

Chariots of San Fernando

MALCOLM JAMESON

* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook *

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Chariots of San Fernando

Date of first publication: 1946

Author: Malcolm Jameson (1891-1945)

Date first posted: Sep. 23, 2022

Date last updated: Sep. 23, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220955

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Weird Tales, January 1946]

Chariots of San Fernando

BY

MALCOLM JAMESON

*Indian legend swore we were headed for a hell
peopled with unspeakable devils.*

FOREWORD

It may be to the credit of the skeptical scientific attitude that no single important group or individual has accepted the sensational account by Dr. Stephen Taussig of the discovery of new, amazing fauna in the San Fernando country at the Amazon's head-waters. Taussig, sole survivor of the Museum

of Living Science Expedition, was plainly deranged when he reached the outposts of civilization. Bits of alleged evidence—a glassy object some ten inches long by six wide, of a pointed oval shape and convex like a cupped hand; a length of coiled transparent tubing, perhaps thirty feet long and tapering from the diameter of an inch to half as much; and a huge bone, unfortunately shattered in transit to America—have invited curiosity, but not diagnosis.

I came into the mystery by pure chance. I was secretary-companion three years ago to John J. Beazle, a wealthy dabbler in exploration and adventure, with some pretension to botanical and zoological education, and sailed far up the Amazon in his yacht, the *Tethys*. News came of a white man, sick and delirious, at a settlement on one of the uncharted side-streams. We sought the place and found it to be the outpost Cruxite mission of Youmbinque.

Father Hundig, who was caring for the sick man, welcomed our appearance and loans of bedding, ice and medicines. The patient, though wasted, screamed and struggled so that we could not move him from the missionary's cot. Beazle, not much interested, spent most of the days that followed among liquor bottles on the *Tethys*. It was I who heard Stephen Taussig's story, which I have tried to set down in his own words from my short-hand notes.

The specimens mentioned above lay near Taussig's cot. When whole, the bone was as massive as the femur of a dinosaur, some six feet long, with its very center a roughly cubical bulge a foot a thick. Tapering both ways from this central lump, the ends of the bone terminated in spherical

knobs, ivory-hard and perhaps eight inches in diameter. As it spindled toward these ends, the bone showed round and smooth but for v-shaped grooves running lengthwise from small holes toward the middle.

It was plainly fresh, to judge from the oily moisture and clinging fragments of tough flesh. I was surprised to find no sign of terminal cartilage on the knobs. About this and the two crystal pieces clung an odor of rot, strangely and chemically pungent.

Father Hundig told how Taussig and others had stayed at the mission on their outbound trip some weeks before, and how Taussig had returned in a native canoe, alone but for sullen Indian paddlers whom he kept in hand at pistol point. Though seriously ill, Taussig begged the priest to take charge of the specimens the boat carried, then collapsed. The Indians paddled away in patent relief.

The recent death of Father Hundig leaves my account almost unsupported, but his diary might prove interesting to scholars with open minds. Meanwhile, here is Taussig's story, to be read either as scientific data or mere curiosa. I am not expert enough to suggest which.

Our up-river trip was mostly uneventful. All had been well planned and Dooling, who had previously visited this basin, acted as interpreter and go-between with the Indians. We had no difficulty until we reached the confluence of the Caquini.

You must have heard the Indian legends about the San Fernando as a hell peopled with unspeakable devils. We did not fall into the error of disregarding these entirely; savage tabus are often founded on a practical basis. We guessed that in the region were real dangers, perhaps unknown predatory animals, and we hoped to find them and prove how exaggerated folklore can be.

But neither threats nor promises could induce a single native to accompany us beyond the great falls of the Caquini. We were faced with the unsatisfactory job of going ahead without guides or bearers. The solution of the problem was somewhat disquieting.

Two days' journey below the falls, we stopped at man's uttermost habitation, the village of the Chicupes. The natives appeared more apprehensive about the country just beyond than any of the down-river peoples.

Their fear had created a bizarre custom—each year they selected two prime warriors to go as sacrifices into the unknown land. If one of these should survive, they said, for the space of a single moon, his safe return would show that the devils had been propitiated. Such a survivor would be rewarded with the chieftainship. But none had ever returned.

By a fortunate coincidence, the selection had been made only a few days before we arrived. The two young warriors were undergoing some interesting rites of purification before leaving. After tedious negotiations and the paying of substantial bribes, we arranged to go along with the party that escorted them.

We had bearers at least, but with them came disquiet. If two warriors, and of the best, went into the San Fernando yearly and did not return, what became of them? We could not guess. Neither, I am sure, can you. But we found out.

A short distance from the falls we established a base camp. Beyond here our Indians would not go. The next three weeks were uneventful. We set up our field laboratories and explored the heavy forest in widening circles. There was little of interest and less of danger in our findings. Hedrick identified some poisonous plants, there were a few snakes and insects, and I shot one wildcat. It was like many another district in the jungle.

Our Indians huddled timorously at our base camp, but we overcame our own sense of vague apprehension. How false were these senses of security we were soon to learn.

As we prepared to move on, only the sacrificial braves, Itai and Tubutu, could be persuaded to help carry our tinned foods, cameras and other supplies. This pair, really splendid youngsters, had slept and eaten apart from their friends, and were seemingly regarded as already dead. Camber remained in charge of the base, with instructions to bring every day as much food and other necessaries as he could carry to a

certain advance base we chose as point of departure into the unknown. Hedrick, Dooling and I, with the two Chicupes, pressed on.

Nine miles on our journey, among thinning trees that hinted open savannas ahead, I almost tripped over a neat ball of crushed and splintered bones. Just beyond lay the neatly severed head of a Capuchin monkey. As we gathered to look, there seemed to hang about us a heavy odor more suggestive of the chemical laboratory than the jungle. Hedrick, stooping, identified the smashed bones as belonging to the monkey whose head lay beyond. They were jammed into a rough sphere the size of a melon, broken and pressed as if by some ramming device, and covered with chemical-smelling slime.

"Looks as if it had been chewed up and spat out," commented Hedrick. "But what jaws could crumple a pelvis like that?"

As to the head, it had been sliced off as smoothly as by a machete, and its hair was dry and clean. None of us could think of an animal large enough to take such a bite with, at the same time, such sharp, guillotine-like incisors. We rejected both lions and anacondas. Whatever had killed the monkey would be in a class by itself, a class unknown to us, a class that might prove decidedly unpleasant to study.

The Indians showed fright, but only for a moment. Steeped in tradition, they seemed to recognize their brotherhood with the monkey's remains. Dooling sniffed the air.

"Silico-ethane," he said. "Where does it come from?" He lifted some slime on a twig. "Here it is. Silicic acid, or I'm an impostor among chemists." He scraped some into a specimen can. "I'll analyze it later."

Hedrick took pictures and we went on.

II

At the spot agreed upon, where Camber was to come daily, we made a temporary advanced base. It was about noon, so we ate a snack, then Hedrick and I struck out for a quick look around at what was beyond. We took Itai with us to carry cameras and boxes, but Hedrick and I were burdened only with rifles and machetes. Dooling said he would go to work with his chemicals and hoped to have a report for us when we returned.

Before us was flat country covered with a short grass. A mile in front and away to the left rose a low range of hills, fairly steep, but round-topped and covered with grass. In the far distance we could make out the hazy blue profile of a mountain range. To the right was a high cliff, about a mile distant at its closest, and running straight away from us for as far as we could see. This escarpment marked a great fault that elevated the country beyond and made possible the magnificent falls of the Caquini, ten miles behind. There was

a little watercourse that followed the cliff down to the Caquini.

We were soon out of the grass and into a thicket of bushes shoulder high. Hedrick stopped in amazement and examined several of the bushes, pulling long pods from them. He shredded the pod, first smelling and then tasting its contents.

"*Ricinus*, of some sort," he said in response to my questioning look. "Must be a variety of castor bean, but I never expected to see it growing wild in South America. I think I can chalk this up as my great discovery of the day. Yours will be the monkey-killer, if you can track it down."

"It didn't leave tracks," I said. "I looked for them."

Hedrick was quite bucked up over his castor beans. I knew what he was thinking, of how nice it would be to see in print *Ricinus Americanus Hedriquensis*. We all have those little vanities.

The area covered by them was fairly extensive. We reached a little knoll, a foot or so higher than the general level, and we could see that they extended all the way to the cliff, and from the forest on our right to several miles to the left of us. We kept on through them as it was by far the shortest way.

A few hundred yards farther on we both were brought up in surprise to find ourselves in a comparatively clear space. The bushes were all down—some uprooted, all of them broken and torn apart and most of the foliage gone. Lanes led

in a dozen directions, like the spokes of a wheel. In these spaces the wreckage of the bushes was appalling. The sight suggested a small scale replica of the damage done by elephants. Here was a new situation to ponder. No one had ever heard of an elephant in this country, and anyway, these would have to be midget elephants.

It was not until we had carefully and minutely examined the ground that we got our first clue. We found wagon tracks!

We checked each of the lanes, that led in. Each showed the marks of broad tires with a gauge of nearly six feet! Our previous mystification was nothing to what we felt now. How could there be wagons in an uninhabited country lying hundreds of miles beyond populated country where even a cart was unknown? And such wide wagons, and so many, and in such a place?

When we had seen all there was to see, we went on, following the wagon trail that led straightest toward the water and the cliff. Under foot all the way were the broken and stripped castor plants. Twice before we reached the far boundary of this extraordinary bean patch we came across much wider places where other wagons had converged and had destroyed a half acre or so of the plants.

Our trail led more or less straight to the foot of the cliff and we finally emerged onto a wide sand-bed that edged the clear creek which ran along the foot of the bluff. Our wagon wheel marks continued straight on into the water, and there they ended! We could see them for a few feet under water, but beyond the running stream erased them. The creek was

hardly fifty feet wide, the other bank of it was a towering cliff, rising sheer three hundred feet.

"What a country!" said Hedrick, wiping his brow, after we had had a good drink of the clear water, and refilled our canteens. "I'm beginning to think those Indians have something."

After a brief rest, we turned upstream, walking along close to the water where the sand was damp and firm. Presently we came to more wheel-marks. That cleared the mystery for a moment. Apparently the driver had chosen to come upstream part of the way in the river. Then we came to an intricate criss-cross of tracks, indicating dozens of wagons, in and out of the river, in and out of the banks, up and down the sand-bed, like a circus lot the day after. We traversed a mile of this, conversing from time to time, chiefly to explode each others' theories as fast as one would develop some hypothesis to work from.

Even if there had been a reasonable source of wagons, the maze of markings on the sand would still have been of dubious meaning. For one thing, there were no tracks of horses, oxen or other draft animals.

Again, many of the trails were partially obliterated, as if by a drag. We also decided that the carts were two-wheeled, and of various gauges, from six feet to as little as two. As we stooped to measure a trail through the thicket, I saw something round and whitish, half buried in the sand near the bean stalks. I picked it up.

It was a human skull.

Around the brow was a leather strap, stiff and mouldy, stitched with copper wire—just such a symbol of sacrifice as Itai wore that moment. Beyond lay bones, human but crushed and compacted, like those of the monkey.

I turned to him, with a sign of inquiry. Brave enough, he drew himself up as if at attention.

"Garzus," he muttered, and passed his left hand thrice across his face—the Chicupe counterpart of the sign of the cross to avert evil. There were tears on his brown cheeks, and he was afraid—mortally afraid—for all that he was a picked fighting man of his people.

III

There was nothing to be gained by lingering over the relics of the dead Indian; if we were to penetrate the veil of mystery that shrouded these strange deaths we must learn more.

An uneasiness, vague at first, but steadily mounting to a sense of profound apprehension, settled upon us. We had not forgotten those hideous legends. Heretofore we had regarded them as the mad inventions of fanatical witch-doctors or the insane imaginings of superstitious heathens. But now we

could not help remembering that no matter in what other respects the myths might differ, they had invariably spoken of the horror of this land of fiends as the "rolling death," and always coupled with that expression had been the dread word "Garzus"—a word signifying "dragon" or "hippogriff."

The wonder grew on us as we speculated whether there could be in this accursed country a ferocious race of aborigines who drove chariots after the fashion of the early Britons. Perhaps in this weird and malignant land there *was* a fearsome creature of a type unguessed; could it be that such a monster drew the war-chariots of the barbarous people of this place? We shrank from that solution. We told ourselves that we must not permit ourselves to be swept away by the psychic vagaries of these credulous savages; that we must retain our grip on our common sense; that we must search, and find more clues until we had found the simple, practical explanation that our reason told us must lie somewhere behind these grotesqueries.

Ahead of us the creek bent outward from the cliff to round a vast hemi-cone of detritus where long ago a section of the cliff had been undercut and fallen down. The widened stream's ripply surface told us that here were shoals that we could cross without serious wetting. Since at this point also there was a convergence of cart tracks leading into the river and evidence of their emergence on the other side, we waded across.

The chariot tracks led around to the downstream face and here we were further astonished to find ourselves in what had every appearance of being a rough quarry. Dozens of half-

begun shafts showed where someone had dug into the walls. An inspection of the roughly level floor of the quarry revealed that away from the walls there were a number of mounds of broken limestone and a little slate. Whoever was working here was only interested in the quartz and silicates. On the ground in front of the newest working we found a pile of large quartz crystals mixed with fragments of agate.

I went to pick up a particularly beautiful piece of stone when to my startled disgust I found it covered with slime. As it slithered from my fingers I recognized the revolting odor and texture of the stuff that was smeared on the dead monkey's bones. Half nauseated, I hardly heard Hedrick's cry of astonishment as he pointed to the gobs of jelly lying on the ground on the far side of this collection of rocks. But there they were, enough to fill a gallon bucket, scattered about as if dispersed by the nuzzling snout of some feeding beast. As I wiped my hands, Hedrick collected several pounds of it to take back to Dooling. There was no smell in the air here of silico-ethane; this was chlorine, faint but unmistakable!

"I think we have enough material for one night's insomnia," Hedrick said, "and it's getting late. Let's go back to Dooling."

Back in the trees we found Dooling had made an improvised camp and had food cooking, and on a box we could see a beaker and some test-tubes.

"The jelly *is* a silicic acid," Dooling announced, as soon as we joined him, "but just which I don't know. It appears to be

an organic variety and there's no telling what the formula for it is."

"Take a look at this, then," said Hedrick, handing him the jar with the stuff from the quarry.

It proved to be the same, or closely similar. The last sample was somewhat stiffer than the slimy stuff from the skeleton.

We talked until late that night, but got nowhere with the baffling data we had collected that day. Being together around a cheery fire, and having warm food tended to allay the qualms of misgiving. Tomorrow might bring a solution to part of these riddles.

IV

Early the next day, we had left two miles of flat plain behind us and were halfway up the side of the first of the foothills. We had already passed three sets of long-dried bones, of antelope, this time. The layout was always the same; a compact pile of crushed bones, and within three or four yards, a complete skull, these with antlers. Then we found a fresh set, a kill of not later than the day before.

"That monster not only has a big mouth, but it must be fast," was Hedrick's comment. "It is no cinch to catch an

antelope in an open place like this."

We examined the grass; there were two distinct trails, one down from the top of the hill, the other up. The up-trail, oddly enough showed the signs of the drag behind it, the other not. There could be no mistake, the direction of the bent grass was conclusive. Outside the lines left by the wheels, we noticed many blades of grass, tipped with droplets of a clear yellow liquid. As this golden dew appeared nowhere else, it must have dropped from the hubs of the chariot. Hedrick lifted a drop with a finger, held it under his nose, then gingerly tasted it.

"Crude castor oil," he grunted.

We followed the trails to the summit of the hill, where we found a long, nearly level ridge, marked occasionally by clumps of trees resembling mesquite. Up here there were many marks in the grass, as if a number of the vehicles had paraded up and down, and we observed half a dozen places where trails led straight downward.

Following the trails along the summit, we had just passed a clump of bushy trees, when we wheeled at the sound of a stifled scream from Itai.

Ten yards away a face was looking at us.

It was no human face—only grotesquely humanoid—and gigantic. Maybe it was four feet across, with large, dark, lustrous eyes gazing placidly at us. Between them a long nose, flexible as a trunk, twitched, and below grinned a yard-

wide mouth, as full of teeth as a shark's. At each temple clustered what appeared to be curls, and two more clumps showed on top of the head. I was stupid with amazement and horror. I remember thinking that I used to know a barber who looked something like that.

But more ghastly still was the body. It was mounted on wheels that attached to either side of a plumpness like a sort of owl. There were no arms or legs, only a dragonlike tail that swept behind to steady the bulk. The wheels were pale and solid, like the wooden ones on a Cuban ox-cart.

All that we saw in a flash of time. For at once, the curl-pads on the monster's head unwound and flicked at us—four darting cables in the air. Itai was closest, and those devil's antennae whipped around his neck, arms and legs, yanking him through the air like a toy on a string. He screamed—once—and then the mouth received him, feet first, and closed. His head dropped off, neatly severed, and bounced soddenly away.

Hedrick and I still stared. These large brown eyes closed as if in ecstasy. The thing began to chew, like a ruminant cow. Hedrick fired first, then I—bullet after bullet from our rifles, at point-blank range.

There was no effect. It chewed calmly. Lead bullets were like peas tossed at a sofa pillow—I saw momentary dimples as the missiles struck and glanced off. That hide was tougher than armor. Its covering of glassy scales rang musically when hit.

We fired, perhaps two or three clips each, when the monster was satisfied with its snack. Opening its eyes and mouth, it spat onto the ground Itai's crumpled skeleton—then looked at us.

I had some saving instinctive impulse. Dropping my rifle, I swipped out my machete. Hedrick did likewise. The tentacles stretched toward us, more slowly—the thing wasn't quite so hungry now.

We whacked and slashed. My first stroke encountered a strand almost as tough as wire cable. A second blow, more strong and desperate, cut away an eight-foot length, and bright blood flowed. Hedrick was tangled in two of the antennae, lifting him from the ground as he hacked and hewed.

I rushed, swinging with all my strength, and he fell free. The monster gave a soul-shattering howl, and its eyes crinkled shut in pain, huge tears rolling into sight. Three of its four tentacles had been wounded, and fell back into coils that spurted blood. Still screaming, the creature thrashed itself about with a sweep of its tail and pushed away. I saw prismatic lights on the scales of the back armor.

We pursued the Garzus—we knew that this must be one—and, scientists even in this hour of peril and fear, we saw that it moved by shoving stubby shoulders against spokelike ribs on the inner faces of the horny wheels. When we came close, we encountered another weapon. The back scales lifted, like hair on an angry cat, and from beneath white smoke gushed upon us. At the same moment the thing hoisted its tail,

balancing on its wheels, and coasted away down a swift slope, losing itself behind the clouds of vapor.

It had laid a smoke-screen of silicon tetrachloride.

V

It was with decidedly mixed feelings that we turned back to the spot where we had commenced our fight. But for the accident of position, either one of us might have played the role of Itai, and had the animal been less sluggish after its meal, it would have taken a second victim. The Thing was immune to gunfire, and with its four tough tentacles one man could not withstand it, even if fore-warned. He could only hope to wound it on his way into that hopper of a mouth.

Knowing now the secret of its locomotion, we perceived that the safest place to encounter one would be on level ground. It could hardly move faster than a brisk trot unless rolling free. We shuddered to think what our fate would have been if our party had been charged by a group of them while still on the hillside, for we now understood the technique of the beast's hunting. Yet even on flat ground, the ability suddenly to flick those forty-foot tentacles made them formidable foes. Yet, the Things must have some weakness; we knew we must study them and find a way to conquer.

The pieces of the antennae stank of silico-ethane and we observed that they were really thick-walled gelatinous tubes. Just what was the function of the wire-thin inner duct that terminated in a sort of nozzle at the tip of the tentacle we could not fathom.

We had a brief discussion, and decided to go on to the quarry and begin our observation. Later we would come back and bury the remains of the unfortunate Itai. We scoured the ridge to make sure there was not another lurking Garzus to swoop down on us after we had begun the descent. Off to the west, the smoke-screen had almost dissipated. Our recent adversary had turned away to the south, several miles upstream from the ford and the quarry.

We found the quarry exactly as we had left it. Sixty feet or so overhead was a hard stratum of sandstone forming a ledge above which we could see the dark mouths of several caves. By grasping at the roots of shrubs growing out from the face of the cliff and taking advantages of the many minor projections we climbed without difficulty to the ledge. Directly under us was the quarry; to the left, beyond the creek, was the sand-bank where the Garzi paraded. We flattened down on our faces, and unslinging binoculars, began our vigil.

Nothing happened for several hours. Once we made out through our glasses another little tragedy on the hillside we had quit earlier. From the crest of the hill came a flash of light, something like a run-away cannon slid swiftly down to where an antelope was grazing, there was a quick gleaming of silvery lariats flailing the air—and there was no more

antelope. In a little bit, the rolling thing turned and slowly climbed up the hill and disappeared into a clump of trees.

Intent on this drama, we had not noticed the first approach of a herd of Garzi. But soon there were dozens, slowly rolling up and down the sands, while some browsed in the patch of *Euphorbiaceae*, tearing at the branches of the bean bushes. Among them were many little ones, Garzilli we called them.

The larger Garzi seemed to be engaged in prodding the little ones into promenading, following them closely. Whenever one of the baby monsters would show a tendency to stop or even to slow down, the parent would whack it forward with a resounding side slap of the tail. Now and then an elder Garzus would appear to attack one of the little ones from the side, gripping it firmly with all four tentacles while nuzzling at the near wheel. The Garzillus would make the air hideous with its trumpeting and squealing for a moment, and, then released, it to roll wabblingly away, its soft young wheels bending and caving under the infant's weight.

"Must be teaching 'em to roll!" whispered Hedrick.

In the meantime, several full-grown Garzi had forded the creek and were up in the quarry. We watched their operations with the most intense interest, for of all the clues we had previously found, those in this spot were the least intelligible.

From our excellent observation post we learned to distinguish between male and female. The latter were smaller, but the salient difference was in the snout. The

female proboscis was much shorter and thicker, and terminated in a cup-shaped tip of bone or ivory. This tip appeared to be quite thin, even sharp, like a tin biscuit cutter.

We could not see exactly what they were doing among the piles of silicates because usually their scaly backs and tails were to us, but we could see fumes rising and detect the odor of chlorine in the air. Just what acid or in what manner they secreted it, we shall probably never know, but having poured it out, they waited patiently. From our previous find, we were able to anticipate the result, they were preparing silicic acid. In a while we were to see them eat it, and others follow and repeat the performance.

Virtually prisoners until the hour should come when this herd would move on, Hedrick and I had ample opportunity to digest what we had seen. Finally, we withdrew a distance into the cool inner part of the cave and compared notes.

We were too realistic not to accept the natural explanation of it. After all, the human being consumes and converts in his lifetime a vast quantity of carbon, salt and other solids. There is small difference between a diet of diamonds and coal and a diet of opals and quartz. It is all a matter of glands and digestive processes.

The Garzus, from its observed diet and excretions, had an affinity for silicon. Its skin and the scales of its armor were siliciculous; it exhaled a silico-ethane, it could produce silicon tetrachloride for protection, and used a silicic acid in

digestion. In order to ingest the required amount of the element, it had special glands that enabled it to reduce onyx and quartz to an edible jelly. It was all very reasonable. And it made us anxious to kill and dissect one of the things. Doubtless the more normal diet of animal-flesh was to provide the necessary heat for movement and the operation of its internal laboratories.

Hedrick and I were in fair agreement as to these theories, but we still had the novel method of locomotion to consider. Nature is a great experimentalist, but this example verged on the incredible. I must have been a little dazed by the rapid events of the last two days, for I must admit that I owe the explanation of it to Hedrick's keen mind.

But I was to wait a while before receiving it. When we had finished our discussion of the silicic aspects of the Garzus, we went out onto the ledge to take a look. The herd had gone. They had gone through the castor plants, a few were still there browsing on the far edge, the others were slowly rolling toward the forest—toward where Dooling and Tuputu were awaiting us!

VI

We scrambled down straight through the ravaged bean growth, crashing through the brittle bushes and acquiring many scratches. As we neared the far edge, we slowed down,

and gripping our machetes and keeping a sharp lookout for the Garzi, but it was not until we had emerged on the other side that we saw any.

The sun was behind us, a circumstance that rendered the Garzi ahead of us exceptionally visible, for the rays reflected from their prismatic backs were brilliant and of every hue. There were three of the glittering creatures, their tails to us, at the foot of a tree by our camp site. We could see the flashes from the snaky feelers that were stripping the lower branches from the tree. We advanced boldly, knowing their clumsiness, but stopped about twenty yards behind them. There was no danger as long as we could stay out of reach of the tentacles, we felt that outside of their radius we could outrun the cumbersome creatures should they turn and threaten us. But they were too intent on what was before them to notice our approach.

A shout from above informed us that Dooling was high up in the tree. He was trying to warn us of the monsters; and said there were several more back in the woods. As he spoke, we saw two rolling toward us, one from directly behind the tree, the other from somewhat to the right of it. We ran to the highest of the nearby trees and scrambled up not a moment too soon, for before we were high enough to be out of reach, we each had to straddle a limb and slash frantically at sinuous glassine tentacles.

I did not succeed in doing more than nick the ones grasping for me, but Hedrick managed to cut away a yard or so of the tip of one, and we heard the yelp and howls of its injured owner with grim pleasure. We resumed our ascent

until we came to a roomy fork about fifty feet from the ground. An excited chatter overhead reminded us that we had company. A group of the Capuchin monkeys was huddled there, squeaking and twittering in fright.

Firmly settled, we craned our necks hallooing, until we spotted a khaki patch through the lacery of leaves. That was Dooling perched in his tree, a couple of hundred feet away. After we had cut away some intervening branches so that we could see better, we observed that his tree was not so high as ours, and, although he was at about our level, he could go no higher. He, too, had partners in misery, a pair of monkeys like ours. Shouting back and forth, we gave each other the high spots of the day's happenings.

Dooling said that Camber had been there about noon with a good load of provisions. They had visited for a while, and Camber had gone back, saying he would return again tomorrow. Dooling went to work on our notebooks. His first intimation of danger was the warning given him about an hour before by the excited Tuputu.

They watched two Garzi approach, and he fell into the pardonable error of trying to shoot them. Ignorant of the uncanny peril in the innocuous looking curls on the heads, of the monsters, he continued shooting until the first one got too close. Tuputu charged it with a machete, and Dooling saw him snatched and devoured in one horrible instant. Under the circumstances, he could think of nothing better than to climb the nearest tree.

We told him he done the only possible thing, but that he was safe now. And when we said it, we thought he was. We did not know that the Garzus had still another deadly weapon.

We watched the Garzi below us grope the lower branches of our tree with their tentacles, reaching, feeling for us, as if they did not trust their eyes. When we next glanced Dooling's way, we were startled to see that a ring of Garzi about the tree had extended their antennae to the fullest, all pointing at Dooling. They looked in the almost level rays of the setting sun like glistening glass rods. They failed to reach him by about ten feet, but the fumes we now saw jetting from, their tips did not. Dealing shouted hoarsely something about deadly gas—chloroform—and frenziedly tried to climb. We saw him cling a moment to a little fork just above his head, then slip away and fall crashing. Like echoes, we heard the thuds of the monkeys as they plopped to the ground beside him. Helpless to do anything, we had to see the inert forms wrapped in tentacles that fell as quickly as cut ropes and witness the greedy tug of war between two rival Garzi who had simultaneously clutched the body of our friend. We turned our eyes away, unable to endure more. When we had heard the third of the shocking *clops* of decapitating mouths snapped shut, we knew that Dooling was now in the maw of the "rolling death" of San Fernando.

Sick with horror, and despondent over our own futility, we hauled ourselves mechanically higher up the tree. Another twenty feet and we were among the shuddering monkeys.

Soon we had our gas attack. We caught the odor, but our height and a freshening breeze that had just sprung up made it ineffective. Seeing that we did not drop, the Garzi abandoned their posts below us and wheeled off into the forest.

In another hour, the bright beams of the rising full moon illuminated the savanna clearly. Hedrick placed a hand on my arm.

"Let's go down," he whispered, "there is at least one more thing we can try."

He led the way to the other tree, where the scattered remains of our advanced camp lay, rooted and tumbled around by the dragons. He picked up an armful of notebooks and asked me to do the same. Watching our tread carefully, for somewhere, about here lay the heads of two of our fellows, we stalked out onto the moonlit plain.

"Damn the notebooks," Hedrick muttered, "if this hunch works, we can write a book whose dullest page will be worth a ton of this rubbish."

He led on. The breeze was quite strong now at our backs, as if blowing out of the moon behind us. Nowhere was the loom of a bulky Garzus. All about us was grass, and just ahead the shoulder high bushes of the castor bean area.

VII

"Thank God for the wind," said Hedrick, fervently. He tore branches from a bean plant and threw them to the ground. Ripping out a handful of leaves from the notebook he wadded them up. I struck a match and held it to the paper in cupped hands. Five minutes later, a roaring fire was sweeping away from us toward the cliffs. We ran each way along the edge of the plantation, lighting new fires every few dozen feet. In an hour's time we rejoined, and stood for a moment watching the wall of flame as it swept toward the river. The crackling of bursting pods and stalks and the roar of the receding flame made a tremendous noise, but we did think once we heard the howling of a roasting Garzus.

We returned at once to our scattered camp. It was fairly light in here now, the moon beams coming through from one side and the ruddy glare of the burning bushes from the other. We rummaged about and found a ball of fish-line, and I mounted to our nest in the tree.

Once there, I let the line down, and successively drew up piece after piece of our outfit that Hedrick tied on below. As each item reached me, I would cut off a short length of the line and lash it to a convenient limb. It must have been midnight when Hedrick joined me.

We had boxes of food, six canteens of water, and some of Dooling's chemical gear and the first aid kit. We took our belts and rifle slings and rigged safety belts. We were all set for a siege. We could last in comfort for a week. But that night we could not sleep, there had been too many gruesome

things happen before our eyes, and too much of interest. And the coming day was to have its responsibilities. We must warn Camber, for he would come walking along, innocent of the dangers that, surrounded him.

Hedrick elaborated his theory of silicon absorption and recombination, and gave me his ideas on the rolling system of locomotion.

"Until we saw these things," he said, "we would have staked our professional reputations that a free joint, like between wheel and axle, would be an impossibility in a living thing. The limb cannot have a connection with the body, and therefore would wither from lack of nourishment. But here, all around us, are examples of this impossibility in actual being. Luckily, there is also the evidence which enables us to see *how*.

"The diet of castor beans serves a double purpose. It provides raw material for the glands of the Garzus which manufacture an organic oil that is both a lubricant and a carrier of living substance to replenish the wheels as they first grow, then wear away. As human body absorbs mercury or lead if rubbed on the skin, so do these horn wheels absorb food from the oil surrounding the axles.

"The females have a bony gadget at the tip of their noses. I am confident if we could find a nest of fresh born Garzilli we would find them with soft, flexible wheels of gristle, and without intervening joint. As they get older, the gristle turns to horn, becomes stiff enough to bear its weight, but the little thing cannot yet move about, it must remain motionless in

the lair. This is when the mother brings her peculiar nose into play. *She cuts a joint.* By this time, the castor oil glands have begun functioning. The oil flows into the incision, soothing it, and thereafter acts as lubricant and carrier of building elements to the severed horn.

"Normally, the horn would again adhere to the axle, just as human bones tend to grow together after a serious joint injury. We can understand now the purpose of the relentless driving up and down of the little ones by the parents. You even saw on several occasions where a mother recut a joint that might have been beginning to freeze. By the time the Garzillus approaches full growth, it has worn definite bearing surfaces on both axle and wheel, its oil glands have taken over their duties, and the rolling joint ceases to require any more attention than our own elbows.

"But suppose we cut off that part of the food supply, which provides the oil, like our burning the bean patch. If, as I hope, that is the only considerable supply near here, it is bound to have profound affects. I anticipate adhesions, perhaps complete immobilizations of the wheels. Stalled in their tracks, they cannot replenish their silicon supply, and the chemical exudations of which they are capable will probably diminish in strength. And, unless some other animal is so stupid as to stray within reach of the antennae, they will also lack the blood food they have been getting."

This logic seemed to me to be perfect. The one great question was, how long will it take? Snakes can endure months without food. Would we see this herd, its wheels

locked, die all about us? Would it take a week, a month, how long?

Our discussions had used up the night. In the fuller light of the breaking day we began to see the monsters tolling toward us, closing in on our tree trunk. They were coming back to finish their work of yesterday. Whatever the ultimate effect of the destruction of the castor plants, in the meantime we must find quicker acting weapons.

VIII

As hastily as possible Hedrick prepared a neutralizer for the Garzus chloroform. We tore off our shirts, and were ready to wet them with the solution and bind them to our noses if attacked again.

"Camber is coming here about noon," Hedrick said, "and they will surely get him. We've got to get down and head him off."

I had been thinking of that, too. I felt I would as soon die myself as witness another friend gulped down. But there was so little we could do. Now that we knew about the gas, it would be suicidal to descend and try an attack with machetes.

Hedrick produced another beaker from Dooling's box.

"It doesn't cost anything to experiment," he remarked drily. "I am going to mix up a belly-ache for our little playmates. You be thinking of a way to feed it to them."

He went to work with his bottles, weighing stuff by guess. The bubbling, fizzy concoction looked potent. I wondered if the Garzi would snap up a bottle. Their craving for silica might lead them to it. Then I remembered that they did not eat crystals raw, they first dissolved them into jelly. Our medicine must be fed to them some other way. That is when I thought of the poor monkeys. I dug in Dooling's box and found a big hypodermic syringe, and a can of chloroform.

Busy with compounding our prescription, we were not watching the Garzi, but at the first whiff of the threatening odor, we bound up our faces with the saturated shirts. The stupefying fumes rose steadily to us. A monkey passed out and fell, straight down. Another, from just above, crumpled and started to slide by us but I grabbed the limp form and half jammed, half hung it in the crotch of a branch. The other monkeys were hanging desperately to the limbs, groggy, barely conscious. Pouring some chloroform onto a piece of shirt, I clambered around, putting first one monkey and then another completely out, securing them so that they could not fall. I got a grim comfort out of the condition in which I found them. They were doomed anyway; I could not be blamed too much for using them in the way I had planned. At least there was a promise of vengeance.

As fast as Hedrick could fill the syringe, I brought and held the limp animals until he shot the injection home. I piled the sagging forms around us as best I could on the limbs and

branches about us. It took a long time to prepare eight, but eight we needed, one for each of our besiegers.

The gas had stopped before we were ready, but the Garzi were still there, staring up at us with those astonishing eyes.

"Let's go," I said, and began heaving the bodies down.

It was a full ten minutes after the horrid churning before we knew that the gastric juices of the dragons had mingled with our doses. Unprepared for what followed, we almost fell from our perch. Before, we had heard the howls of injured Garzi, when we had hacked at their antennae, but those were as nothing compared to the hideous cacophony that arose now from below. The medley of shrieks, trumpeting, howls and bellowing nearly broke our ear-drums, while the threshing about of the agonized monsters made our tree tremble from its uttermost leaf to the very trunk. Slashing about below, the crystal encrusted tails beat wildly against their mates, against the tree, anything solid. In their frenzy and agony, the creatures' glands let go with every offensive and defensive device known to them. Gasses squirted from the drooping antennae and from beneath the hard, glittering scales of the back and tail came smoke, the cavernous mouth belched other gasses and vomited gobs of bloody jelly.

It was with grim, sardonic joy that we viewed this spectacle. If the extraordinary structure of the Things had allowed it, they would have wallowed and squirmed, but bound as they were by those colossal wheels, they could do

nothing but yowl and thresh about, whipped here and there by the dragonish tails. The exudation of the smoke-screen, an instinctive reflex, quickly blotted them from our vision. What followed we could only guess at, it was much too thick below.

"I figured they had acid stomachs," was Hedrick's bland comment.

After a bit, when the smoke had cleared somewhat, all we could see were a few smoky trails, leading away. If Hedrick's prescription had proved fatal, they had gone away to their hidden lairs to die. We left the remnants of our field laboratory and the food supplies that were in the upper branches. We climbed down, and machete in hand, took the back trail to the base camp.

We were halfway there when we met Camber. We turned him back and walked along beside him. He was inexpressibly shocked at what we told him, but we could see the gleam of disbelief in his eyes. He heard us out, but as we neared the base camp his revealing comment was:

"It's a tough country—a good night's sleep will do you both good."

We fell onto our cots like men struck by an axe.

When we woke Camber felt that he ought to make the usual trip to the advance base. He still believed that Dooling and the two Indians were camped there. We reiterated our

story in vain. He persisted in treating us as sick men, spoke of tropical fever and the like. Futilely, as it later transpired, we tried to impress him with the reality of the tragedy we had survived.

A couple of mornings afterward, when we got up for our breakfast, we found Camber gone. We selected the sharpest machetes in the camp and hastened after him. I need not tell you the rest. Six miles away we found the head and the thoroughly masticated bones. The incredulous, as well as the credulous, are sometimes led to fearful dooms.

The Garzi, then, still moved about their domain. We got our notes in order, and started to mix more of Hedrick's prescription, but had used up several ingredients. Because we must, we retreated into the thick forest through which we had first come, knowing that no wheels could follow us there.

Our natives were as nervous as when last we saw them. Perhaps they wondered what had become of our companions, but none deserted. At the end of a week, Hedrick and I scouted back into Garzus territory.

From the tree that once gave us refuge we surveyed the country beyond. Fire had swept away most of the castor beans. About two clumps that had survived thronged numerous Garzi, apparently fighting over the inadequate supply. We camped that night at the edge of the thick forest.

Next morning we saw none of the Garzi, and no castor beans at all. Venturing into the open, we spotted a grotesque shape standing motionless on the charred plain, and further

on another. Approaching the nearest one, we found that it whipped its tail savagely and reached with its tentacles, but did not move on its wheels. We closed in, gingerly chopped off its tentacle-tips and pressed in to prune them as close as we could.

He could not turn those wheels—they were frozen. After experimental slashes, we sliced away some of his lifted scales. Finally, with repeated stabs in the exposed softness, we killed it amid weird and mournful howls.

An axe from the camp enabled us to strip away the tough bulk, until we had freed the axle-bone and wheels. While I finished the stripping of the axle, Hedrick, examining some of the exposed viscera, screamed.

I whirled to help him, but I staggered back, choking and momentarily blinded, from a cloud of vile yellow-green glass.

His machete had thrust into an organ, from which the venomous juice had squirted into his face. He was unrecognizably disfigured by its deadly acid!

I lashed his body to the axle-bone and from our belts and gun-slings rigged myself a harness. Then, dragging the chassis of the Garzus, I struck along the creek margin toward the falls. I passed stalled Garzi—singly, in groups, once a mother with three young—and with gloomy satisfaction knew that they must linger where they were, to starve for

want of castor beans, quartz and blood food. One still rolled, very slowly, after me, but easily I distanced him and came to our base camp.

There stood perhaps a dozen Garzi, the last of their great race. Necessity had driven them on creaking wheels into this country where for ages they had existed only in legend. About them lay, the strewn wreckage of our camp—boxes, our valuable notes, instruments. Our canoes were crushed by the blind thrashings of the starved beasts. Up several trees hung some of our Indians, but scattered on the ground were many brown heads of crushed victims.

By now, none of the raiding Garzi could move freely. Casting off my harness, I approached, machete in hand. One after another I cut away the groping tentacles—twice I was nearly snared and eaten—and it was an afternoon's dreadful, exhausting work.

The surviving Indians watched me, and this conquest of demons before their eyes gave me the prestige with which I carried out the last phase of the adventure. I bullied them down from their perches, made them load a single unsmashed canoe with a few salvaged supplies and the specimens I had saved. The chassis of the Garzus could not go whole, and so I hewed away the wheels, saving only the axle-bone.

The trip down-river to the mission lasted a week. When the Indians, still horrified, tried to desert me and my relics of their dreaded demon-enemies, I kept them at the paddles with a levelled pistol. And I reached here, and then the

cumulation of horror, fatigue and perhaps sickness brought on by that whiff of acid-gas, blacked out everything.

*

*

*

*

*

That is the end of Taussig's narrative. He came home with us aboard the *Tethys*. How that heavy axle-bone came to be broken is one of the mysteries—both Taussig and I think that the Indians who handled it deliberately chopped it up as a magical rite. Anyway, his story did not suit those who heard it at home. The Garzus remains unrecorded among the fauna of the upper Amazon, but it may be that in the future some man of daring and faith will go into the Caquini country and find those telltale remains.

But before he goes, let him come to me. I know where Taussig lives today—he runs a taxidermist's shop on Ninth Avenue, and refuses even to discuss the affair save with me, to whom he thinks he owes much. Perhaps I can persuade him to show the model of a Garzus which stands hidden on a closet shelf in the back of his shop. Even though small and stationary, it is frightful enough to be convincing.

[The end of *Chariots of San Fernando* by Malcolm Jameson]