of its pale colour.

Tommy could now understand the fascination of the game, for while he was constantly disappointed the hope remained that the next shovelful of earth might yield a large nugget. The fact, as Digger assured him, that men had spent their lives in the same hope, did not discourage him in the least. He was happy, and was prepared to carry on until their food was exhausted.

‘Because there was so much gold here when the Spaniards came,’ said Digger, as they sat over their evening meal, ‘there has always been a school of thought that the Mayas, the Aztecs, and the Incas farther south, had fabulously rich gold mines. Harwin evidently believed that. I don’t. I think they’re wrong. Gold in more or less quantity can be found in all these rivers. In two days five of us have taken out nearly a pound weight. Think how much a tribal chief, with perhaps a thousand men working for him, could win over a period of years! I’m pretty sure that was how it was done. The idea of digging the stuff out in lumps is an enchanting one, but had that been the case we may be sure that the Spaniards would have found the mines. The original people here won it as we’ve been winning it.’

Tommy got into his hammock that night with nothing to indicate that this happy state of affairs was soon to end abruptly. Indeed, in the thrill of what he was doing he had almost forgotten the Indians. He was reminded rudely soon after dawn when Batty, who had been on guard, reported that a mob was coming towards the camp.

‘All right. Keep calm everybody,’ ordered Digger. ‘If they mean trouble there’s nothing we can do about it; but it’s my guess that they’re after presents.’ He looked at the Indians, now close. As they kept close together it was not possible to count them, but there appeared to be not fewer than twenty. Some wore remnants of European clothing. ‘They’ve got women with them, which is a good sign,’ he observed.

There was nothing hostile in the attitude of the natives when they came up, although all the men were armed with spear or bow, or both. They came right into the camp and looked at everything without surprise, with the exception of Pompey, who was surrounded by a small admiring crowd.

‘Keep your eyes on our kit,’ warned Digger. ‘These people may not be thieves according to their own code, but they’re liable to help themselves to anything that takes their fancy. If they decide to stay it’ll put an end to our digging.’

It was soon evident that the natives had no intention of cutting short their visit to what, to them, must have been a rare exhibition. They stayed. They did no harm. They picked things up, but did not protest when they were relieved of the objects. Digger distributed presents, which, as he had feared, merely created a demand for more. The longer they stayed the more at home they made themselves, talking volubly, although, as neither side understood the language of the other, conversation was not possible. Pompey’s decorated torso was always the main attraction.

‘I’m afraid we shall have them with us for as long as we stay,’ said Digger lugubriously, some time after noon. ‘If they see us eating they’ll expect us to give them food, and as we have to get home that’s something we can’t afford to do.’

‘What’s the answer?’ asked Batty. ‘They seem friendly enough.’

‘That’s the trouble. They’re too friendly. For all the good we’re likely to do here now we might as well pull out, or at least put ourselves on the other side of the tunnel. They won’t follow us through that, and it would take them some time to climb over the top of the massif.’

‘Okay,’ put in Pompey. ‘Let’s break camp and get out of this. I’m sick of being poked.’

‘I saw them poking themselves,’ said Batty.

‘Sure. I pretended not to get it, but they’re crazy to have pictures on their chests like mine. Let’s go. What’s Sunny breaking into a rash about?’

The Negro was gesticulating, pointing down the river.

The others looked. Coming up the river was a canoe.

‘It’s that pair we saw on the Hondo, Pedro and Louis,’ muttered Digger. ‘They must have followed us after all.’

‘They’ve got a nerve,’ growled Pompey.

Digger shrugged. ‘They’ve got as much right here as we have, so there’s nothing we can do about it. They were looking for this tributary. They must have found it.’

‘I smell trouble,’ drawled Pompey. ‘I can smell it from here. Those two guys stink of it.’

‘What are they doing for grub?’ interposed Batty. ‘If they were short when we saw them they must be even shorter now.’

‘We shall soon know,’ returned Digger, frowning.

The canoe, driven by the paddles of its eight-man crew, came up, and any hope that it might go past was soon dispelled. It was pulled to the beach, and the two dark-skinned white men stepped ashore a few yards above the camp. Both wore revolver holsters. One carried a rifle.

‘So here you are,’ greeted the one believed to be named Pedro, as was presently confirmed. The man forced a smile, but there was no humour in his eyes, or in his tone of voice, which held a suspicion of a sneer.

‘What about it?’ inquired Digger.

‘Why didn’t you say you knew the way here when we spoke to you on the river?’

‘We didn’t know then. Why should we tell you? You said you were going to the coast.’

‘We changed our minds. Your launch left an oil trail to show us where you turned off. Where did you tuck it away?’

‘What’s that to you?’

‘We could do with some grub.’

‘So could we. That’s why we’re about to pull out.’

‘Did you find Harwin’s mine?’ This remark settled any doubt as to why the men were there.

‘We did not. I don’t think there is one. If you think otherwise go ahead and find it. It’s all yours as far as we’re concerned.’

‘I see you’ve done some panning. How did it work out?’

‘There’s colour, but not enough to rave about.’

‘We’ll rig up a sluice and get these nit-wit Indians on the spade work.’

‘You’ll what?’ Furrows lined Digger’s forehead.

‘You heard me. As we shall be staying you’ll have to let us have some grub.’

Digger answered in a voice ominously calm. ‘I’ve told you, you’ll get no grub from us.’

‘We’ll see about that.’ Pedro beckoned his companion, and they went over to where the Indians were standing watching.

‘Finish packing up,’ Digger told the others quietly. ‘There’s going to be trouble.’

CHAPTER 9

HOMeward BOUND

WHILE POMPEY, helped by Tommy and Batty, loaded the canoe, Digger watched the new arrivals. Tommy also watched out of the corner of an eye. He saw Sunny talking to one of Pedro's paddlers, who were watching events with obvious apprehension. Most significant of all he saw Louis go to his canoe and rejoin Pedro and the Indians with a bottle in each hand.

Digger stepped in. 'Are you giving those Indians liquor?'

'What's that to do with you?' returned Pedro insolently, taking a swig from a bottle.

'You must be out of your mind.'

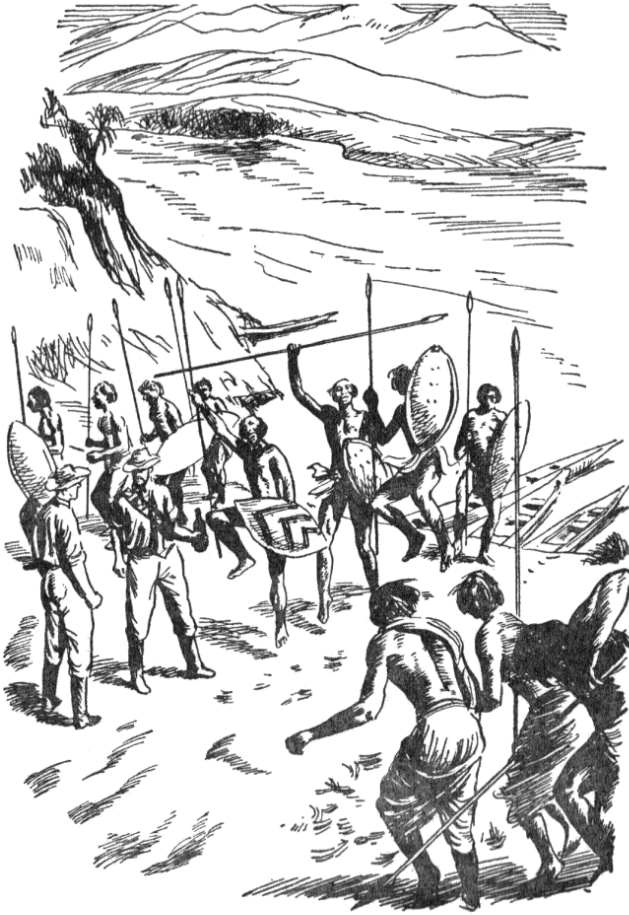
'You watch your own business.'

'This is my business. Get those Indians drunk and they're liable to do anything.'

Pedro took no notice.

'Hurry up, you fellows,' Digger told those still busy at the canoe. 'Let's get out of this.' He went to his kitbag and put his pistol in his pocket.

The Indians were now getting noisy. Soon they were dancing and waving their spears.



Soon they were dancing and waving their spears

Sunny sidled up to Digger. ‘Pedro is telling them to kill you, boss. He says you’ve got many bottles in your outfit.’

‘He speaks their language?’

‘Yaas, boss.’

‘The fools,’ grated Digger. ‘The imbeciles. If those Indians start something they won’t stop.’

‘Dat sure is de truf, boss.’

Pedro swayed over, clearly the worse for drink. ‘I want some grub,’ he demanded belligerently. ‘Cough it up.’

‘You’ve had my answer,’ returned Digger icily.

‘Do you give it or do we take it?’ snarled Pedro.

Digger remained wonderfully calm. ‘If you attempt anything like that I won’t be answerable for the consequences.’

Pompey stalked up, eyes narrow, fists clenched.

‘Take it easy,’ Digger told him. ‘Let’s get out.’

‘Nobody’s runnin’ me out of anywhere till I’m ready to go,’ rasped Pompey, glaring at Pedro.

It was evident to Tommy that things were fast approaching a climax, for the Indians were yelling and their manner had become threatening. How matters would have ended had not a new and unexpected factor arrived on the scene is a matter for speculation, for it was evident that should they launch the canoe they would never reach the tunnel with Indians shooting at them from the bank. The river was too narrow. Pedro’s paddlers seemed to realise the danger they were in more than their masters, for they stood huddled in a group, taking no part in the proceedings.

At this vital juncture there appeared, marching briskly across the open ground, a party of men in uniform. Tommy recognised the leader as the Mexican officer who had spoken to them on the Hondo. His attitude, when he arrived, was peremptory. ‘You are all under arrest,’ he said crisply, while his men, rifles at the ready, formed a semi-circle covering the scene.

Digger exchanged meaning glances with the others. ‘Are we on Mexican territory?’ he asked the officer.

‘You are.’

‘Then I am very sorry. I thought we were in Honduras.’

‘The falls are the boundary.’

‘I did not know that. We will return to them at once.’

‘Who has been giving these Indians drink? It is strictly forbidden.’

‘You may be sure it wasn’t us,’ said Digger. ‘We don’t carry the stuff. We protested, and were about to go when you arrived. I need hardly say that we are very glad to see you.’

‘These are the men I was looking for.’ The officer pointed to Pedro and Louis.

What happened next took the colour from Tommy's face. The Mexican officer's manner had been curt, but not uncivil, which made Pedro's next move the more unpardonable. Had the man been sober it is unlikely that he would have attempted violence, for with soldiers standing by it was not easy to see what he had to gain from it. At all events, his temper seemed suddenly to flare up. With an oath he whipped out his revolver and fired point-blank at the officer, who must certainly have been killed had not Pompey, who was standing near, jumped in and knocked his arm up, following this with a swing to the jaw that sent the man reeling backwards, the revolver flying from his hand as he hit the ground. Pompey kicked it aside with a growl of 'What's the idea?'

Before Pedro could rise the soldiers had thrown themselves on him, and with scant ceremony dragged him to one side. Louis, looking frightened, as he had reason to be, offered no resistance as his wrists were pinioned.

'*Muchas gracias, señor,*' said the officer to Pompey. He remained calm.

While this was going on Pedro's paddlers, seizing their opportunity, had bolted in the canoe, which was now going down the river in a cloud of spray.

'Let them go,' the officer told his men. 'They will not come back.'

The Indians also began to fade away.

The officer turned to Digger. 'You have not trespassed far into our country, and such mistakes are possible. If I overlook your trespass, have I your word that you will return to your own side of the border immediately?'

'You have,' Digger assured him. 'We were going back anyway. In fact, we were on the point of departure when these two ruffians arrived and tried to induce the Indians to rob us.'

'They won't trouble you again,' said the officer. Then with a knowing smile he went on. 'Are you sure you don't wish to stay? If you do, no doubt permission would be given.'

'We have no reason to stay,' stated Digger.

'Then I imagine you haven't found much gold.'

'Very little. A few ounces. As it's your property you had better have it.'

'Had you denied that you had any, or refused to give it up, I would have taken it from you,' asserted the officer. 'But as you have so courteously offered it, and as the quantity is small, I will return the compliment by asking you to keep it, although it might be better to say nothing of this down the river. It is between ourselves, you understand?'

'I understand perfectly, *señor.*'

The officer bowed.

‘Have we your permission to go now?’ asked Digger.

‘Certainly.’

‘Can we help you? How will you get back?’

‘The way we came. We know a short cut overland to where we left our boat. *Adiós, señor.*’ So saying the officer gave an order. His men, with their prisoners, formed a column and marched away.

‘We were well out of that,’ remarked Digger, as they watched them go.

Pompey grinned. ‘Like play acting,’ said he, biting off a chew of tobacco. ‘All so nice and polite.’

‘Politeness, when you know you’re in the wrong, is usually the best policy,’ averred Digger briefly. ‘Had we started chucking our weight about, that *caballero* could have made things very awkward for us. Let’s see about getting off his ground.’ He turned to the canoe.

The return to the launch was made without incident. To the relief of everyone it was found as it had been left. Darkness was falling as, travel-stained and weary, they stepped on board.

‘Tomorrow,’ said Digger over supper, ‘we’ll start down the river. The rest should be plain sailing. We haven’t done anything spectacular, but we might have done worse. What you fellows have lost in sweat you’ve gained in experience. We might collect a bale or two of orchids on the way down. They’ll help to pay expenses. At the same time I’ll fill a bag of seed pods of Tommy’s blue flower. There may be possibilities with them.’

It may be said here that the seeds were sold to a manufacturer of cosmetics at a figure that made them the most profitable discovery of the enterprise.

‘As far as gold is concerned, I suppose we shall have to count the trip a failure,’ remarked Tommy.

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ disputed Digger. ‘I told you at the outset that gold hunting is a chancy game. If you get home as well off as you started you’ve nothing to complain about.’

‘I guess you’re right, at that,’ agreed Pompey.

‘And after all, we did find *some* gold,’ put in Batty. ‘The quantity doesn’t matter. If we’d got a ton, imagine what a sweat it would have been humping it round the falls.’

Everyone laughed.

‘We should have been sick of the sight of the stuff,’ declared Tommy. ‘As we only got a little we can go on looking for more, somewhere else.’

‘That’s the way to look at it,’ asserted Digger. ‘Don’t forget the old prospectors’ proverb: “Where it is, there it is.” Now let’s see about turning in.’

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Adventure Unlimited* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]