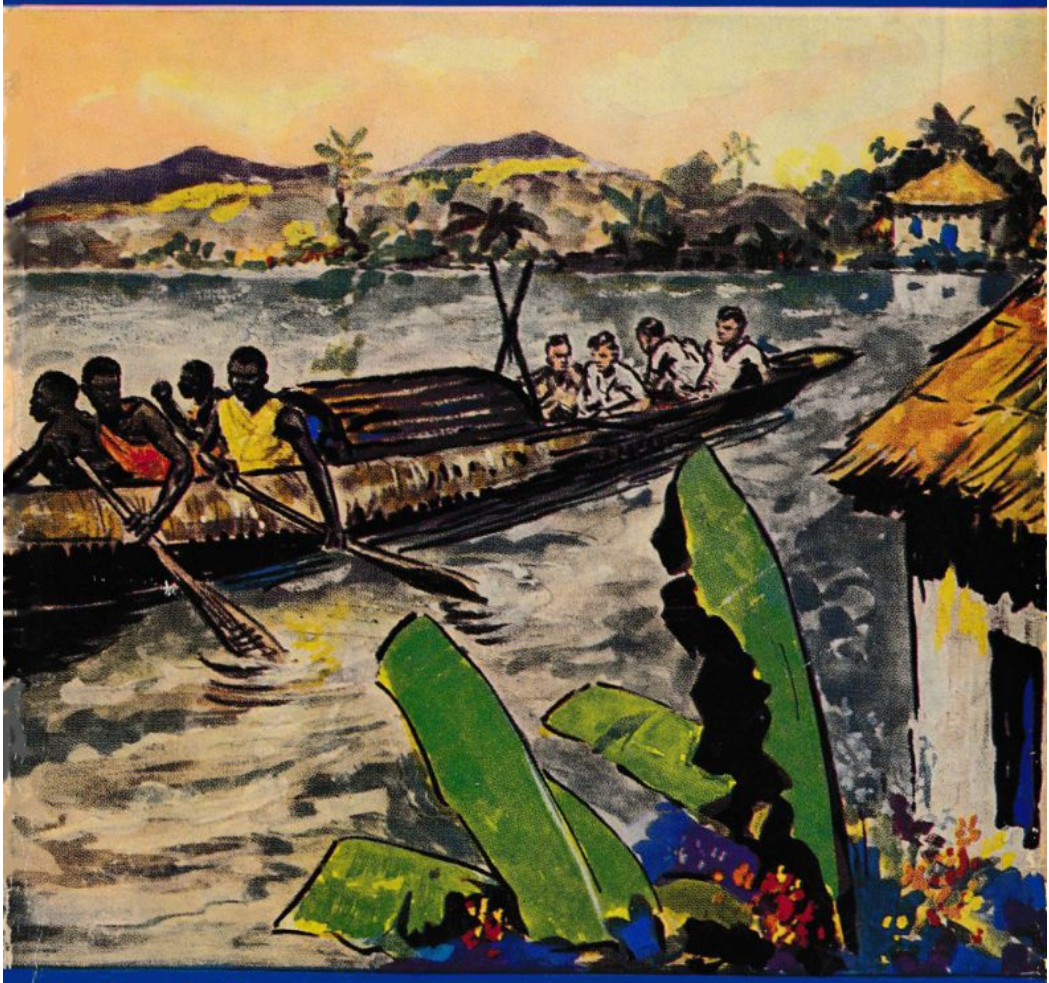
GIMLET OFF THE MAP

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS



A Brock-Book for older Boys

Title: Gimlet Off the Map
Date of first publication: 1951
Author: Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns (1893-1968)
Illustrator: Leslie Stead (1899-1966)
Date first posted: May 31, 2023
Date last updated: May 31, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20230564

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, akaitharam, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

Womp, womp! thumped the paddles

GIMLET OFF THE MAP

by

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

Illustrated
by
LESLIE STEAD

Published by
THE BROCKHAMPTON PRESS LTD.
LEICESTER

First published 1951

Made and Printed in Great Britain for The Brockhampton Press Ltd., Leicester,
by C. Tinling & Co., Ltd., Liverpool, London and Prescot

GIMLET OFF THE MAP

A further adventure of Captain Lorrington King, D.S.O., wartime Commando leader, and his three troopers, “Copper” Colson of London, “Trapper” Troublay of Canada, and “Cub” Peters, one time scholar at Brendalls School, Essex.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER I

DANGEROUS JOURNEY

Womp womp! . . . womp womp!

Four heavy paddles rose and fell with mechanical precision, driving the nose of the big greenheart canoe into the turgid water of the untamed, unnamed river.

Womp womp! . . . womp womp! growled the paddle handles against the gunwales. With the sound, the sinews of four naked ebony backs strained in unison.

Jose, leader of the negro crew, six feet of bone and gristle, stood poised in the prow, his steering paddle raised ready for instant use should an emergency arise, as it often did, for rocks and sunken logs and swirling whirlpools were all too common.

Womp womp! . . . womp womp! thumped the paddles, as the boatmen fought the current.

"Dig deep! Don't wash yo' blade, dat man! Make bubbles," roared the helmsman.

As the crew responded, their muscles rippling under shining black skins, yard by yard the canoe drove into the river which, by reason of shoal, rapid and cataract, had never yielded—and would never yield—to engine power alone. In any case, weeds would soon have fouled the propeller. For in spite of all that science can do, the nearer men get to nature the more must they rely on their own strength.

Womp womp! . . . womp womp! bumped the paddles.

"Watch blades! Keep headway there," yelled Jose, as the canoe yawed in a backwash. With practised hands he took the craft a little nearer to the bank where the current was not so savage.

Cub Peters, sitting in the stern, with perfunctory interest watched a cloud of big blue Morphos butterflies sail past. In nearly a month of jungle travel, getting ever deeper into the primeval Central American forest, such spectacles had become commonplace. But for the most part the scene was unchanging: green water: a green wall of vegetation on either side and a narrow strip of blue between interlaced branches overhead. The sensation created was of being swallowed up in a sea of green. The river wound a tortuous course as it fought the jungle to reach its parent stream, but each

successive bend merely brought a repetition of the picture. The only difference was the turbulence of the water according to the gradient of the river-bed, and the pattern of the rocks that tried to stem its progress.

Occasionally there was a spot of colour. Parrots of brilliant plumage passed overhead. Humming birds, flashing like jewels, poised over clumps of purple orchids from which they sipped the nectar. Higher in the trees, gaudy toucans with fantastic beaks greeted the intruders with raucous cries of disapproval. Sometimes black and yellow orioles could be seen in colonies, busy about their pendant nests.

Next to Cub in the stern of the canoe, with a rifle across his knees, sat Gimlet. Just in front, with extra paddles ready to hand should they be needed, Copper and Trapper watched the green water swirling past, Trapper with bored indifference, Copper with grim suspicion. Both took care to keep their hands out of it, even though it promised cool relief from the clammy heat that caused every pore to sweat; for on the previous day they had been given a demonstration of what could happen in the waters of tropical America when a shoal of those small but voracious fish, known as perai, were looking for food. They had, of course, been warned of this razor-toothed peril, which could cut as though with a guillotine anything on which it closed its jaws; but the sight of the creatures in action came as a shock. Other unpleasant inhabitants of the river, such as electric eels and alligators, seemed tame in comparison.

What happened was this. Gimlet had shot a tapir—not because he wanted to kill the harmless beast but because the crew had pleaded with him to do so, for a taste of fresh meat. The animal, mortally wounded by Gimlet's bullet, plunged into the river. The canoe raced for the spot: but it was too late. The water swirled and became streaked with red as a shoal of perai rushed open-mouthed upon their prey. Jose yelled a warning, and any attempt to save the meat was abandoned forthwith. Indeed, in a matter of seconds it was no longer there. Only the bones remained. Hide and flesh had disappeared down the throats of a ravening horde. It was the speed with which this was done that shook Cub. A sinking feeling took him in the stomach as he realised that what had happened to the tapir could happen to a human being. When, earlier, Jose had told him that a wading man, attacked by perai, could lose his feet before he could reach the bank, he was sceptical. But he believed it now, and having no wish to lose his fingers he took care to keep them out of the water.

So far the only accident, a minor one, had occurred when the canoe was pelted by a gang of spider monkeys. A piece of bark had hit Copper on the head, to his furious indignation.

Between the white men and the paddlers rose a tarpaulin-covered mound made by the expedition's piled-up stores. Upon this, as every member of the party knew, depended the lives of the voyagers; for contrary to common belief, with every creature in the jungle seeking food, little could be expected from that source. Armies of scavengers, large and small, were always on the move. Even a fallen fruit or berry was devoured by ants as soon as it was on the ground.

Womp womp! . . . womp womp! thumped the paddles.

To Cub, this sound had become part of his existence. How the paddlers could maintain their labour for hours on end, in such heat, was to him a thing to marvel at. He found it equally hard to believe that only six weeks had passed since he had left England for British Honduras, a name which, until then, had meant no more to him than an attractive postage stamp. Then, he had wondered what the jungle would be like. Now he knew.

The adventure had started when Gimlet had asked them all to join him for lunch in his London hotel. Having explained the mission with which he had been entrusted by the Colonial Office, he invited volunteers to join him in a quest which, he admitted, was as vague as could be imagined. As he put it, he knew roughly where he was going, but what he would find when he got there was anybody's guess. Several guesses had, in fact, been made, but in the event none was near the mark.

The facts which were known, were these:

There had operated for some years in the hinterland of British Honduras a professional orchid-collector named Banford. He was well known to the authorities. He was, it seemed, one of those strange men on whom the jungle exerts a peculiar fascination. He knew his job. He knew the native Indian dialects, and he knew the country as well as any white man could know thousands of square miles of impenetrable jungle where movement was only possible by following the rivers or the game tracks. Into this sinister labyrinth Banford would disappear for long periods, sometimes for twelve months at a stretch, with a few trusted negro servants. These men were not, strictly speaking, natives of the country, although they had been born there. They were descendants of the negroes who had been carried to America from Africa in the days of the slave trade. Those who escaped from the cotton plantations farther north usually fled to the jungles of Central America where they were safe from pursuit. There they had settled. The modern generation were, of course, free people. Those who lived in British territory were British subjects. Most of them were loyal, industrious and trustworthy. Such were the men Banford employed. Eight of them, expert

hunters and water men, had worked for him for years, paddling him through the jungle waterways and generally doing the camp chores.

It was largely due to this comradeship that Banford had been successful in his dangerous enterprises. But his last trip had ended in disaster, although the cause of this was still a mystery. He lost all of his men except one, and but for this one he would probably have perished himself. He reported the matter to the authorities in Belize, the capital of the Colony, as he was bound to, to account for the death of his servants. Then he took ship for home to recover his health.

Almost from the outset of his last trip, he reported, he had been aware of a change of temper among the native Indian tribesmen. His followers, even more sensitive to a hostile atmosphere, had also noticed it, and wanted him to turn back. This he had refused to do. The natives with whom he did business, bartering trade goods for rare orchids, now avoided him. When met by accident they were sullen and unfriendly. All went armed with spears and bows, and carried gourds of poison with which to treat their weapons. The significance of this was not lost on an experienced explorer like Banford; however, he went on, feeling that he could cope with trouble should it occur.

On arrival at his destination, a distant village which he had once before used as a base while collecting in the surrounding jungle, he found it abandoned. This puzzled him very much, because he could think of no reason for it. Still, he stayed, and went on with his work. For a week everything was normal, apart from a rather sinister atmosphere. Then came the blow.

On this particular day he had remained in camp with a touch of fever. His head man, Jose, had remained with him. The others went off to search for orchids in a remote section of the forest not previously surveyed. With one exception these men were never seen again.

When night fell (said Banford) and his men had not returned, he was worried, because this was unusual. The men always returned before dark, for the jungle was no place in which to spend the night. It was easy to get lost. However, there was nothing he could do but wait and hope for the best.

The following evening one man staggered into camp and collapsed. He had been wounded. Had the wound been caused by a spear or an arrow it would have been understandable, stated Banford. But it was a bullet wound. Moreover, when the missile was extracted it was found to be the sort fired from a modern high-velocity rifle. The bullet had touched a lung. Pneumonia followed, and in spite of all that Banford could do the man died.

Just before the end he recovered consciousness, but was never really coherent. His utterances were confined to a rambling story of white men doing big work in the jungle, building great fires to burn stones. Nothing was said about the fate of the other negroes. What to make of this story Banford did not know. It seemed most unlikely that white men could be in such a place. And if white men were there, why were they working? In such a country work is done by native labour. Anyway there was nothing Banford could do about it. He had only a vague idea of the direction taken by the missing men so to try to find them would be worse than futile. Moreover, his own position was serious. Without paddlers he would be lucky to see civilisation again.

He waited for three days. Then, knowing it was no use waiting any longer, he abandoned most of his stores and equipment, and with the one surviving porter, Jose, started for home. He got through—but only just. The canoe, with the rifle and essential food, was lost in a rapid. The journey was concluded on foot. Emaciated and racked with fever Banford was carried the last few miles to Belize.

That was the story as he reported it to the local government before being put on a ship for Britain to recover his health, which, according to doctors, would take some time. There could be no question of him returning to the tropics for at least a year.

Such a story, coming from a reliable man like Banford, could not be ignored by those responsible for the security of a Colony where some trouble had recently been caused by jealous neighbours. That something was going on in the interior was certain. What was it? No unknown white man had passed through the coastal towns, so if such men were there they had come in through the back door, so to speak; from Yucatan or Guatemala. What were they doing that called for so much secrecy? Irregular gold and diamond prospectors had crossed the frontiers more than once; but if they were back, knowing the country, they would have more sense than to murder the black or brown inhabitants on whose co-operation they relied for labour. If the Indians knew what was going on, clearly they were not prepared to talk, even to Banford.

The Colonial Office decided that the affair would have to be investigated. Banford was in no condition to return. Jose, his boatman, would certainly not go alone, although it was ascertained that he would be willing to act as guide to a white expedition. This was the proposition that had been put to Gimlet, and he had stated his willingness to accept the assignment provided a reliable crew could be found to take him up the river.

Copper, Trapper and Cub, said they would go with him.

They had all gone to see Banford in the nursing home where he was under treatment, for his advice, obviously, would be valuable. He seemed doubtful about the chances of the expedition. That it would be attended by considerable danger went without saying. Floods, disease, falling trees, poisonous snakes and hostile natives combined constantly to put life in peril. The party would, declared Banford, be tormented by day and by night by the most pernicious insects on earth. There were spiders, hornets and centipedes, the sting of which could cause intense agony for hours.

At the end of this disconcerting recital, Gimlet asked Banford for his private opinion of the affair that had cost the lives of his porters.

The orchid collector answered that he had thought a good deal about it. Those who had murdered his men were, he felt sure, strangers to the country, or they would not have behaved as they had. He then surprised everyone by saying that in his opinion his men had fallen foul of a party of irresponsible treasure-hunters.

Gimlet's eyebrows went up. "Is there a treasure there, then?"

"Not as far as anyone knows—but there could be," returned Banford enigmatically.

He went on to explain that everywhere in the jungles of Honduras, Guatemala and Yucatan, there were ruined cities and temples of the ancient Maya civilisation. Pyramids and towers could be seen rising above the trees from almost any high point. Some of the cities, built of flint and limestone—overgrown of course with jungle—covered vast areas. Many books had been written about them. They had often been seen, but few had been properly surveyed, for such a task would be difficult and the expense enormous. The British Museum and the Carnegie Institute of America had had men working for years in some of the ruins, notably at a place called Chitchen Itza. Their interest was entirely scientific. Bowls and vases of pottery, obsidian spears and arrow heads, had been found in quantities, but nothing of real value. More than one private treasure-hunting expedition had also been out, but as far as was known, all had been unsuccessful. Hunger, disease and discomfort, invariably drove out white men sooner or later. He himself was not particularly interested in archæology. His business was orchids.

Concluding, Banford said the idea of treasure-hunters occurred to him when he recalled that somewhere near the village where he had lost his men there was supposed to be a city of considerable size called Uaxatikel. He had heard Indians speak of it but had never seen it himself. It was in this region many years ago that a man named Carmichael, having saved the lives of two Indians, was shown by them a temple in which a treasure had been hidden.

He marked the building by cutting a cross in the stone and then returned home to get equipment necessary for the recovery of the gold. He died before he could go back. Other men had looked for the building, but none had found it. The treasure might be there. On the other hand, the story might be pure humbug. No one knew. But there was just a chance that a party of white men had gone there, looking for the lost temple.

"We'll have a look round," promised Gimlet.

Banford prepared a list of equipment which, in his experience, he considered essential.

With this information the party had set off for Belize. The real purpose of the expedition, at Gimlet's request, was not divulged. It was given out, to satisfy curious observers, that they were the advance-guard of surveyors seeking a route for a road into the heart of the Colony. Jose had been found, and his help enlisted. Even he had not been informed of the true purpose of the trip until the canoe was well up the river, when Gimlet thought it advisable to take him into his confidence. Jose it was who had found the canoe and the porters, four men on whom he could rely. Since his own life would depend on their reliability, Gimlet did not doubt that he had chosen the right men for the job. Their names were Nelson, Easter, Pete and Luke.

A week later, soon after dawn, the paddles had dipped, and the canoe had nosed its way into the river of mystery. The canoe was still forcing its way upstream.

Womp womp! . . . womp womp! thumped the paddles.

CHAPTER II

A JUNGLE TRAGEDY

For another week the expedition continued to force its way up the river, through a green labyrinth that only one man of the party had seen before—Jose. The four paddlers he had introduced were of course experienced in this sort of travel, although normally their business had not taken them so far into the interior.

One day was much the same as another, but the amount of progress made naturally depended upon the state of the river, which varied constantly. At the best it was deep, dark and swiftly flowing, the amount of discoloration depending on the quantity of rain falling in the mountains where the river had its source. Trees, masses of weed and other obstructions, became a greater nuisance than usual when the water rose sharply, as it sometimes did—due, said Jose, to thunderstorms ahead.

More often than not the going was both difficult and dangerous. There were rapids where the canoe was tossed about in a raging stream that circled and eddied and plunged in cross-currents, and back-washes so violent that Cub had to hang on to the gunwale to prevent himself from going overboard. On such occasions, it was only Jose's skill, strength and experience, that prevented the canoe from capsizing. His bellowed shouts of instructions were followed with the greatest admiration by Copper, who more than once declared that the helmsman should have been a Guards sergeant-major.

"Lift blades! Back water! Dig. Dig deep. Tear water!" Jose would roar above the noise of the stream. "Lemme see you bend those paddles. Break yo' backs, yo' mans, or dis place am death fo' true. Headway now! Watch yo' blades!" And so on. And the gleaming black backs would respond. More than once Cub was convinced that it was "death fo' true" for all of them.

There were places where the current was too swift even for the stalwart paddlers. Then a rope would be carried forward thirty or forty yards on the bank and fastened to a tree. On this, those in the boat would haul, hand over hand, until the tree was reached when the performance would be repeated. Even this laborious method did not always suffice, and at bad cataracts a portage would have to be made. This, in the heat, was a heart-breaking business. The canoe would be taken to the shore and unloaded. A way through the underbrush would be cleared. Portage rollers would then be cut

from the forest and the canoe dragged over them to a point above the danger zone.

All this labour had to be done under the attacks of hornets, mosquitoes, ticks and ants, all known to the porters under the generic name of *plaga*—the plague. Always the plague was present, biting, stinging and sucking, to make life miserable. There was one insect in particular that Cub hated. In size it was microscopic, but it could sting like a wasp and draw blood. After wiping the sweat from his face his hand would be red. He was not without experience in jungle travel, but he had never known anything like this. The reason why so much of the country was unexplored, or unoccupied by white men, became plain. He tried tying a handkerchief over his face, but in the sticky heat he found the remedy worse than the disease. Jose, grinning, told him he would soon get used to it. Cub had doubts about it.

There were times, too, when the noise was indescribable, and Copper only added to it by his exasperated protests. Added to the everlasting voice of the river would be the screeching of resentful monkeys and the clamour of circling parrots. Still, the scene was one of tropical splendour. Even that great snake, the anaconda, which was seen once in a while, was beautiful in its own way. One day Copper killed one, and in doing so brought the canoe near disaster. The paddlers were hauling the boat along by reaching up to some low-hanging branches. Gimlet had just expressed his disapproval of this method of progress, because ants were falling off the disturbed branches into the canoe, when out of the leafy canopy just overhead appeared the forepart of a big snake. Copper did not wait to ascertain its intentions, which were not necessarily hostile; he pulled out his revolver and shot the reptile through the head, whereupon it fell bodily into the canoe. The snake was minus most of its skull, but it was by no means dead, and in the confusion caused by its contortions the boat was nearly swamped. One man was knocked overboard. Another jumped overboard. Copper tried to throw the heavy snake into the water, and with Jose's assistance succeeded, whereupon the two men in the river, in their haste to get back into the boat, nearly had it over. A good deal of water was shipped. When the noise of everyone shouting at once had subsided, Gimlet told Copper what he thought of him. Copper promised not to repeat the experiment, and from the fervent way he spoke it was clear that he meant what he said.

It was Copper's misfortune, too, to be bitten on the nose by a vampire bat while he slept. He knew nothing about it. It was Jose who, seeing blood on his face in the morning, told him what had happened—that a bat had made a meal off him. Actually, this was Copper's own fault, because although they were all aware of this menace, which in time can drain all the

vitality from a man, he was inclined to scoff at the idea of using mosquito netting as a preventative measure.

For some time afterwards he could be heard muttering: “This ain’t a country—it’s a perishing zoo!”

The taciturn Trapper said little, but even he cursed the pests. There were places in Canada where the mosquitoes could be bad, he conceded, but they were mere amateurs compared with these bloodthirsty little devils.

Once Cub glimpsed a black panther, one of the few dangerous big cats of the forest.

Towards sundown it was the practice to make camp at any place where this was possible. That is to say, watch was kept for a clearing. Sometimes Jose would find one that he had used before, when travelling with the orchid-hunter. A tent would be pitched for the white men, and their hammocks slung. The blacks would quickly build a lean-to of thick, tough *bijao* leaves. While on the bank Cub would become more and more aware of the difficulties of exploration, and the silent threat conveyed by the forest. It was always there, dark, sinister, watchful. Slim-trunked palms with pendant fronds stood shoulder to shoulder with mighty trees above a curtain of matted vegetation. Sometimes in the night one of the great trees could be heard to fall with a roar like an avalanche, having died presumably from old age or from disease. All the trees were evergreens, for the only difference in the seasons was that sometimes more rain fell. In camp the creatures that scared Cub more than anything were the black sauba ants, more than an inch long. They had an excruciatingly painful bite.

There came a day when Jose announced that just ahead was the hut of a half-caste *chiclero*, one of the men who made a living by collecting the sap of a tree, called a chicle, which forms the base of chewing-gum. They would stop there, said Jose, and if the man was at home, exchange news.

Presently the hut came into view, a primitive structure built on a small clearing on the left bank of the river. There was no sign of life, but as Jose knew the man well, they stepped ashore and advanced with confidence. At least, they did for a minute or so. Then, suddenly, Jose’s manner changed. He stopped, staring ahead, a frown on his face. Cub looked at the hut from which came a low persistent hum. He did not know what caused it; but Jose did; or at any rate he had a good idea. He looked at Gimlet. “I no like this place, chief,” he muttered. “Let’s go back to the river.”

“What’s wrong?” demanded Gimlet.

The big negro rolled his eyes. “I smell dead mans.”

Gimlet walked on to the hut alone. As he opened the door the humming noise grew louder, and, at the same time, the cause was revealed. The humming was made by countless flies. Gimlet took a quick look and stepped back. “You’re right,” he told Jose curtly. “The man is dead.”

“How did he die, chief?” whispered Jose.

“I think he was killed by an axe—there’s one lying beside him,” answered Gimlet. “This is no place for us,” he added. “We’ll move on.”

Jose and his companions were only too willing. They retired to the canoe, casting furtive glances at the silent jungle. Gimlet put a match to the sun-dried hut as the only decent way of disposing of its grisly inmate.

The canoe went on. There was no talking, much less joking, for some time. Cub felt that the jungle had shown its teeth.

A few days later they reached the deserted village where Banford had made his last tragic camp. The final approach was made with caution, and not without difficulty, for it was at the junction of two rivers, and the effect of the meeting of the turbulent streams was alarming. The water boiled with whirlpools, and had it not been for a quiet backwater it would have been unsafe to moor the canoe. Erosion at times of spate had worn away the banks, exposing the bed-rock which rose up on all sides in a chaos of black boulders, some of considerable size. Stones brought down by the river had formed an island just below the confluence. At the same time, there was a change in the landscape, and this had, no doubt, resulted in the site being chosen for a village. The ground on one side was more or less open savannah, an area of rough grass and scrub. This extended for perhaps three acres, when the jungle began again. Still, it was a relief, Cub thought, to have the forest at arm’s length, so to speak. It was possible to breath, and for the first time for a month there was a view of sorts. Lofty hills could be seen on either side at no great distance.

Near the backwater stood the village, a collection of rough, palm-thatched huts. That the natives had not returned since Banford was there was apparent from the fact that the jungle had already taken charge, young trees even sprouting through some of the huts. The grave of the one survivor of Banford’s party was already overgrown.

That the black men did not think much of the place was clear from the anxious way they stared at the edge of the jungle. Even Jose, normally full of energy and good humour, was quiet. This was understandable in view of what had happened there. Apart from that, they had been nervous ever since the discovery of the murdered *chiclero*. Indeed, Cub often found himself

staring at the forest, wondering what dark secrets it held. He could not shake off a feeling that it—or something in it—was always watching them.

Gimlet apparently sensed this feeling of depression and got everyone busy in order to shake it off. “Let’s make camp,” he ordered briskly.

As this was to be the base from which the party intended to operate, and there was no indication of how long they would be there, more pains than usual were taken to make the camp as comfortable as the circumstances would permit. The first step was the collection of dry grass and brushwood to burn the herbage from the actual site of the camp. This was done to clear the ground of insects and to discourage the invasion of small rodents, reptiles, snakes, centipedes and the like. The tent was pitched, and a hut and cook-house built. Stores were next landed and made secure. Cub then walked nearer to the forest to collect firewood.

While he was doing so it seemed to him that the river suddenly changed its note. At first he thought that a spate might be coming down, and was about to shout a warning to Gimlet when he changed his mind and stared at the sky. For a minute or two he stood in a listening attitude, looking upwards, but seeing nothing he walked back to where Gimlet was arranging his equipment.

“Did you hear anything just now?” he asked.

Gimlet looked round. “What sort of thing?”

“You know,” answered Cub almost apologetically, “it may sound silly, but I could have sworn I heard an aeroplane in the distance.”

Gimlet shook his head. “I didn’t hear anything—but then, I was nearer to the river, so I probably wouldn’t. You didn’t actually see a plane?”

“No.”

Gimlet shrugged. “I suppose there’s always a chance of an odd plane passing over this area,” he said. “After all, planes fly in straight lines, and civil aircraft operate nowadays between most of the big towns of North and South America. We might be on the route of one of them.”

No one else had heard anything, probably on account of the noise made constantly by the river, so the subject was dropped, and was not referred to again.

The brief twilight was dimming the scene by the time the camp was shipshape and ready for occupation. As a matter of detail it was some little way from the village, as the huts, Jose assured them, would be infested with fleas and ticks.

“Tomorrow we will start on the job,” Gimlet told the others, as they foregathered at the tent for a cup of tea. “While we are here we shall have to mount guard day and night. It’s a bit of a bore, I know, but it would be silly to risk having our throats cut while we’re asleep.”

Jose approached with such a purposeful stride that it was evident he had news to impart. He had.

“Dere’s a man watching us, suh,” he told Gimlet softly.

“What sort of man?” asked Gimlet quickly.

“Indian man.”

“Where is he?”

Jose indicated the direction with his eyes. “Man stands just inside the forest,” he announced.

“Just the fellow I want to see,” declared Gimlet. “He may be able to tell us something. You speak the language. Ask him to come in. Offer him some food.”

Jose received this order without enthusiasm, but he obeyed. At least, he tried to obey. He called once or twice, and then returned to report that the man was no longer there.

“Man carry poisoned spears and arrow,” said Jose significantly.

“Well, that was only to be expected,” averred Gimlet. “After all, this is an Indian village. If you see any of them, call them in and tell them they have nothing to fear from us. If one Indian knows we’re here, I imagine it won’t be long before they all know. By the way, what’s the name of the tribe that lives here?”

“Wakinas.”

Gimlet nodded. “All right. Just behave as if nothing unusual were happening.”

As Jose joined his black companions Gimlet looked at the others with a curious smile on his face. “Not a very comfortable feeling, knowing you’re being watched; but Banford had no real trouble with these fellows, so I hope we shan’t. We’ll just have to take things as they come. There’s nothing more we can do.”

“ ’Ow are we going to tackle this vegetable mad-house when we don’t even know what we’re looking for?” Copper wanted to know.

“Banford gave me the direction taken by his men,” replied Gimlet. “They either found a way, or cut a way, into the jungle. We should be able to find their trail and follow it.”

“Then I suppose we’ll get what they got,” muttered Copper.

“Not necessarily. Our behaviour will be different from theirs. They were not expecting trouble. We are. No doubt they made a lot of noise. We shall go quietly.”

“Quiet as a lot of mice, I ’ope,” murmured Copper, thumbing the edge of his machete thoughtfully.

“The great thing is not to get lost,” went on Gimlet. “That’s where Trapper should be able to earn his pay. It’s odd that the Indians should have abandoned this place. There must have been a reason for it. Still, if Banford couldn’t work it out, it isn’t much use our trying. But let’s have supper. Then we’ll draw lots for guard duty.”

Night, dark and oppressive, blotted out the deserted village. Unseen in the darkness the river rushed on to the distant sea; to its voice was now added the noisy serenade of a thousand frogs, and other nocturnal creatures of the crowded jungle.

CHAPTER III

FIRST RECONNAISSANCE

THE squawking of parrots announced the dawn, much to the relief of Cub, who had drawn the morning watch and found his vigil rather a strain. In the darkest hour that comes before sunrise, the noises all around had been many and strange, and sometimes horrible. What creatures they were made by, animal, bird or reptile, he did not know, and didn't particularly care as long as he remained unmolested. Actually, the night passed without incident. A stroll round the precincts of the camp in the growing light revealed no signs of visitors. At the rear of the village he found signs of cultivation, much overgrown. There were a few pineapples, some plantains and sweet potatoes. These presently made a welcome addition to the food supply, which was mostly in tins.

After breakfast Gimlet called Jose into the party and told him what he intended doing. This was, in fact, all that could be done. It could hardly be called a plan. The procedure was simply to find the tracks of the lost porters and follow it. What they would find at the end, if anything, was open to speculation. That white men had been in the depths of the forest seemed almost certain in view of the bullet extracted by Banford from the porter who had died; but whether or not they were still there was another matter. The negro had seen, or thought he had seen, white men. It was more difficult to believe his curious statement that they were burning stones.

Gimlet told Jose that he and his crew could remain in camp, since there was little they could do if they came. It was not as if there were any heavy loads to carry. Machetes, for hacking a way through the forest, weapons, a few cartridges and some sandwiches for lunch, were all that would be needed. He pointed out that since Banford's porters had gone far into the jungle they must have found a path, probably a game track. The first thing, then, was to find it. If it turned out that there was no such track, then their job was hopeless from the outset; they might go on hacking at the forest for the rest of their lives without finding anything or getting anywhere.

Jose agreed that his lost friends must have found a track of some sort, at any rate in the first instance, otherwise they would not have got far, probably not beyond the sound of a rifle shot. Cutting a way through the tangle was slow work. The Indians had a few secret paths, but mostly they used game tracks, as did every animal that dwelt in the jungle. Jose was quite sure that

there was a big ruined city somewhere in the jungle not far away, because the Indians both here and lower down the river had told him about it. He thought an aeroplane had once flown out from Belize to look for it, which in his opinion was foolish, because the jungle hid everything. The Indians had not only seen the place but knew its legendary name, Uaxatikel. Had the Indians remained in the village he could have asked them about it; but they weren't there, and as they might never come back it wasn't much good waiting for them. Thus reasoned Jose.

Gimlet admitted that this argument was sound, and went on to say that it was not his intention, that day, to go very far, even if they did find the trail of the lost porters. The first trip would be in the nature of a preliminary reconnaissance to look for the track, and generally ascertain the state of the going. Armed with this information a more ambitious sortie could be made.

Jose thought this was a sensible idea but questioned the advisability of being left behind. He was willing to go with the exploring party, and he did, after all, know more about the country than any of them. The others could stay in camp. They all had a smattering of the Indian language and should be able to deal with any problem that arose. There was no proof that the Indians of the village had turned actively hostile.

Gimlet, after a little thought, approved this arrangement, with the result that shortly afterwards, armed and in marching order, the white men followed the black to that part of the forest where the porters had gone in, never to return. It took a little while to find the actual trail, but once some clean-cut branches were found the rest was easy.

It would be misleading to say that there was a clear path; but there was an old game trail that had become partly overgrown. There was a good reason to think that Banford's men had followed this, cutting a way where it became necessary. At all events, that someone had used the path comparatively recently was proved by places where encroaching lianas had been severed.

With Jose leading, a razor-edged machete in his hand to clear odd weeds and vines, the party moved forward into the twilit forest. Indeed, at first, after the bright sunshine outside, it seemed almost dark; but this effect soon wore off. No sun could penetrate the dense green ceiling overhead, but even so, the sticky heat soon had Cub bathed in perspiration.

He found himself in a strange, fascinating world. Some of the trees were enormous, and provided a foothold for a host of parasites, ferns, fungi and orchids, all striving to reach the life-giving sun far overhead. Every tree and every branch was overhung with lianas which varied in thickness from the

size of string to great twisted cables. From time to time, somewhere in the forest, a tree would fall, and when this happened the effect was startling. As the doomed tree began to move, dragging with it others to which it was fastened with lianas, monkeys would scream as they leapt for safety, and parrots screech as they flapped clear. Dead trees did not always fall to the ground, but were held up by their lianas at all sorts of angles.

The wisdom of accepting Jose's suggestion that he should go with them was soon made evident, for apart from clearing new growth with a deft stroke of his machete—which Cub discovered was not so easy as it looked—he pointed out dangers that might not have been suspected. The nests of hornets and wasps were sometimes cunningly concealed in low-hanging foliage. To brush against one of these by accident, as might easily happen, would, promised Jose, have unpleasant results. The wasps were larger than the European variety, with dangling legs. There was a particular liana, too, with broad, sharp thorns that could make an ugly wound. Dead branches had always to be avoided, for to touch one would bring down a rain of biting, stinging ants. Of the animal kingdom none was seen, although signs of them were common. Once, in the distance, there was a noise as of bones being rattled together. Jose said it was caused by a herd of peccaries gnashing their teeth as they fed. These small pigs travelled in large parties, and could be dangerous if disturbed. Their small but sharp tusks had been known to rip a man to pieces in short time.

The party moved on quietly, getting ever deeper into the jungle. For a long time nothing happened. Good progress was made, for on the whole the going was better than could have been expected.

The first incident of note occurred when they came upon a heap of orchids piled up on the ground, but still sprouting glorious blooms from their curious bulbs. Such a thing could hardly happen in nature, and it did not take Jose long to work out how they came to be there. He said they could only be plants which his lost companions had collected for Banford. They must have gathered them on the way out and made a dump, intending to pick them up on the way back. But they had never come back, which could only mean that the place where trouble had overtaken them was still somewhere ahead.

"Dey meet death fo' true," said Jose sadly, his dark eyes gazing apprehensively into the shadowy world through which they moved.

At that moment Cub admired the man for his courage, for he had little to gain and everything to lose from the part he was playing.

At midday, when a halt was made for lunch, apart from the orchids nothing connected with the expedition had been discovered. Still, the orchids were important, because they practically proved that the lost porters had used the path. There was no definite sign of the path having been used since. This, of course, was not conclusive, as Indians would certainly not leave marks of their passage. At all events, it seemed that if the dangers that had overwhelmed the lost porters were still present, they were somewhere in front. One matter was quite clear. Advance was only possible along the track. It would have been a hopeless business to try to force a passage through the virgin jungle. To cut a path would take hours of time for every mile gained.

Cub ate his biscuit sandwiches with a small army of ants carrying away crumbs as fast as they fell. He shuddered as he realised what the fate of a sick or wounded man or beast would be.

The meal finished, the party moved on, Jose still ahead, eyes and ears alert for anything unusual; but for all that was seen they might have had the forest to themselves.

It was about two o'clock, and Gimlet had called a halt with a view to turning back rather than over-do the first trip, when Jose, who had walked on a little way, returned with the news that there was a hill just in front of them. There were no trees on it. It might be possible to see something from the top.

Naturally, it was assumed that he meant ordinary rising ground, and at first Cub merely wondered why there were no trees on it. Anyway, there was a hill, which was a welcome change, for so far the floor of the forest had been dead level.

They all moved forward, and presently came upon a mound so perfectly conical in shape that it seemed impossible that it could have been fashioned by nature. As Jose had said, there were no trees on it, although the reason for this was still not apparent. There were plenty of trees at the bottom, but the hill itself was clad to the summit only in rough scrub and coarse grass. Cub judged it to be about two hundred feet high. The actual base, as far as could be seen, was more or less square. The apex was a blunt point.

Jose settled any doubts about this curious formation by declaring it to be the work of men. It was, he explained, built of stone, and as far as he was concerned, there was nothing remarkable about it, for he had seen many others in the forest. Years ago he had worked with a white man who had done much digging in these mounds looking, Jose thought, for treasure. That was how he knew they were built of stone. But no one, not even Indians,

knew what the things were, or how long they had been there. All that was known was, they had been built in a former age by a great nation that had vanished.

"I don't wonder they vanished," growled Copper. "Strike old Riley! Who'd stay in this greenhouse and be chewed up by bugs if he could get out of it?"

The hill, being in the open, was bathed in sunshine, which was at least refreshing after the gloomy forest. A move was made towards it, Jose slashing a way through the vegetation. In doing this he proved his statement that the hill was built of stone, for the foundations were exposed.

"Let's have a look round from the top," suggested Gimlet. "If we achieve nothing else we shall at least get a breath of air."

"Does this mean that we've arrived at the ruined city of Uaxatikel?" questioned Cub.

Gimlet put the question to Jose, who replied that he didn't know. There were, he said, plenty of such hills in the forest, but not many cities. But then, the cities, being smothered with jungle, were not easy to find.

The ascent was not difficult, and did not take long. It was soon clear that the structure was in fact a pyramid, built in a regular step formation. That is to say, each successive layer of stone was slightly smaller than the one below it. The actual steps were, of course, covered with herbage, but they were there and simplified the climb. That the thing had been built by human hands was quite evident.

It turned out that the top was only slightly above the level of the surrounding trees; but this was enough to provide another surprise. Ahead, in the direction in which they had been travelling, were more pyramids, apparently identical with the one they were on, which again confirmed what Jose had said. Cub could count at least a dozen, all looking like small islands in an ocean of green. It was the extent of this ocean, now that a clear view of it could be obtained, that amazed Cub. In fact, it rather appalled him. In every direction, as far as the eye could see, the billowing tree-tops rolled on and on until they merged with a misty horizon.

"Fancy getting lost in that lot," muttered Copper. "Wouldn't 'ave much chance of getting out, would yer, Trapper, old pal?"

Trapper clicked his tongue. "Too true," he murmured.

Apart from the presence of other pyramids, the ascent yielded nothing of interest, for it was no more possible to see what lay below the surface of the vegetable ocean than if it had been the Atlantic.

Gimlet regarded the scene thoughtfully. “I feel pretty sure that these mounds can only mean that this was once a place of importance,” he remarked. “According to report, the city of Uaxatikel should be somewhere in this region, so that chances are we’re close to it. Maybe these humps were part of the defences—but we needn’t worry ourselves by guessing about that. The white men that Banford’s dying porter spoke of may have been at Uaxatikel. That’s only surmise.” He looked at his watch. “We’re fairly well-off for time,” he went on. “That next mound can’t be more than a mile away. It might be worth while walking on to it. There’s a chance that we may see something of interest from the top.”

“Anything for a change from these blinking trees,” muttered Copper.

Descending to the floor of the forest they went on again, and they had not gone far when Cub made a curious discovery. There came out of the forest, across their path, a snake about ten feet long. He recognised it as a bushmaster, perhaps the most deadly of all reptiles, for they had seen two or three of them on their way up the river. There was nothing hostile about the snake’s behaviour. In fact, it ignored them. It merely slithered unhurriedly across the path and disappeared again into the jungle. But on its appearance they had all moved smartly to give it a wide berth. Cub, in stepping aside, slipped on some rotting leaves, as if he had skidded on a banana skin. Recovering, and looking down, he saw that he had exposed a flat stone. This surprised him, because in the ordinary way there were no stones of any sort in the jungle, the ground consisting of nothing but alluvial soil deposited by floods in ages past, overlaid with rotting vegetation. Scraping away some more dead leaves with his heel he brought to light a flat stone slab. He called Gimlet’s attention to it, with the result that Copper’s heavy boot revealed more slabs.

“There must have been a building here at some time,” opined Gimlet. “Either that or there was a paved road. Very interesting.”

Cub looked at him and realised suddenly what he meant. “Stones!” he exclaimed. “Banford’s porter spoke of stones.”

“Exactly,” replied Gimlet. “These slabs rather bear out the story, which I was beginning to doubt. The thing that has puzzled me ever since we started walking was this talk of men burning stones. What stones? I looked but I couldn’t see a single stone. It now seems that there are more stones than we imagined, so the story could be true. There are stones here, at any rate.”

“It’d be a bit of a job to burn ’em, all the same,” put in Copper cynically. “Why burn stones when there’s plenty of wood, any old how?”

Gimlet shook his head. “You’ve got me there,” he admitted. “The only explanation I can think of is, the men who attacked the porters had built a fireplace of stones. Banford’s men, who wouldn’t trouble to build a fireplace, might have supposed that the strangers were burning stones.”

“You speak truf fo’ sure, chief,” put in Jose.

“Let’s carry on,” said Gimlet.

More stones were soon forthcoming, and they were not always flat on the ground. Some were erect, and presently, several piled one upon the other marked the site of what had obviously been a building of some size. Near by, standing by itself, was an obelisk, looking rather like a tombstone. There was some intricate carving on it that was evidently writing. This, of course, conveyed nothing to the explorers, who could only stare at it, wondering what hand in the dim past had done the work.

The thing meant little to Jose, who declared that he could show them plenty of similar stones if they were interested in them. He had shown some to white men, he declared, but no one could read the writing.

The party pushed on towards the pyramid, which could now be seen through the trees, Gimlet merely remarking that these signs could only mean that they were getting near to Uaxatikel, if they were not already on the spot where the city had stood. Instinctively the advance was made with more caution.

The second mound was like the first in every respect except that near the base there were some ancient walls, confirming Gimlet’s belief that they were in, or approaching what had been a settlement of some size. The view from the top, too, was practically the same; the same sea of green leaves with the tops of numerous mounds protruding. But there was a difference, and the importance of it was not lost on any of them. From near the base of a distant pyramid, reckoned to be three or four miles away, a pillar of white smoke rose high into the blue sky. It was so conspicuous that they all saw it simultaneously, each with his own ejaculation of astonishment.

Gimlet was the first to comment. He looked at Jose. “It begins to look as if your friend told the truth when he talked of men burning stones. We’ve seen the stones. Now, I suspect, we are looking at the fire.”

“Dat ain’t no cooking fire, chief,” declared Jose. “Dat fire roast bulls at one time. Indian man use dry wood, make no smoke. Smoke tell enemies where he is. Yes, suh.”

“Can you think of any reason why anyone should make a fire as big as that?” asked Gimlet.

“No chief.”

"Could there be a settlement of any sort over there?"

This time Jose's "No" was emphatic. That part of the country was unoccupied, he said. Had there been an Indian village there he would have heard of it from other Indians near the river. He repeated his assertion that no Indian would build a fire of such size. If he did build a fire he would see to it that there was no smoke.

"Could there be a volcano there?" suggested Cub.

Gimlet looked again at the column of smoke and shook his head. "Volcanoes are usually high enough to be seen; they don't make smoke from ground level," he answered. "This much is certain. There are men there, and they are busy at something. There's only one way of finding out who they are, and what they're doing, and that's by going there."

"What about pushing on and having a dekko?" suggested Copper.

"It's too late today. It would mean spending the night in the forest. There's no desperate hurry. We'll try tomorrow. Now we know the track, we shall get along faster. It'll take us all our time to get back to camp before dark as it is. We shall learn no more by standing here, so let's be moving."

Back in the forest a brief investigation showed that the track continued on beyond the place where they stood. But as Gimlet pointed out, it now looked as if the path was something more than a game track. The presence of more flagstones under the mush of decomposing vegetation suggested that there had once been a paved road. From a place as important as the one they had reached there would naturally be a track to the junction of the two rivers. The Indians who occupied the village at the junction must have known about it. The huts and cultivation proved that they must have lived there for a long time without serious trouble. Why had they gone? People do not leave their homes without a reason, argued Gimlet. He said he couldn't help feeling that there was some connection between the departure of the Indians and what was going on in the region of the pyramids.

"It would be interesting to know just where this path ends," said Cub. "It must lead to a definite objective."

"The most likely place for any path to end is at a town or village," replied Gimlet. "I'd say this one ends at Uaxatikel, or what's left of it. The important question to us is, did Banford's men actually reach the end of this road or were they attacked somewhere on the trail? They were certainly attacked somewhere. Why? Remember, they weren't looking for trouble. They were merely looking for orchids. Why, then, were they shot at?"

Cub answered. "My guess is, they were bumped off because they tumbled on to something by accident, and saw too much."

“My guess is the same as yours,” returned Gimlet. “But let’s get home. We may find the answers to these questions tomorrow.”

They started off, and as the trail had been cleared by Jose’s machete on the way out, they were able to maintain a good pace. They reached camp, without incident, just as night was closing in, to find that all was well.

CHAPTER IV

CUB FALLS OUT

THE following day dawned clear and bright, much to the relief of everyone, for the party had been warned of the savage thunderstorms and torrential rain that might be encountered. At such times the level of the river rose swiftly, sometimes overflowing its banks, and making boat travel impossible. The continuation of the fine weather was therefore something to be thankful for.

The camp was on the move early. During a quick and simple breakfast Cub noticed that Gimlet seemed preoccupied. Indeed, so quiet was he that Cub, suspecting that he had something on his mind, asked him what it was.

Gimlet replied that he was somewhat perturbed by the non-appearance of the Indian proprietors of the village. This worried him, he said, more than the semi-hostile attitude Banford had noted on his way up the river. "The point is, they must know we are here," he went on. "When we arrived there was an Indian hanging about. Jose saw him. That fellow must have been in touch with his friends and would hardly fail to tell them of our arrival. Banford used to give them presents. They would naturally expect us to do the same thing. Such occasions must be rare in their lives. Why haven't they shown up? There's something queer about that."

"Maybe Jose could make a guess at the answer," returned Cub. "After all, he knows these people. He speaks their language. If anyone should be able to give us a line on their behaviour, surely it's Jose."

Gimlet called the negro over and put the question to him.

Jose looked uncomfortable, standing first on one foot and then on the other. "I guess dose mans mighty scared, chief," he announced at last.

"Scared of what?"

"Couldn't say, suh. But I know dese por Indian savages am drefful superstitious. Dey surely scared or dey wouldn't run away from de village."

"Do you think they've gone right away or are they likely to be hanging around?"

"Dey won't go far, chief," declared Jose. "Dis am their territory. Dey walk on territory of another tribe, den dere is trouble fo' sure."

"In that case they may be watching us all the time?"

"Dats de truf, suh. Dat man I see ain't by himself all alone in de forest."

Gimlet considered this opinion. "It's a pity we can't make contact with them and end this state of uncertainty. What I am thinking of is the possibility of an attack on the camp while we're away. If we came back and found the canoe and the stores gone, we should be in a bad way."

"We should all be dead mans, suh," answered Jose, with disconcerting frankness.

"Very well," resumed Gimlet. "We shan't be moving off for a few minutes, so here is an idea that I think is worth trying. If it fails we shall be no worse off. You take a walk round the edge of the forest, shouting that we are friends and have brought presents for anyone who cares to come and fetch them."

Jose agreed, but with such reluctance that Gimlet asked him what he was afraid of.

"If dis man no like my face, I get poisoned arrow in my ribs," said Jose.

"In that case you'd better forget about it," returned Gimlet.

Jose thought for a little while. "Mebbe if we don't make friends with dese mens we all get the arrow," he muttered. He walked away, and presently the others could hear him shouting something that sounded like "May-re! May-re!"

"Good for Jose," murmured Copper. "I've met a lot of coves with white faces who ain't got as much pluck as he has. What say you, Trapper, old chum? Am I right?"

Trapper clicked his tongue. "Every time, pal," he agreed.

Cub thought the black had so little chance of success that he didn't pay much attention to him, but busied himself getting his accoutrements ready for the march. An ejaculated "Strike old Riley!" from Copper made him turn, and on looking round to ascertain the cause of it, he was not a little surprised to see Jose standing near the edge of the forest talking to a shadowy, copper-coloured figure, armed with a bow and a spear.

A conversation, watched with interest by everyone in camp, ensued. At the end of it Jose strolled back to Gimlet leaving the Indian standing in the same place.

"Good work, Jose!" congratulated Gimlet. "Do you know that man?"

"Yes, suh. His name am Tagum. His father big chief. One day he plenty sick with sore foot and Mister Banford make him well. He says he come to see Mister Banford to say go away, because plenty danger. But when he see only strange white mens, he hide in de forest."

"Did the Indians leave the village because of this danger?"

"Yes, suh."

"What is this danger?"

Jose dropped his voice and rolled his eyes. "Tagum say de village is haunted by an evil spirit."

"Has he seen this spirit?"

"Yes, suh."

"What did it look like?"

"Dead man with big white face like de men who lived in de stone houses in de forest long time ago."

"So that's why the village is deserted."

"Yes, suh. Dat's why."

"Do you believe in this spirit?"

"No, suh. Not me. I'se an educated nigger. But I no like spirits."

Gimlet smiled. "Did Tagum say where this spirit came from?"

"Dat way, suh." Jose pointed in the direction of the path that led to the pyramids.

"That's what I thought," murmured Gimlet softly. "I suppose the Indians no longer use that path?"

"Not fer a million dollars, chief," declared Jose earnestly.

"Has Tagum any idea of what's going on at the end of the path?"

"Yes, suh. He say bad white mans make powerful medicine with fire and stones."

Gimlet threw a meaning glance at the others. "Is that all he knows?"

"No chief. He say white mans dey try to make Indians work."

"Work at what?"

"Cut down de forest."

"That'd be a tall order," said Gimlet dryly. "And the Indians didn't like the idea, eh?"

"No, suh. Indian man is a hunter, no like work. Dey run away. White man shoot with gun. Indian shoot back with poisoned arrow. One white man die. Indians run. No go back. Dey say white man's spirit come here. Dat's why dey afraid to stay in de village any more."

Gimlet digested this illuminating information. "All right, Jose," he said at last. "Give Tagum some presents out of the trade box—anything you think will be likely to please him. Tell him to tell his friends that we've come to

drive away this evil spirit. They needn't be afraid of us. We want to be friendly with them. Say we're going off right away to look for this spirit. Tell Tagum to be sure to come back here."

"Yes, suh." Jose walked back to the forest.

Gimlet looked at the others. "The trouble here begins to take shape," he asserted. "So there are white men in the forest making powerful medicine, and they don't want anyone to see what they are doing. It will be interesting to discover what they're really up to. Apparently they've stopped the Indians from using the path by letting loose a spook on it. Banford's porters, knowing nothing about all this, went up the path and ran into trouble. It rather looks as if these curious white men have put a guard on the path. Well, whatever they're doing, it must be something out of the ordinary or they wouldn't have shot Banford's porters. This doesn't sound like treasure-hunting to me, or anything like it. Unfortunately for these people, one of Banford's men managed to get back to camp, with the result that we're here. They may find we're not so easy to push around. We are at least forewarned. If they start any shooting, they'll find it's a game that we can play. Still, if we can find out what these stiffs are doing, without any fireworks, so much the better."

"The trouble is going to be to get close enough to have a good look at these stone-burners without being seen," observed Cub. "If we stay on the track we shall be spotted—that is, if the track is being watched."

"That's something we may be able to ascertain by scouting," answered Gimlet. "If the track is watched, obviously we shall have to leave it and try to work our way through the forest. But let's see about it. It's time we were moving."

"You're not taking Jose?" queried Cub.

"No. We don't really need him now. It would be better if he stayed in camp to talk to the Indians if they should turn up."

Jose agreed, and so it was decided.

A few minutes later the party was moving in single file through the forest, with Trapper, acting as scout, fifty yards or so ahead.

The march was a repetition of the previous day, except that faster progress was made, with the result that the first pyramid was reached well within the forenoon, and the second, in time for lunch. This was, of course, the limit of the previous day's march. Half an hour sufficed for the meal, at the conclusion of which the journey was resumed. Progress was now slower, not so much on account of the state of the path as because Trapper was advancing with more caution, often stopping to listen. This was on the

instructions of Gimlet, who thought they were getting near the danger zone. It suited Cub, who had developed a slight headache.

Stones, small mounds, and the ruins of ancient dwellings, large and small, were now so common that they were no longer remarked. Thick vegetation prevented them from being examined without loss of valuable time. It was obvious that they had arrived at what had been a place of size and importance. Once they passed a limestone quarry from which the building material had been excavated. Obelisks, or large upright stones, often with the heads of uncouth creatures sculptured on top, appeared on either side of the track, which went far to confirm the view that the track had at one time been a main road.

Cub soon saw why everything was in ruins, why even the big houses had been overthrown. Through the centuries seeds had fallen from the trees and dropped into interstices between the stones. When these germinated the growing roots had forced the stones apart, no matter how thick were the walls.

It is not to be supposed that this march was a pleasant jaunt. It was anything but that. The heat was stifling and the usual insect pests were troublesome. Red spots on hands and faces showed the stings and bites of the insect population. Every member of the party looked hot and tired. Legs were mud-plastered from boggy areas; shirts were limp and wet with perspiration. Cub was definitely feeling the strain, but he did not mention it.

It is not to be supposed that this march was a pleasant jaunt

He saw Trapper stop and pick up something from the ground. When they drew level with him he displayed his find. It was not much, but it spoke volumes. It was, in fact, the short end of a cigarette, stained brown as if it had been lying on the ground for some days.

"The white men are not far away," averred Gimlet.

Shortly after this a pyramid came into view. It was—or should be, they thought—the one near to which they had seen the smoke on the previous day.

"We're getting warm," said Gimlet. "We can't have much farther to go. Trapper, go on ahead and spy out the trail. We'll wait here."

"Do you want me to climb the hill?" asked Trapper.

"It might be a good thing," decided Gimlet. "One person can see as much as four, and make less noise, as well as being less conspicuous. Here, take the glasses."

Trapper took the binoculars and moved off. The others sat on a fallen tree, having first examined it for centipedes, to await his return.

After a while Cub found himself listening to a distant sound that he did not recognise. It was not constant, but intermittent. He was by this time accustomed to the many queer sounds produced by the dwellers in the forest, from the startling bell-like call of the bird Jose called the campanero, to the almost human cries of the different species of monkeys: but this was a musical metallic hum that reminded him of something, although what it was he could not remember. He did not comment on it because his headache had become so much worse that he felt unable to take a serious interest in the proceedings.

Trapper was away for about half an hour, and from the expression on his face when he returned, it was apparent that he had not wasted his time.

"Well, what did you see?" asked Gimlet.

"Plenty," answered Trapper. He clicked his tongue. "From the top of the hill there was so much to see, I didn't know where to begin. That porter of Mr. Banford's who got back sure told the truth, and then some. There's a full-sized camp away out there in the jungle. They've got a tractor."

"Tractor!" Gimlet looked incredulous.

"That's what I said, skipper."

"But how—what in the name of all that's fantastic are they doing with a tractor?"

"Hauling timber."

"What are they doing with the timber?"

"Sawing it up and burning it, as far as I could see. They've used these stones that are kicking about to build what looks like an out-sized oven. In fact, there's a couple of them. They've got a saw-mill going."

"That's right. I could hear it," put in Cub. "I thought the hum of the circular saw must be made by a bird of some sort."

"They've cut a big swathe right through the jungle," continued Trapper. "They've got another bit of machinery there, too. It looks mighty like a concrete-mixer."

For a moment or two Gimlet could only stare. "Concrete-mixer! What in thunder would anyone here want with a concrete-mixer, of all things?"

"Search me, skipper," answered Trapper helplessly. "Maybe you'd better come up and have a look for yourself. You can get a good view of the whole outfit from the top of the hill."

"Did you see anyone at the end of the track?"

"I didn't go as far as that. I cut into the timber and worked my way round to the back of the hill and went up from there. I figured no one would be watching on that side. I couldn't see the end of the track from there; some trees were in the way."

"Let's go and have a look at this," said Gimlet crisply. "Lead on, Trapper. You know the way."

The party moved forward again, following Trapper, who soon left the track and plunged into the tangle of undergrowth. It was heavy going. The ground was spongy; at every step feet sank deep into a mire of slimy, sphagnum moss. Lianas and other creepers hung in festoons from tree to tree and had to be pushed aside, or avoided if this proved impossible. The heat was suffocating. Cub stuck it for a little while, but when his legs began to go weak under him he thought it time to inform the others of his plight. He did so with reluctance.

"Touch of fever," diagnosed Gimlet, looking at Cub's flushed face. "Have you been taking your quinine regularly?"

"Of course."

"Hm," murmured Gimlet, looking at Cub. "The sooner you're back in camp the better. We shall soon be on our way. Meanwhile, there's no need for you to exhaust yourself trying to keep up with us. Rest here and we'll pick you up as we come back. We shan't be far away."

"Fair enough," agreed Cub. Although he was sorry to drop out of the party, he saw that if he tried to go on, he would only be a hindrance.

As Gimlet and the others continued on their way, Cub found a big tree and squatted on a projecting root. Taking out his handkerchief, already damp, he wiped cold perspiration from his face and then rested his head in his hands. But he was soon uncomfortably aware that instead of feeling better he was getting worse, and began to wonder how he was going to get back to camp. He was irritated rather than surprised that he should fall sick, for he knew well enough that fever was one of the commonest hazards of jungle travel; but it seemed unfortunate that he should fall victim at this juncture, when he was so far from camp. He comforted himself with the thought that early bouts of malaria are seldom of long duration.

A long time seemed to pass. Exactly how long he did not know, for he kept no account of it. He was feeling ill. Time, like everything else, had

become curiously vague. Eventually a movement near at hand made him open his eyes. A few yards away a monkey sat staring at him. Seeing him move, the animal leapt with a howl of fright or execration into the nearest tree, where apparently his companions were awaiting the result of the investigation. They joined in the excitement, and at once set up such a howling, screeching, yelling and barking, that Cub was appalled by the volume of sound. He was also alarmed, fearing that the whole troop was about to set on him. In his exasperation he shouted at them to go away, but this only made matters worse. Furious, for he felt that the din would drive him crazy, he snatched up a piece of dead wood and flung it at the nearest monkey. A dozen missiles came hurtling back at him. He could bear no more of it, so getting unsteadily to his feet, he beat an ignominious retreat, making for the main track. That the others would find him there he did not doubt.

Strange to relate, the obvious danger of such a pandemonium did not occur to him. Had he been in normal health he must have realised that such an uproar would be heard for a considerable distance, and that anyone hearing it, understanding such sounds, would come to investigate.

He had nearly reached the track, with the clamour subsiding behind him, when he became vaguely aware of voices no great distance away. He supposed that it was Gimlet returning, so rather than risk being missed by them, he steadied himself against a tree to wait. Instantly a pain like the thrust of a red hot needle shot through his hand. With a gasp he snatched his hand away and saw a big sauba ant, which he had crushed, fall to the ground. Others were scuttling about, so hardly knowing what he was doing he blundered on. As in a dream he heard a hail, and assuming that the others had reached the spot where he had fallen out, and were looking for him, he let out an answering hail in which urgency and misery were blended. Then a movement caught his eye, although, to his surprise, it was nowhere near the direction from which he expected the others to appear. It was on the main track. Sick, and half-blind with pain, he saw that it was not Gimlet. There were men there; but they were strangers.

Swaying on his feet, fighting nausea, he made out four men. Two were white, or nearly white. Two were Indians. He stared at them. They, seeing him, stared back for several seconds before advancing. To Cub, the whole thing was now getting hazy. He was by no means sure that the men were really there. If they were, he thought, they must be enemies. With the trees spinning before his eyes, he fumbled at his belt for cartridges. But the men hurried forward and took his rifle from him. Hardly able to stand, he did not protest when they led him quietly but firmly to the track.

There was a brief conversation in a language he did not understand. It sounded far away. Everything was getting darker. He felt, rather than saw, the Indians put their arms under his shoulders. His knees gave way under him. Everything spun faster and faster. Darkness closed in.

CHAPTER V

COPPER GETS A FRIGHT

GIMLET, COPPER and Trapper, had just reached the summit of the mound, and were lying flat in the coarse herbage that flourished on it, when the monkeys began mobbing Cub. They heard the noise, for the distance in a straight line was not great, and guessing what was happening paid no attention to it. The same thing had happened more than once before. Copper was inclined to treat the matter as a joke until Gimlet pointed out that other people within ear-shot would also know what was happening and perhaps go to investigate. However, they were not really worried, for it was unlikely that the animals would do Cub a serious injury. The truth may be that Gimlet's real interest was now focused on the scene before him. The nearer part of the view, as Trapper had stated, was blocked out by trees; but the more distant area was open to inspection, for the ground had been cleared.

It was evident at a glance that numbers of men had been busy for some time, even though not all the ground now open to the light of day had been occupied by trees. Had that been so, an army would have been required to make the clearing that now existed. Most of the ground had been savannah; that is, ground more or less level had been occupied only by rough grass and shrubs, with perhaps an occasional tree. In this case the ground appeared black, suggesting that the vegetation had been burnt off. Along the edge of the land thus cleared were several objects of interest, calculated to cause astonishment.

There were some wooden hutments, and three long, low, substantial-looking buildings that had obviously been constructed of material originally used for the old buildings now in ruins. There was a saw-mill, recognisable by the usual heap of sawdust. Even then a tractor was hauling a tree to it. Objects of even greater curiosity were two beehive-shaped structures from which smoke was rising, and, close to them, a piece of machinery which Trapper had thought was a concrete-mixer. Near by was a litter of squared stones that must have been collected from the ruins. Two men were engaged in breaking up these stones with sledge hammers. Considering all the circumstances, a more futile form of labour would have been hard to imagine. Other men were moving about as if engaged in urgent work. Taking the thing by and large, Banford's porter had not been far wrong in his rambling statement about what was going on in the forest.

Gimlet, who had been surveying the place through his glasses, rested his chin on the back of his hand and acknowledged himself beaten. “This is the most fantastic thing I ever saw in my life,” he asserted. “What’s going on here? What the deuce do these people think they’re doing?”

“Looks like they’re building a railway,” suggested Trapper.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” answered Gimlet shortly. “For what possible purpose would anyone want a railway in a place like this?”

“Bring folks out to see the monkeys,” suggested Copper facetiously.

Gimlet did not deign to answer.

“How about gold mining?” suggested Trapper.

“I see nothing remotely resembling mining gear,” returned Gimlet.

“Treasure-hunting in the old ruins,” offered Copper.

“No. That won’t do. I can’t imagine that those men cracking stones are such fools as to suppose that there is anything inside them.” Gimlet paused for further consideration. “One thing is certain,” he went on. “Whatever is going on here is being done in secret. If it was all above board we shouldn’t be here, because the Government would know all about a legitimate undertaking of this size.”

“What beats me,” remarked Copper, with wonder in his voice, “is how these blokes got this heavy tackle here. There ain’t a river and there ain’t a road. Don’t ask me to believe that some poor cove humped a tractor on his back right through that perishing jungle. It takes me all my time to carry an ’aversack, and I ain’t no chicken.”

“I think you’ve got something there,” replied Gimlet, in a curious tone of voice. “That tackle was never brought here by normal methods. Had it come overland, it would have started from the coast; and had it started from the coast it would have been seen by import or customs officials, who would have wanted to know who it belonged to and what it was for. In a word, crazy though it may seem, there’s only one way that stuff could have got here.”

“I get it,” breathed Copper. “Swipe me with blanket! Cub thought he heard a plane. That’s it. The stuff was flown in.”

Trapper clicked his tongue. “Pal, you’ve guessed it.”

“The component parts of that machinery could have been flown in and assembled here,” said Gimlet thoughtfully. “This open area we’re looking at is the air-strip.”

“What d’you know about that?” muttered Copper. “These blokes must have money to chuck away. Next thing we’ll tumble on is a picture palace, I

shouldn't wonder. Maybe there's a fish shop 'andy. I could do with a nice plate of fish and chips right now."

"Don't talk nonsense," requested Gimlet curtly. "Take it from me, this is no laughing matter. We've got to find out what's going on here."

"Okay, Skipper," answered Copper. "I ain't no use at guessing. Let's go down and ask these blokes what they reckon they're a-doing of."

"And get what Banford's porters got?" replied Gimlet grimly. "We know where their curiosity got them. That won't do. This is too big a project to take chances with." He looked at his watch. "Time's getting on. We're going to be late home. Still, we've done well—better than I expected. Let's get back to camp. We'll continue the debate there. Come on! Be careful not to show yourself."

They began backing down the far side of the slope. Once below the skyline, with the mound between them and the camp, there was no possibility of being seen, which was of course why Gimlet had chosen to retire that way. On the other hand, neither could they see the camp. On this, although they were not to know it, much depended, for had they remained in sight of the camp for a few minutes longer they would have seen Cub carried in. The mystery of his disappearance, which altered the whole sequence of events, would not then have arisen. Thus can so much depend from one slender thread of chance.

A discovery of minor importance was made on the way down. It had been assumed that the pyramids were of solid stone throughout. This turned out not to be the case—at any rate, in this particular example. A square entrance gave access to a small chamber, perhaps twenty-four feet by twelve. There was nothing in it, so they gave it no more than a perfunctory glance. Copper observed in passing that it wouldn't be a bad spot to doss down at a pinch.

They were not long in getting back to the place where Cub fell out and was to have waited for them. Not seeing him, they looked around, without, of course, seeing anything of him. Gimlet looked puzzled rather than worried. He confirmed with Trapper that they were at the right place.

Trapper pointed at some broken branches that were lying about. "I guess the monkeys pelted him and made him move," he surmised shrewdly.

"That may be it," agreed Gimlet. He whistled. There was no answer. He called softly. Not receiving an answer, he walked on and in due course reached the main track. He looked up and down. Again he called, and whistled, but without result. "What the deuce can he be doing?" he muttered. "We're pushed for time already."

"Maybe he don't know himself what he's a-doing of," observed Copper, new doubt in his tone of voice. "He didn't look too good when we left him. We shouldn't have left him here on his own."

"You're right," conceded Gimlet. "He may have been feeling worse than he pretended. If he's wandering about in the forest, delirious, we're going to have a nice game trying to find him. But he can't be far away. However, we've got to find him and that's all there is to it. There can be no question of leaving him here. I doubt if he'd survive a night in the forest if he's gone down with a really bad dose of fever."

"We ain't got much time left," Copper pointed out. "Once it gets dark, we've had it, as far as looking is concerned."

They spent an hour searching, but to no purpose. Gimlet stopped again on the track, worried and frustrated. He looked at his watch. "It will be dark inside a couple of hours. If we spend the night here without quinine or mosquito-nets, we shall *all* be down with fever. I don't know what to do for the best and that's a fact. Has anyone an idea?"

"I'll tell you mine," replied Copper earnestly. "There ain't no sense in us all staying here, without grub or anything. That's asking for trouble. We shan't be able to do anything once it gets dark, any old how. Someone will have to stay, of course, to go on looking, or be around if he turns up. You push on home with Trapper and come back tomorrow with some grub, quinine, and a blanket in case Cub's really queer. I'll wait here. I'll go on looking for him until it gets dark, and tomorrow as soon as it gets light. That's all we can do as far as I can see."

"It's going to be no joke, spending the night here alone," said Gimlet dubiously.

"Nothing ever is a joke on active service when things come unstuck," answered Copper, with a logic born of experience, "Don't you worry about me. I shall be all right. Get Jose to hump a load of stuff out tomorrow in case we have to stay. That's my idea, skipper."

"It makes sense," put in Trapper.

"All right, if you don't mind staying," agreed Gimlet. "If we're going we might as well start. We shall finish in the dark, anyway. Come on, Trapper." Without further parley, Gimlet strode off down the track.

Copper watched him go and then resumed his task, although there was little he could do except walk up and down the track whistling their old rallying signal. To make anything like a systematic search in the jungle itself would have been as hopeless as looking for the proverbial needle in a bundle of hay. As time went on a feeling grew on him that he was wasting his

energy. Cub was not there. Certainly he was no longer on his feet or he would have been back before this.

Time went on, with Copper becoming more and more sick with anxiety. He was angry, too. He knew that to cry over spilt milk is a futile proceeding but he called himself hard names for leaving Cub alone. Actually, of course, Cub was chiefly to blame, for not reporting his sickness earlier, and making light of it when he did mention it. But then again, in so behaving he acted, as he thought, for the best.

The light was fast failing when Copper made an important discovery. He had been a fair way up the track, and was returning when the toe of his boot struck something hard. Glancing down he caught the gleam of metal. The object was half-hidden under a dead leaf. He picked it up. It was a brass cartridge and he recognised it at once for a .256 calibre Express rifle. This was the weapon Cub carried, and short of an unbelievable coincidence it was certain that he must have dropped it. It was in brand new condition, moreover, so it could not have been lying there very long. Whether it had been dropped by accident or design, Copper had no means of knowing; but as it lay at a point beyond where they had turned off the track into the jungle it provided a clue to the direction Cub had taken.

With the cartridge in his hand, Copper stared along the darkening track. His first impulse was to follow it in the hope of overtaking Cub; but then his common sense and military training prevailed, and he perceived the danger of leaving the rendezvous that he had made with Gimlet. To make an arrangement, and then depart from it, no matter how well-intentioned, is perhaps the most fruitful source of trouble. Apart from any other hazard, in a few minutes it would be dark. To move far would obviously be the limit of folly. Pondering, Copper realised it. He also realised that to lose himself at this juncture, as he might, would only make matters worse—much worse.

Deep in thought, moving quietly, he went back down the path a little way to where he remembered seeing one of the old stone dwellings in better shape than most. It stood some eight or ten yards inside the forest. The doorway faced the track. He had no intention of standing on the path all night—or sitting on it, if it came to that; for he had not forgotten that panthers and other beasts of the jungle used the same track for their nocturnal travels.

Coming level with the house he pushed a way to it through the trailing creepers. A fallen block of stone provided a seat. He moved it to a position just inside the doorway, confident that he would hear, even if he did not see, anyone using the track. There he sat, his rifle across his knees. Groping in his pocket he found a crumpled packet of cigarettes. Straightening one with

expert fingers he lit it, drew on it with deep satisfaction and settled down to wait. The smoke did to some extent discourage the mosquitoes.

He did not, of course, attempt to sleep. That was the last thing in his mind. With ample time for contemplation he tried to work out what could have happened to Cub. The only crumb of comfort he could find that was in the ordinary way Cub was well able to take care of himself. Whether or not he was still in a condition to do so depended on the severity of his attack of fever. That was something he did not know.

He thought about the cartridge, turning over in his mind all the possibilities it suggested. It could hardly have fallen out of Cub's belt by accident. Had that been possible he would have lost all his ammunition long ago. It followed, therefore, that Cub had taken out the cartridge deliberately. There were only two reasons why he would do that. One was in order to load the rifle. If that was the answer, it was obvious that he had been prevented from carrying out his intention, for even if the cartridge had slipped from his fingers he would have picked it up. The alternative reason was that Cub had dropped the cartridge deliberately, hoping they would find it, and thus learn which way he had gone. That, in turn, could only mean that he was not master of his actions; that he was being taken away by force.

Thus pondered Copper, keeping his mind occupied to prevent it from dwelling on other things. For there were other things, things that filled him with an alert uneasiness. There were noises—grunts, squeaks, rustlings and other stealthy movements, made by he knew not what, but calculated to keep his nerves on edge. It was now deep night, and he could see nothing. Absolutely nothing. Literally, he could not see his hand in front of his face. The result was an unpleasant sensation that the great trees were closing in on him from all sides. Not once did he move the rifle from his knees.

The night passed as slowly as only a night can pass when there is nothing to do except to stare into utter darkness. Once a tree crashed down not far away with a noise like the end of the world. It brought him to his feet with a rush; but realising what it was he sank down again, the shock bringing beads of perspiration to his forehead.

It was some time during the early hours of the morning that it happened. He was still sitting in the doorway of the ancient dwelling, when through the trees, he saw a light coming down the track. There were, he perceived, with tightening muscles, two lights. One was a small beam. The other was round, and glowed with a bluish, unearthly effect. It was upon this that Copper's eyes became fixed. It was not so much the eerie quality of the light that made him stare, because in the tropic forest at night there were many things that glowed. There were the fireflies. There were big, fat glow-worms. There

were fungi. More than once the rotting tinder of a long-dead tree had gleamed with an uncanny phosphorescent light.

It was the size of this light, and the way it moved, that made him moisten lips that had suddenly gone dry. It was about the size of a football and appeared to dance along about two feet above the ground. As the object drew nearly level it seemed to turn towards him. Only then did he see that it was a human face—or rather an inhuman face. The features were human but distorted, like some of the leering, grotesque heads they had seen on the pillars and lintels of the ruins. In fact, one of them might have come to life.

Straight along the track it danced with a faint rustling sound. Sometimes it was there. Sometimes it was not. On it went, still bouncing and turning, getting smaller and smaller.

Up to now Copper had not moved. Whether he did not think of moving, or whether his limbs refused to function, is a matter for conjecture. Either way, he could have been excused, for the whole thing had happened so suddenly that there had been no time to think. All he could do was hold his breath and stare.

It was not until the thing was some way off that he recovered himself. Then, with a hiss of indrawn breath, he leapt to his feet and crashed out into the path. For a moment, at the noise he made, the thing seemed to hesitate; then it went on at a speed which Copper did not feel inclined to match, and finally disappeared from sight.

Copper stood still in the middle of the path, staring after it, muttering under his breath. Then, slinging his rifle on his shoulder, he mopped his face with his handkerchief. This done he felt for his last cigarette, straightened it and lit it. In doing this he discovered, much to his annoyance, that his fingers were shaking. In his wrath he hurled the dead match away. “Okay, Guy Fawkes,” he rasped. “Try to put the wind up me, would you? All right, shiny mug; I’ll be waiting for you when you come back, my oath I will.” Drawing hard on his cigarette, he returned to his seat, angry, puzzled, and although he would not have admitted it, more than a little shaken. What irritated him as much as anything was the fact that although he had a rifle, he had not thought of using it. Wide awake now, he settled down to watch the path with calculating eyes.

Then, suddenly, he remembered something. The Indians to whom Jose had spoken had said something about an evil spirit that haunted the village, giving that the reason for its evacuation. It was reasonable to suppose that it was this alleged spirit that he had seen—unless there was more than one. It was also reasonable to presume that the thing that had passed him was on its

way to the village. He derived some satisfaction from the thought. Somebody there would be on guard. And so little respect did Copper have for evil spirits that he chuckled at the thought of this one encountering Gimlet with a gun in his hand. “A .45 slug in your bread-pan should make you dance to some tune, my beauty,” he breathed.

Considering the incident, now that he could think clearly, one or two points of interest occurred to him. In the first place, the thing had come from the direction of the secret camp. If that was where it hid in the day-time, it would probably return there at the end of its nocturnal tour. It would, presumably, stay on the track. It would not, therefore, be able to pass the spot where he sat without him seeing it. Secondly, he recalled that it had made a slight noise as it moved. Copper had had no previous experience of spirits, but he felt that there was something wrong about this. A spirit, he reckoned, should moved silently. What puzzled him more than anything was the height at which the thing had moved above the ground. At no time, he estimated, had it been more than three feet above the track—the height, say, of a man’s hips. It was hard to see how the head could be on the shoulders of a normal human being. Was he, Copper wondered, dealing with a dwarf? He had seen no body. The darkness was such that nothing except a light of some sort could be seen.

Copper gave it up. Perhaps the thing would come back. If it did, he told himself grimly, it would find him ready and waiting. What, in that event, he was going to do, he had not yet decided. Shooting, he thought, was to be avoided, on account of the proximity of the secret camp. He wished Gimlet was there to give a decision on the right line of action.

At long last the night died and another day dawned, with grey twilight creeping imperceptibly through the forest.

CHAPTER VI

COPPER GETS HIS OWN BACK

STILL COPPER waited. Knowing how long it had taken him to come from the river he was able to form a fair estimate of how long it would be before the "spook" returned, assuming that its objective was the river and that it did not spend too much time there. He wondered how often it made the journey and whether their own arrival at the village had anything to do with the present occasion.

His estimate of time was not far wrong. Grey dawn had given way to daylight when he saw a figure coming up the track from the direction of the river. It was not an Indian, nor a negro, as he thought might be the case if one could be found with enough nerve for such a job. Nor could the man be described as a European, although he was nearly white. High cheek-bones and eyes that were set at a slight slant suggested a tinge of Oriental blood. For clothes he wore only a shirt, linen trousers and rope-soled canvas shoes. It was fairly evident to Copper that the man was not British, and beyond that he was not particularly interested. That the man was one of the working party among the ruins in the secret camp was not to be doubted, and that, for the time being, as far as Copper was concerned, was enough.

That he was the "spirit" that had scared the Indians from their homes was revealed by an object that dangled from his belt. It was a mask, apparently made of white cardboard or similar material, rather larger than life-size. Copper recognised it for the face he had seen in the dark, although it was of course no longer luminous. It hung loosely on a cord, and the movements of the man as he walked caused it to turn and bob about, as if it might have been a dwarf, dancing.

Copper's lips parted in a contemptuous sneer at this simple explanation of the phenomenon. He still hadn't decided what to do. In the end he did nothing.

He looked at it like this. He had no proof that the man was doing anything wrong, beyond playing a cheap trick on the superstitious Indians. The man had not molested him. To attack him would therefore be an unprovoked assault. Merely to accost him would reveal his own presence to no useful purpose. To ask the man what he was doing there would simply invite a lie. He might have grabbed the man, and detained him; but the last thing he wanted at that moment was to clutter himself up with a prisoner. It

was better, he thought, that the man should not know that he had been seen; so he let him pass without revealing himself.

So that's that, he told himself, as the fake ghost disappeared up the track. He stood up, stretched, removed some leeches from his legs, and then resumed his search for Cub, but without going far from the rendezvous. It was still too early for Gimlet or Trapper to show up, but being hungry and without a smoke, he hoped that they would not be long.

In this matter he was to be disappointed. The day wore on and there was still no sign of them. He dare hardly think about Cub. From time to time he told himself that he would turn up presently; but in his heart he knew that if Cub had really lost himself in the jungle, they had small chance of ever seeing him again.

It was after two o'clock when Gimlet and Trapper appeared, followed by Jose carrying a heavy bundle. Copper greeted them with frank disfavour. "Strike old Riley!" he exclaimed. "You ain't half been a time. I'm nearly passing out for a bite of something to eat."

Gimlet ignored the remark. "What about Cub?" he demanded in a brittle voice.

"Not a sign of him," answered Copper wearily. "I've tramped this perishing jungle for hours, too. 'E ain't here, and that's all there is to it. Mind if I 'ave my rations?" He reached for the bag Jose carried.

"I'm sorry we're so late, but we had a spot of bother at the base," explained Gimlet.

"What happened?"

"We had a visitor."

"Ah, of course. I should have guessed it."

"Why should you have guessed it?"

"I saw him—that is if you mean the spook?"

"You saw it!"

"Too true. I saw 'im a-going and I saw him coming back. Had two minds about slamming him one in the pan, for putting the wind up me. Give me quite a turn, 'e did."

"You can tell me all about that presently," said Gimlet. "He came into the camp and started a stampede. I didn't see him. The porters did and they bolted. It's taken us all morning to round them up again."

Copper looked at Jose reproachfully. "And I thought you was a man," he jeered.

"Dat spirit——"

“Spirit, me grandmother!” jibed Copper. “It’s a man with a mask on ’is head. Passed me within a couple of yards.” Copper went on to describe what he had seen.

Gimlet listened attentively. “That settles any argument about that,” he said at the finish. “This spook racket is obviously part of the scheme to discourage visitors. The Indians who lived in the village were probably in the habit of using this path. They’re not likely to use it now they believe it to be haunted. They’ve even left the village on that account. The only way one can get here is by the river. Visitors, like Banford, for instance, would naturally stop at the village for a gossip with the Indians. The Indians would talk about the strange business going on in the jungle. As that was undesirable, they’ve been driven away by an old trick. That’s the answer to this spook business. So far so good. The question is what are we going to do about Cub?”

“Ah, I nearly forgot.” Copper told of his finding of the cartridge. He produced it.

Gimlet looked at it. “Where exactly did you find it?”

Copper pointed.

“Then Cub must have gone up on the track,” declared Gimlet. “In that case the chances are he is in the enemy camp. Maybe that’s why the spook was sent out last night—to see if there were any more white men at the village.”

“Then the sooner we give their camp the once-over the better,” said Copper emphatically.

“To barge in in broad daylight would be the last way to find out what we want to know,” countered Gimlet. “Once these people know we’re here, we shall be up against a more difficult proposition. There’s no desperate hurry about it. We’ll try our luck in the dark first. Meanwhile, there’s no point in standing here on the track in full view of the enemy should he come along. Let’s find a place to make a dump. We’ll go on looking for Cub. We may see something from the top of the pyramid. Someone can watch the track at the same time.” He told Jose he needn’t stay. “He only came to carry the kitbag,” he explained. “If we don’t come back, I’ve ordered him to go down the river and deliver a note I’ve given him addressed to the Governor.”

“How about using that little room in the pyramid for a dump?” suggested Copper. “It looked pretty snug to me.”

“The very place,” agreed Gimlet. “Let’s get organised. Jose, you get back to camp and wait there.”

“Okay, chief.” Jose strode off.

Copper picked up the kitbag and they all walked on to the foot of the pyramid. Here a temporary dump was made while a further search was carried out for Cub. This met with no success so the only result was a general feeling of depression.

"There's only one chance now," said Gimlet at last. "If he isn't in that camp, I'm afraid he's had it. He isn't here. There's nothing more we can do about it. We're only wasting time. It'll be dark presently, so we may as well get to the top of the hill while there is any daylight left."

Copper put the kitbag on his shoulder and presently unloaded it in the chamber of the pyramid. Then they all went on to the top.

The view was in no way different from what it had been the previous day. Gimlet, lying flat, studied it long and carefully through his binoculars, but the distance, and the glare of the setting sun, made it difficult to see anything distinctly. One or two men were moving about, but what they were doing could not even be guessed at. In the doorway of one of the houses he said he could see a negro who appeared to be doing nothing in particular. He did not mention Cub, although it had been the hope of everyone that he would be seen.

"All right: let's get back to the track while we can see what we're doing," said Gimlet at last. "It isn't funny groping about in the jungle after dark."

"But you're going to have a look round the camp when it gets dark? Is that the idea?" asked Copper.

"It's about all we can do," replied Gimlet. "If we can't find Cub we may be able to find out what's going on. That was our purpose in coming here and I'm not going back until I know. It's no use blundering about in the pitch dark. We'll get down to the track and wait there for the moon to rise."

They went back to the track, a position from which they could no longer see the camp, and settled down to wait.

"What about the spook?" inquired Copper.

"What about it?"

"What are you going to do if it comes along?"

"Yes, that's a question," replied Gimlet. "We don't want a prisoner on our hands. Against that, if we let it go past, it'll cause trouble at the village. Jose and the porters will certainly bolt if they see it. They may be too scared to come back. We can't blame them. They're scared stiff of anything they don't understand. They're made that way and it's no use us trying to alter them. It would be better if we could prevent this fake apparition from

reaching the village, but the problem is how to do that without showing ourselves."

Copper slapped his thigh. "Hold 'ard!" he exclaimed. "I've got it. How about scaring the spook?"

"With what?"

"Another spook."

"We haven't got another spook."

"I reckon I can soon make one. I used to be pretty good at making guys on Guy Fawkes' day. Wait a minute. I'll show yer."

Copper strode off and returned presently dragging a stone obelisk on top of which had been carved one of the grinning gargoyles that had been assumed to be either an ancient god, or a mask to keep evil spirits at a distance. "How about this baby?" he demanded, proudly, standing the thing upright beside the path.

Gimlet admitted that the face was horrible to look at, but pointed out that in the dark it would not be seen. Already it was nearly dark.

"Won't it, though," returned Copper warmly. "Wait till I've done with it."

From his pocket he took a box of matches, the sort that have red tops. One by one, with his knife, he beheaded them into the palm of his left hand. This operation took some time. When it was complete, he spat on the heap and then ground the mass into a paste with the thumb of his right hand. As the moisture released the phosphorus content the paste began to glow with an eerie blue light.

Trapper clicked his tongue. "*Bon*," he murmured with a chuckle.

Copper now stood up and applied the paste to the stone face with a finger which, if not artistic, was at least effective. In the darkness that had now closed in, the hollow eyes, the open mouth and long teeth, took on an unearthly glow that was anything but pleasant to look at.

"Now what about it?" cried Copper triumphantly. "What about meeting *him* on a dark night. Strike me pink! It fair puts the wind up me, and I made it."

Gimlet smiled. "Full marks, Corporal!" he congratulated. "It's a beauty. I had no idea you possessed such artistic genius."

"That's just it," replied Copper modestly. "I can do a lot of things people don't know nothing about. It'll be a joke to see what happens when two spooks meet—my oath it will. What say you, Trapper, old pal?"

"Right every time," confirmed Trapper.

“Funny idea, two spooks barging into each other,” went on Copper. “I reckon it never happened before. There is this about it. If either of them run away, it won’t be mine.”

“If you go on making that noise the other spook will take fright before he gets here,” Gimlet pointed out.

“True enough,” agreed Copper. “I ain’t quite finished. We don’t want it to be seen too soon.” He covered the face with his handkerchief. “I shall say something if the other guy doesn’t turn up after me wasting all my matches,” he said softly, as he sat down at the foot of the stone to wait.

It was a long wait, too, although as they themselves could do nothing until the moon rose, the time was not wasted.

Nearly two hours passed before a soft intake of breath by Trapper warned the others that somebody was approaching. Presently the thing, exactly as Copper had described it, could be seen through the trees some way along the track. Dancing and jerking the mask drew near. Nothing could be seen of the man carrying it, although the rustle of his feet in the leaves could be heard. Not until the thing was almost level did Copper move. Whipping off the handkerchief, he played his master stroke. As the face sprang out of the darkness a hoarse moan seemed to break from its lips.

Whatever the effect that might have been expected from this dual manifestation was exceeded by the event. A wild scream rent the air. Almost simultaneously, there was a tremendous crash, which was, as a matter of fact, Copper falling over, having tripped over a vine in the dark. There was a rush of flying feet, another yell, then a succession of yells accompanied by such a threshing as if two bodies were rolling about on the ground. This stopped. There were more flying footsteps, then silence.

“Strike old Riley!” gasped Copper. “What a picnic! Sounded like a whole blinking party of spooks on the gallop.”

“You certainly stirred things up,” said Gimlet seriously. “Anyway, you put the wind up the spook. I’ll bet he’s still running. From the noise he made he must have barged into the jungle and thought the lianas were arms grabbing at him. No matter. He’s gone, and I don’t think he’ll worry Jose tonight. Good show, Corporal! If there was a war on, I’d see you got another stripe.”

Gimlet walked a few steps and picked up the mask that the running ghost had dropped. He examined it for a moment and then suspended it from a tree. Then they all sat down on a log and had a good chuckle.

“I’ll bet it ain’t often that a spook meets another coming the other way,” declared Copper. “What a yarn I’ll be able to make of this when I get home.”

“You got to get home first,” reminded Gimlet. “Serious now. The moon should be up any minute and we’ve got work to do. Let’s get on with it.”

CHAPTER VII

CUB LEARNS A FEW THINGS

CUB returned to consciousness to find himself in strange surroundings. The fact that he was lying on a bed, within four square white walls, at first only served to baffle him. Then, his eyes roving as full consciousness returned, through an open door he looked out across a sun-drenched savannah, and understood. Memory returned with a rush. So he was in the secret camp, and, judging from the number of stones lying about, on the site of the ancient city of Uaxatikel. It took him some time to work out how he came to be there. He could remember the others leaving him to go on to the pyramid, and, subsequently, a nightmare composed chiefly of monkeys; but after that everything was vague and detached, as a dream recalled after many hours.

He realised that he had had a severe attack of fever, and a swollen hand reminded him of the ant, he also realised that the fever had now left him, so that on the whole he felt reasonably well apart from a certain weakness. This, he knew, was usual with malaria in its early stages. Each successive attack would tend to get more severe.

How long he had been in the camp he did not know; but observing a negro sitting in the doorway, gazing out across the clearing, he decided to try to find out. He supposed—correctly, as he soon discovered—that the man had been stationed there to watch him. “Hi, there!” he called. “Do you speak English?”

The man started, turned sharply, rose to his feet and walked up to the bed. “Yes, boss, I speak plenty,” was the gratifying answer. “Me British man from Belize.”

"*Me British man from Belize*"

This was more than Cub expected. Hard on his surprise came an idea. "You're not one of Mr. Banford's porters by any chance?"

The man looked frightened. He glanced at the door nervously, as if afraid of bang overheard. "Yes, boss," he replied in a hoarse whisper. "Me work all the time for Mr. Banford. George my name."

It struck Cub that there was something odd about this. Why had these men in charge of the secret camp, if they were engaged in something underhand, allowed him to make contact with a man who not only spoke English, but could divulge the truth about the disappearance of Banford's porters? The explanation was soon forthcoming.

"Do these people here know you were one of Banford's men?"

"No, boss."

Again Cub was mystified. "Why don't they know?"

"I no tell."

"But weren't you with the other porters when they disappeared?"

"Yes, boss. But I run fo' de forest. Dey no catch me. Den I get lost. Indians find me. I stay with them a long time. Den dese bad men come and catch Indians, to make dem work. Dey catch me too. Dey say what do you do here? I say, I run away from river and live with Indians because I'se a bad man and police want me. I no say I work for Mr. Banford. Dey say you work for us or we shoot you. I no wan' to be shot so I say I work for dem."

This explanation was so reasonable, and so obviously true, that Cub did not question it. His brain was now getting back to normal and he saw that in this man he had probably found a useful ally. "If they didn't lock you up, why did you stay here?" he asked.

"Can't get away, boss," was the melancholy answer. "No grub, no boat, nothing. If I try, I die in forest."

"What happened to the rest of the porters?"

"Dey is all dead, boss."

"Killed by these white men?"

"Yes, boss."

"D'you want to stay here or go back home?"

"Go back home down the river, boss."

"What are you supposed to be doing now?"

"Dey tell me to keep watch. When you wake up, I'se to tell the Major."

"Major who?"

"Dunno, boss. He's the big chief here."

"Is he a white man?"

"Yes, boss."

"British?"

"No, boss."

"What nationality is he?"

"Couldn't say, boss."

"You say this man is in charge here?"

"Yes, boss."

"Is he a bad man?"

“Yes, boss. They all bad mens. De one they call Max am terrible. He always want to kill people.”

Cub nodded. “I see. How long have I been here?”

“Dey carry you in from the forest yesterday.”

“What time is it now?”

“Wants about an hour to sundown, boss.”

“What’s going to happen when you tell the Major I’m awake?”

“Reckon they want to talk to you. Dey’s mighty scared about how you come here. Mebbe they kill you.”

“What’s going on here, do you know?”

“No, boss. Plenty hard work. Dat’s all I know.”

“What sort of work?”

“Hauling in der stones and burning dem.”

“Then what do they do with them?”

“Dey fro dem all about on the ground. Mebbe dey build factory here. I dunno. Dat’s de truf, boss.”

“How long have these people been here?”

“Couldn’t say, boss.”

“But how do they live? What do they do for food?”

“All dat stuff come by aeroplane, boss.”

“I see,” said Cub slowly, not a little shaken by these revelations. “How often does this plane come?”

“One time it come pretty often, bringing de bits of de engines. Now only sometimes.”

“And how many men are there here altogether?”

“Couldn’t say for sure, boss. Three, mebbe four white mans. Den dere’s some mixed trash, and Indians who work because dey get rum to drink. Dey do anything for rum.”

Cub did some more thinking. “All right, George,” he went on. “As soon as it gets dark, we’ll see about getting out of this. I’ve some friends down at the river. I think I can find my way down the track.”

George’s eyes saucered. “Don’t you go dat way boss!”

“Why not?”

“Dere’s a bad spirit walks on dat path.”

Cub smiled. “Don’t worry about that,” he said confidently.

George, who had been keeping a watchful eye on the camp from the door, let out a hiss of warning. With a gesture of alarm he announced that the Major was coming. “I go and say you just wake up,” he whispered. “If dey tink I no tell straight away I get stick across my back.” He strode off.

Cub waited, curious to see the man they called the Major, at the same time wondering what was going to happen. He would, he guessed, be subjected to an interrogation as to how and why he had come there, and if alone or with a party. Having had some experience of Nazi interrogation during the war, he thought he should be able to hold his own. He thought swiftly of the explanation he would give. He hadn’t much time, for within a minute a shadow fell across the doorway and two men entered.

Cub regarded them with interest, realising that in their identity lay the probable answer to Gimlet’s mission. One was a rather burly type with a clean-shaven, intelligent face, and dark, penetrating eyes. His movements were brisk and his manner decisive and Cub knew that he had to deal with a man of powerful personality. The other was entirely different, being tall, thin and bearded. A high forehead above a studious expression suggested a professional man of ability. A suspicion of pallor indicated recent indisposition, probably fever.

The thick-set man opened the conversation, in a voice so suave, so polished, that Cub knew instinctively that it was affected for his benefit. He spoke in English but with a marked accent. On the whole his manner was affable, if inclined to be a trifle condescending, as a man of importance might deign to address someone normally beneath his notice.

“Well, my boy, and how are you feeling now?” he inquired.

Cub was too old a hand at dissembling to reveal too much to people who might turn out to be enemies. He had to admit that he was feeling better, but added that he did not feel quite well enough to get up. “Who was responsible for finding me and bringing me here?” he inquired.

The question was ignored. “From the speed of your recovery, I imagine you haven’t been in the country long enough for the fever to get properly into your system,” said the thick-set man.

Cub admitted that this was so. In reply to a further question he gave his name.

“My name is Borloff, Major Borloff,” went on the speaker. “My friend here is Professor Andrewski. You may have heard of him. He is the greatest living authority on the lost civilisations of America. Now you can guess what we are doing here.”

"I see. I take it you are excavating on the site of Uaxatikel," returned Cub.

"Exactly. It's time it was done. It's a big job. Lucky for you we were here. You were in a bad way when we found you. May I ask what you were doing, wandering about in the forest by yourself?"

"The same as you," answered Cub with a smile. "I was looking for Uaxatikel, and thought I had found it when I went down with fever."

"Yes, you have found the old city," stated Borloff, a curious expression on his face. "I'm afraid we have forestalled you. As you may have noticed, we've done quite a lot of field work; even so, much remains to be done. Our discoveries should cause a sensation when they are published. By the way, what did you intend to do if you found Uaxatikel? You do not appear to be equipped for archæological research."

"Oh no, nothing like that," replied Cub quickly. "My assignment in the first place was merely to ascertain if the place was here. It was no use sending out a proper survey party until that had been established."

"I imagine that you are not here alone?" Borloff's eyes were on Cub's face. His features were smiling, but there was no humour in his eyes.

"Of course I'm not alone." Cub laughed lightly. "I shouldn't be likely to tackle a job like this single-handed."

"Where is the rest of your party?"

"At the river."

"You came up the river?"

"Of course."

"Do your friends know where you are?"

This, Cub realised, was a leading question; but he had his answer ready. "No," he replied truthfully enough. "I found an old track and followed it. Then the fever struck me, and I don't remember what happened afterwards except that I was mobbed by a lot of monkeys."

"We heard them," confirmed Borloff. "You had a lucky escape, young man. More than one expedition has come to grief trying to force a way up the river. There was an orchid-hunter, I remember, named Banford—or something of the sort. He was attacked by Indians and his porters were killed. We sent a relief force to help him as soon as we heard about it, but alas, it arrived too late. He had gone. We have often wondered if he managed to reach the coast. Do you happen to know?" Still Borloff's eyes did not leave Cub's face.

"Orchid-hunting isn't in my line," answered Cub casually. "I came straight out from England, so I would hardly be likely to meet this man Banford."

"Quite so. The matter is of no real importance now. But I mustn't tire you with any more questions while you are in such a weak condition. You will, of course, stay with us for a little while, until you are well enough to travel. We are well equipped, so you won't be encroaching on our supplies."

"Thank you. That is most kind of you," said Cub, who was not for a moment deceived by this apparently friendly offer. "I wouldn't care to start walking through the forest feeling as I do now," he remarked.

"That is the sensible way to look at it," asserted Borloff. "When you are on your feet, I'll show you round the ruins. There are no secrets here. Now rest and get some sleep. I'll leave a man with you in case you find yourself in need of anything."

The two white men went off, and soon afterwards George returned to his place at the door.

For a little while Cub did not speak to him. He was busy thinking, for the conversation had given him plenty to think about. The information Borloff had volunteered was, he was sure, insincere, although the man Andrewski looked like a scholar and may have been genuine. But archæology was not Borloff's purpose in being there, of that he was convinced. The invitation to stay until he was well was not prompted by humanity, either, he decided. Borloff was bound to regard his arrival with suspicion and would want to keep an eye on him. He would also want to know all about his companions at the river. So far, because it suited him, he had offered the velvet glove; but Cub knew that if he tried to leave he would soon feel the weight of the iron fist inside. Borloff, naturally, would wonder if the arrival of the new party had any connection with Banford. So far, Cub thought, he had got him guessing. Borloff would not dare, at this stage, to push his questioning too hard.

Cub wondered what the man intended to do with him. He would certainly not allow him to return to the coast to report what he had seen at Uaxatikel—anyway, not if it could be prevented. But there was no need for Borloff to do anything in a hurry. No doubt he would want to think the matter over before deciding on a course of action. The probability was, he would endeavour to ascertain the size and importance of the party, of which Cub was a member, before he did anything.

Cub had no intention of staying in the camp for a moment longer than was necessary. He was all agog to get back to Gimlet to report what he

knew, and set his mind at rest about his safety. That they would all be in a state over his disappearance he was well aware. No doubt they were all looking for him, even at that moment. The thought worried him not a little, but he did not see how he could do anything about it for the time being. It would not help matters if he tried to reach the river before he was fit to travel. Lying in bed he felt almost well; but that did not mean that he was in a condition to struggle miles through the stifling forest. Another point arose. By remaining in the camp a little longer, he might learn more about it; for he still had not been able to work out the real purpose of Borloff's expedition.

He consulted George. "Have you any idea of how long these people are going to stay here?" he asked.

"I hear a man say dey soon go home."

"Go home?"

"Yes, boss. Dey say when work finish here dey tidy up. Jungle soon grow and make it look like no one been here."

"Hm. And what do you suppose is going to happen to you, and the Indians working here, when they go?"

"Dey kill every man for sure, boss. Leave no one to talk about what he see here. Reckon white men go in plane."

This, Cub thought, was sound reasoning. Borloff, when he went, would leave no witnesses. The fast-growing jungle would soon cover up all signs of activity. "I think we'd better get out of here as soon as we can," he told George.

"Yes, boss."

All the same, Cub resolved to find out before he left, if it was humanly possible, what Borloff had been doing. It was no use asking George. The negro had no doubt seen all that was going on, but not having a technical mind he would not understand the purpose of the works. Clearly, there was big money behind the project, whatever it was. To operate an aircraft more or less regularly to such a place would cost a small fortune. Where could the plane come from? Certainly not from the official airport at Belize. Where, then?

"Is it a big plane that comes here?" he asked George, knowing that the man must have seen big passenger planes at Belize.

"Biggest plane I ever saw, boss," answered George.

"Are there any markings on it—letters or flags, or anything like that?"

"Didn't see none, boss."

Cub stopped asking questions for a moment in order to think again. There seemed to be lot to think about. Obviously, the first thing was to let Gimlet know where he was, if that could be arranged. How could it be arranged? George was obviously unwilling to act as a messenger, since it meant using the track. Could he be persuaded to go? Cub was turning over in his mind all the possible arguments when George broke into his train of thought. It was to tell him that some Indians were walking towards the Major's house. They were carrying bows and arrows, spears, and their poison bags. This was unusual—in fact, forbidden, in the camp, said George, looking worried. There was a reason for it, he declared.

"Is there any way you can find out what they are going to do?" inquired Cub, who did not like the sound of this information. He felt that if a war was imminent, those at the river were likely to be involved in it.

"Wait a minute, boss. I come back," said George in a low voice, and moved away into the twilight that was now closing in.

It was with some impatience that Cub awaited his return. When he came back, Cub saw from his expression that any news he had gathered was not likely to be reassuring.

"Dis am bad to tell, boss," said George earnestly. "Indians say de Major is going to make war on de Indians down at de ribber."

Cub stared. "What that really means is," he said grimly "the Major has found out that an expedition has arrived at the village, and he's going to liquidate it either by killing everyone or by stampeding the porters, which would come to the same thing."

"Guess you're right, boss," admitted George sadly.

"I can't let that happen," decided Cub. "You'll have to go and warn my friends, or I will."

"But you can't go dat way," protested George.

"Why not?"

" 'Cos you ain't got no clothes."

Cub started. He blinked. He looked around. He was in his vest and trunks. Not until that moment did he realise that the rest of his clothes were not in the room. So that was it, he thought bitterly. No wonder the Major had not feared that he would run away. Well, he did at least know how he stood. On the face of it these people had offered him hospitality. Actually they had made him a prisoner. All right, he soliloquised. If that was their game, they'd find he could match cunning with cunning. From now on he would definitely regard them as enemies.

"Who took my clothes?" he asked George.

"De Major, boss."

"Where are they?"

"Couldn't say, boss."

"And my shoes have gone, too."

"Yes, boss."

Cub sank back, thinking fast. He did not suppose Gimlet would be in the village by the river. It was far more likely that he would be on the track, or in the jungle, trying to find him. Eventually he would come into the camp, looking for him, no doubt. That did not alter the essential fact that Jose and his men would certainly be in the village. If they were attacked by Indians with poisoned weapons, either they would be forced to bolt for their lives, or they would be killed. The canoe would be destroyed. Without porters, or a canoe, none of them had the remotest hope of ever getting back to civilisation. He spoke again to George.

"You'll have to go to the village," he told him tersely.

"But de bad spirit, boss," protested George.

"There isn't a spirit," Cub told him impatiently. "That's all stuff and nonsense made up to frighten the Indians. This is your only chance of ever getting home. You know Jose. He's in the village. You go to him and you can go home with us. You may meet three white men, my friends, on the track. If you don't meet them, you may find them in the village. They'll see nothing happens to you."

George weakened. "But in de dark, boss?"

"All the better. No one will see you go."

"What do I tell dese white men?"

"Tell them that I'm here, and that the village is going to be attacked."

George drew a deep breath. "Okay, boss. I go, but if I meet dat ghost, I'se a dead man for sure. I fetch you some grub, den I go."

George went off, and returned in about ten minutes with a basin of soup, bread, and a mug of tinned milk. He said that the Indians had gathered round the Major's house, but he had learned nothing more. He was ready, he said, to start for the village. "If de Major say where am I, you don't know nothing."

"That's the line I shall take," promised Cub.

George faded away into the darkening shadows, leaving Cub a prey to mixed sensations. He did not see why George shouldn't get through, for he didn't even take into account the possibility of his meeting a "ghost." Still,

even if George did get through the position would still be critical. This foreign Major was obviously a type who did not believe in half measures.

Cub's immediate problem was clothes. With clothes he would have made an effort to get to the river himself; but it was out of the question to start walking in bare feet. Indians and negroes, with the soles of their feet as hard as leather, could do it; but not a white man. For something to do he had his meal and felt better for it. His strength was returning quickly now that the fever had left him.

A little while later, he got up and found to his great satisfaction that he was practically back to normal. He gave himself some exercise by striding up and down the little room. The door was still open, so only a glance from time to time was necessary to make sure that he was not caught unawares by the Major or by any of his staff. George, he comforted himself, was by now well on his way.

Running feet sent him scrambling back into bed. A man burst in. It was George. He seemed to have difficulty in breathing. His teeth rattled like castanets.

Cub's heart went down like a lift. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

George gasped. He gulped. "De devil himself was on de path," he panted.

"Rot and nonsense," snapped Cub furiously.

"It's de truf," moaned George. "I see dem—two devils. One catch me." He shuddered.

"So one caught you," sneered Cub, "Was he solid?"

"Solid, boss," chattered George. "He so solid, he done nearly knock my teeth out. He come rushing up the path and knock me in the bushes. Dat's de truf, boss."

That something had happened on the track was certain. What it was Cub could not imagine. Could George have collided with Gimlet or Copper? Somehow it did not seem likely. "Did you see the man who ran into you?" he asked.

"No, boss. I only see a face all on fire, just like de ghosts in de picture book."

Cub gave it up. One thing was quite certain. Whether George had really seen anything or not was now beside the point. Nothing on earth would induce him to go down that track again after dark. There was only one thing to do, he decided. He would go himself.

"Have you got a knife?" he asked George.

“Yes, boss.”

“Then help me to cut these sheets into strips.”

“What for you do dis, boss?”

“Not having shoes, I’m going to bind my feet up in rags,” said Cub grimly. “Then I’m getting out of this. It’ll take a pretty tough ghost to stop me, too.”

It took the best part of half an hour to get the job done to his satisfaction. Then he took a few strides to test his foot-gear.

“You look mighty like a ghost yourself, boss,” said George in a weak voice, for Cub’s underclothes were white.

Cub paid little attention. He was more concerned with the fact that in the dark he was likely to be undesirably conspicuous. However, there was nothing to do about it—unless by good fortune he could find his clothes.

CHAPTER VIII

CUB MAKES A MOVE

CUB went to the door and looked out. Little could be seen, for the curtain of night had fallen, bringing with it an atmosphere of peace and rest. There was a light here and there, and small parties of fireflies waltzed in the still air. Across the open savannah two cone-shaped structures discharged a lazy wreath of smoke, or steam, red-tinted as if from reflected fires within. They might have been furnaces in an industrial town, thought Cub, as he contemplated them with considerable curiosity. Furnaces suggested the smelting of metal. But according to report they were used for burning stones. This Cub did not believe; but that did not bring him any nearer to their true purpose.

Mosquitoes hummed. The temperature was still high, but even so, the idea of walking about with so much of his skin exposed to the attacks of thorns and insects was anything but pleasant. He might manage without clothes, reflected Cub, as he stared into the gloom; but there was one thing he could not do without, and that was a light of some sort—an electric torch for preference, or failing that a lantern. It would, he perceived, be sheer lunacy to start off through the forest without one.

He asked George to point out the Major's quarters.

George pointed to a light, apparently an uncurtained window. "Dat's the big bungalow, boss. All de white mans stay dere," he said.

Cub walked a little way towards it. George, protesting that it was madness, that they would both be whipped, went with him. There seemed to be nobody about. Things were, he thought with a twinge of uneasiness, rather too quiet. Had the Indians already left for the river? It rather looked like it. He couldn't see them or hear them talking. If they had started, he would be wasting his time following them, for he had no chance of overtaking men who had lived all their lives in the forest.

Suddenly he became aware that he was walking on a hard, flat surface, even though it had been overlaid with a thin covering of leaves and grass. Stooping, he pushed some of the rubbish aside, and exposed something grey, almost white, in colour. It was rough to the touch. Investigating further, he decided that it was not stone paving, for there were no dividing lines. It was more like concrete. In fact, he concluded that it could only be concrete.

Concrete! The word suggested a runway . . . the perimeter of the air-strip, perhaps. A secret air-field. Was that the answer? Feeling sure that he was on the track of something, he walked on a little way, but after half a dozen paces he came to the end of the thing, whatever it was. There was quite a step down to the grass of the savannah. So it was not a runway, he mused, with a sense of disappointment. It was too short; and a runway would not end in a step. Could it be the foundation of an ancient temple? He asked George. George told him no; the white men had made it. He had helped. There were others like it not far away.

Although he thought hard, Cub could make nothing of it. One thing did become clear, however. These foreigners were not archæologists. Archæologists excavate. These men were building. But what the building was going to be, or for what purpose it was intended, was beyond his powers to work out. If these people were using concrete, they would need cement, he reasoned. And a lot of it. Cement was heavy stuff. It would need a good many aircraft to bring in enough. . . . Then the truth struck him. He stared at the things that he had supposed to be furnaces. "Kilns," he breathed. "Lime kilns." That was it. These men *were* burning stones, reducing to powder the limestone blocks of stone of which the Maya city of Uaxatikel had been built. They were building something and covering it with litter to hide it from air observation.

Wondering why he had not thought of the answer before, Cub walked on, slowly, staring about him, until he had to turn aside to avoid the beam of light that spread from the window of the Major's bungalow. Actually, this window was his objective. He thought that if he could see inside the lighted room, he might learn something. He might even find his clothes, or more important still, his shoes. It was taking a chance for there were men in the room. He could hear them talking. He caught an occasional word, but as it was in a language that he did not understand, it told him nothing. George said he did not know the language, either.

With infinite care, keeping clear of the light, Cub drew nearer. The window, which was set in the end of the building, was open. There was no blind, but the opening was covered by a mosquito-net, through which an assortment of moths and beetles were trying to find a way.

He had just reached the wall of the bungalow, which he observed was made of wood, when there occurred an interruption which at first filled him with dismay, thinking that his departure had been discovered. Almost without warning, a party of Indians materialised out of the darkness, running. Fortunately they were making towards the front of the building. A warning hiss from George had already sent Cub flat. Within a minute a

jabber of excited voices made it evident that something had happened, or was about to happen. Supposing that the Indians were speaking in their own tongue, Cub asked George in a whisper if he could understand it, if he could make out what the fuss was about.

George listened for a little while and then provided the information. Briefly it was this. The Indians had started for the river. They had come back for the same reason that he had come back. The spirits were on the path. The Major was telling them they were fools. He was very angry. As soon as the man Max was able to get ready, he would go with them to prove there were no spirits. From the way George spoke, he seemed doubtful if even the brutal Max would be able to do this.

What struck Cub as more important than the spirits was the fact that the Major was apparently outside, arguing with the Indians. If he had left the bungalow it seemed probable that his companions had gone out with him, in which case the lighted room would be empty. With his nerves tingling he put the matter to the test. A quick peep confirmed his belief. The room was empty.

His eyes made a quick reconnaissance. Generally speaking, the interior was much as might have been expected. The furnishings were simple—a table, a cupboard, and some flimsy cane chairs such as are commonly used in the tropics. A few objects were conspicuous against otherwise bare walls. His own rifle stood in a corner, the cartridge belt hanging on it. A revolver, in its holster, hung from a peg, with a whistle and a whip. On the back of the door, from a hook, hung a black alpaca jacket. There were some papers on the table. Cub paid little attention to them. He was more concerned with the things likely to be useful to him in his present predicament—the weapons and the jacket. Several articles had been put carelessly on the top of the cupboard—a T-square, binoculars, a box of cigars, an electric lamp, among other things.

It took him only a moment to decide that this was an opportunity not to be missed. All he needed was ten seconds of time. One sweep of his hand brought down the mosquito-net. He vaulted over the sill. In another two seconds he had jammed a chair under the door-handle so that he would have warning if the men returned. He snatched up his rifle and belt, unhooked the revolver and collected the jacket from the door and the lamp from the cupboard. He was on his way back to the window when he happened to glance at the table. What he saw brought him to a halt. The papers were maps, pinned flat by drawing-pins. On one of them lay a compass, a scale, and a pair of dividers.

With his muscles braced, ready to jump for the window at the first sound, Cub looked at the largest map. It was, he saw, a sketch map of the cleared site. Conspicuous on it were six rectangles, coloured red, in a line pointing from north to south. He would have liked to study the map more closely, but knowing the folly of trying to push luck too far, he dared not linger. Throwing a leg over the window-sill, he went out as he had come in; and there, against the wall, he stood for a moment, his heart fluttering from the tension of the past few seconds. George was still there, sitting on the ground with his hands over his face, apparently prepared for the worst. He tried to speak, but his nerves were in such a state that he could not articulate.

Cub made a peremptory signal and backed away, to get well clear of the place before the things he had taken were missed. He knew that he had no time to lose, so he hurried on to his own hut. There he slipped on the alpaca jacket and buckled the revolver round his waist. Rifle in hand he announced that he was going to start for the river forthwith.

"Boss, you am mad fo' sure," quavered George. Cub was not prepared to argue about that. "Are you coming with me?" he asked shortly.

"No, boss."

"Why not?"

"I'se feared of those spirits."

"The Major may kill you when he discovers that I've gone."

"Can't help that, boss. I'd rather die than face the debil himself."

"All right," returned Cub, with asperity. "Will you show me where the track to the river begins? I don't know where it is."

George agreed. "If we meet dose Indians we're all dead mans fo' sure," he lamented.

"I shall be on my way before they start," declared Cub. "That's why I'm in a hurry. If you've decided to stay here, will you do something for me?"

"Yes, boss."

"If you see any strange white men in the camp, will you tell them that Cub—that's me—has gone back to the village?" Actually, Cub did not think this very likely to happen. He thought it more likely that either he would meet the others on the track, or at the river camp.

George said he would watch for the white men.

"All right then, let's go," requested Cub.

With many a furtive glance around and behind, George led the way to a point where the savannah gave way to forest, a matter of perhaps two hundred yards. There he halted. "Dis is de place, boss," he said softly.

"For the last time, you're sure you won't come with me?" urged Cub.

"No, boss."

"Have it your own way." Cub took a last look in the direction of the bungalow. He could see nothing distinctly, but lights were moving about so he hoped that the Indians had not yet started. He had to switch on his lamp, shielding the beam as well as he could with his hands, in order to find the opening in the jungle. This did not take long, and having found it, with a parting word of thanks to George for what he had done, he set off.

As he walked on he was not thinking of ghosts, spooks, spirits or apparitions of any sort. This may seem odd, because there was ample evidence of something that neither George nor the Indians would face. The fact remains, so convinced was he that this was all superstitious nonsense, that these tales of unnatural visitations had departed from his mind. He was thinking on more practical lines—of what he had learned in the camp he had just left. He tried to work out what the red squares signified. He considered the possibility of gun emplacements, of which they reminded him. But for what possible purpose would anyone build gun emplacements in the middle of a Central American jungle, he pondered? What was there to shoot at? All the same, he was sure that he was thinking on the right lines. The business had nothing to do with a private venture like a treasure-hunt, oil drilling or gold-mining. Somehow—he did not know how—politics came into it. What he himself had seen must have cost more money than a private individual was likely to provide.

His mind was still running on the problem when he thought he detected a movement through the trees some way ahead. His lamp was switched off at the time. In order to save the battery his procedure was to turn it on, have a good look at the track, and then, if the track ran straight, switch off. At such times he also listened for any sounds behind that might indicate that the Indians were again on their way to the river. It was fear of this that prevented him from calling Gimlet, who might, he thought, be somewhere near at hand. All he dared do was whistle softly from time to time. These signals did not produce an answer, much to his disappointment. The others must have gone back to the river camp, he decided.

The movement that he had noticed in front was repeated. It appeared to be something white, something that glowed faintly in the darkness; otherwise, of course, he would not have seen it. At one moment it was there; then it was not, in the manner of a will-o'-the-wisp. While he was not actually frightened, it induced an uncomfortable feeling inside him. He remembered all that had been said of hauntings on the track. And he discovered that it is one thing to scoff when one is on safe ground, but not so

easy to be brave when one is confronted by the thing in question, particularly in such circumstances as those in which he now found himself. However, he switched on his light, and telling himself not to be a fool, with his heart thumping, went forward.

The thing appeared. It was, without doubt, a face. It moved a little to one side. Then it was gone.

Cub drew his revolver with a hand that was not quite steady, clenched his teeth, and took a few more paces. The face reappeared. He could see it clearly now. He raised his revolver, finger tightening on the trigger, and dashed forward. He stopped suddenly, feeling weak as his nerves and muscles relaxed when he saw what the thing was. He strode up to it and struck it. As it swung back to him he caught it. It was a mask, supported by a cord from a branch; a thing made of cardboard, painted white and treated with some luminous substance. So that was what all the fuss was about! He smiled, somewhat feebly, for he had been badly shaken. The purpose of the thing was plain now. Who had put it there he did not know, but he realised that it was intended to discourage people from using the track after dark. He thought again. Who could have put it there? Obviously the Major knew nothing about it, for he had pooh-poohed the Indians' statement that there was a spirit on the path. Cub gave it up. That his own friends had hung the thing there, as in fact they had, was a thought that did not even occur to him for a moment. Which was understandable.

Satisfied that he had "laid" the ghost he went on, leaving the mask as he had found it. It might delay the Indians for a little while when they came to it, he decided, as he proceeded on his way. He had not gone far when, to his surprise, he came upon yet another ghost. He walked up to this one confidently, to discover that it was not quite the same. It was rather more pallid than the first one, the reason being that Copper's match-top phosphorescence was losing its strength. Cub was not to know that, of course. Not for an instant did he suspect that Copper might have had something to do with it. He merely noted that it was of solid stone, apparently a carved doorpost. Again he left the thing as it stood. Indeed, he was only sorry that he had not a box of luminous paint on him with which to fashion a few ghosts of his own.

Meanwhile, finding the mosquitoes troublesome, he put his best foot forward, feeling that the sooner he got to camp, where he could dose himself with quinine, the better. With giant moths, beetles and insects unknown, crashing themselves to death against the glass of his lamp, he went on, stopping sometimes to rewind his unusual foot-gear.

CHAPTER IX

GIMLET TAKES A HAND

Now it so happened that, by one of those ironical twists that fate is fond of playing to confuse the affairs of men, Cub missed seeing Gimlet by a matter of minutes.

After the affair of the "ghosts", Gimlet's party had walked on a little way towards the camp and then sat down beside the track to wait for the moon. It was not long before Trapper's sharp ears detected movements approaching. This sent them into cover. A light appeared. As it drew near it became possible to make out that this was a rather inefficient torch made of brushwood carried by an Indian. He was followed by several more in single file. Moving at a steady trot, they were soon past. Carrying bows and spears it was plain that they were bound on a definite errand.

As the sound of their progress died away, Gimlet rose to his feet. "I don't like the look of that lot," he said tersely, staring down the track. "Those fellows must be going to our camp. There's nowhere else for them to go in that direction. They'll kill our porters, I'm afraid, or destroy our stores ——"

He got no further. From down the track came yells of terror and the noise of stampeding feet. Gimlet just had time to duck back into cover when the Indians tore past on their way to the clearing. At least, it was assumed that the runners were the Indians although they could not be seen, the torch either been dropped, or gone out, in the confusion.

"Well, so 'elp me! My old guy is doing some good work," remarked Copper, as the noise of the panic flight subsided. "I reckon that's what made 'em change their minds."

"Without a doubt," replied Gimlet. "A good thing, too. But I see nothing to chortle at. An attack on our camp would have been a serious matter for us. I'm afraid the reason for this sudden activity on the track is pretty clear. The people here have learned of our arrival at the village."

"How will they know about that?" inquired Copper.

"There could be several answers to that question," rejoined Gimlet. "They might have kept a regular watch on the place. That would be reasonable, because the river is the only highway to this district. Or, again,

they might have got hold of Cub and learned about us from him. That would account for his complete disappearance."

"He wouldn't tell them about us," disputed Trapper.

"Maybe not, but they'd know he wouldn't be wandering about here on his own. They'd guess he was a member of a party."

"True enough," agreed Copper.

"Let's go on," ordered Gimlet. "The sooner we get to the bottom of this the better. These mosquitoes are the very deuce."

They went on, cautiously, to the clearing. Some lights showed in the darkness, but nothing else could be seen, for the moon was not yet up, although a pallid area of sky just above the horizon announced its approach. Satisfied that all was quiet Gimlet said: "We'd better wait for the moon so that we can see what we're doing. It won't be long." He edged away about a score of paces to the left, where, finding some ruins on the fringe of the forest that offered convenient seats, they settled down to wait.

They were sitting there when Cub, accompanied by George, went past. As we know, he did not see them. But they saw him, without recognising him. This was understandable. In the first place there were two figures moving through the darkness, not one. It was assumed, naturally, that Cub would be alone, wherever he might be. Again, as Cub was wearing a black jacket, all that could be seen of him was a pair of light-coloured trunks, such as natives wear, moving dimly through the gloom. It so happened, too, that at that particular moment neither Cub nor George was speaking. Unaware that they were watched by three pairs of eyes, they walked on to the forest, where it will be recalled, Cub switched on his torch for a moment to find the entrance to the track.

It might be thought that this would have conveyed to the watchers a suggestion of the truth. Actually, it had the opposite effect. As a matter of detail Copper was at that moment wondering about Cub. But when he saw the light he was quite sure that neither of the prowlers was Cub because he knew that Cub hadn't got an electric torch with him. When a faint reflected light from the lamp fell on the black body of George it merely confirmed Copper's mental argument. That Cub might have secured a lamp, and found a coloured companion, was a possibility so remote that it did not occur to him—nor to the others, for that matter. The light disappeared in the forest. George was heard, rather than seen, returning to the camp.

"There sure is some traffic on that path tonight," murmured Trapper. "I wonder what that guy who has just gone in will do when he bumps into the spooks?"

"He'll do like the rest of them—bolt," declared Copper.

They did not wait to see, for the rim of the moon had now appeared above the distant tree-tops, and Gimlet at once announced his intention of exploring further.

It was a long time before anything of interest was discovered, this being due to the fact that movement was necessarily slow, and Gimlet had decided to explore the cleared area first. This merely confirmed that the scrub and grass had been burnt off. Gimlet then turned towards the faintly-glowing furnaces, and in doing so came upon one of the hard, flat platforms, that had puzzled Cub. Like Cub he soon found out what it was made of. "Concrete," he told the others quietly, in a voice tinged with surprise. He then paced the sides of the thing to get an idea of its dimensions.

Walking on they soon came upon another similar foundation. "If my guess is right, we shall find another one over here," said Gimlet, and went on until he came to it. By this time he was near enough to the glowing objects to ascertain what they were. "So now we know," he murmured. "This is where they burn the stones—to make cement."

Now Copper had not been a soldier without learning something of the business. He slapped his thigh. "I've got it," he breathed. "A battery of gun emplacements."

"You're very nearly right, but not quite," returned Gimlet softly.

"You mean, they're too big for guns?"

"Yes."

"Anyhow, what is there for guns to shoot at except trees?" inquired Copper, his mind, not unnaturally, running on the same lines as had Cub's.

"My guess is that they are rocket-launching platforms," said Gimlet simply.

"But the same thing applies, skipper, don't it? I mean to say, who's going to shoot rockets at what?"

"At the moment, nothing. But in the event of anyone going to war with the United States, a rocket battery here would be a trump card. Remember, rockets can now be guided by remote controls. All the operators need is an aircraft to do the spotting and put them on the target."

Copper shook his head. "I can't work that one out. I thought we were a long jump from the United States."

"So we are," agreed Gimlet. "And guns still have a comparatively short range," he went on. "Rockets can travel much farther, as we discovered to our cost in the last war. The advantage of this site would be its position. It

might be a month before it was located, and in that time it could do untold damage."

"How?"

"Where's your geography, Corporal?" chided Gimlet gently. "Honduras faces the Caribbean Sea. Straight out across the Caribbean are the islands of the West Indies. Between them are the channels that give access to the Panama Canal, the most vital factor in the whole system of American defence. On the islands themselves are naval bases and airfields covering the approaches to the Canal. To make the matter quite clear, Honduras is *inside* that defence system. These rocket-launching sites, if that is in fact what they are, are built in line facing the islands; which means, simply, that an enemy stationed here could bombard the West Indian bases from the rear, a direction of attack that could hardly be foreseen. In a word, a battery of controlled missiles stationed here might well disorganise the defences of the entire Canal Zone, and so put the Canal itself out of action."

Copper sucked in his breath. "Well, blow me down!" he breathed. "If that ain't a fair knock-out."

"That," replied Gimlet dryly, "is just what it is intended to be."

Trapper clicked his tongue. "Are you telling me!"

"I wonder who thought out this nice little job?" inquired Copper.

"Your guess should be as good as mine," answered Gimlet. "No matter who did it, they're not friends of the U.S.A., so they're not friends of ours. We're partners in this sort of business, Copper, don't forget."

"Too true," said Copper quietly. "Well, what are we going to do with this joint—knock it to bits?"

"It'll have to be knocked to bits eventually, but before we start we'd better make sure that it isn't too big for us to tackle on our own. Let's see if we can find out——"

Gimlet broke off, turning sharply in the direction of a sound well calculated to startle anyone. It was the wild yell of a human being in pain or terror.

"Now what goes on?" asked Copper in a hard voice.

The sound was repeated.

"Cub!" whispered Trapper.

"It didn't sound like his voice, but he may be involved, so we'd better see. Be ready for trouble." Gimlet began walking quickly towards the nearest light, the direction from which the sound had come.

It was not far away. As they drew near, figures could be seen against a lighted background, the light being provided partly by an open door and partly by an oil-burning lantern held by somebody.

Gimlet continued to advance slowly, until the scene became fairly clear, when the cause of the disturbance was revealed. Three Indians were in the act of tying a struggling negro to a post under the directions of a white man. Two other men stood by, watching. One was short and stocky. The other was tall and thin. The stocky one carried a whip. All the time the negro was either pleading, moaning in terror, or shouting such protest as: "I don't do nothing, Major. You no whip me. I'se British. I'se friend of Guv'nor in Belize. Don't whip me, Major."

He might have saved his breath for all the notice that was taken. The negro secured, the Indians stepped back, and the man with the whip advanced with the obvious intention of using it.

Gimlet spoke quietly to the others. "That black is telling the truth when he says he's British. So are we. Whatever he's done these toughs have no right to use a whip on him. I'm not standing for that. Watch out. If they start any rough stuff hand it back to them."

Gimlet walked on into the circle of light. "What's going on here?" he asked crisply.

Every head turned to face him. Silence fell. Even the negro stopped moaning.

The man with the whip took a pace forward. "Who are you?" he asked curtly, speaking in English with a pronounced accent.

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours," replied Gimlet evenly.

After a brief hesitation, the man rejoined: "This nigger works for me. He deserves the whip. I do what I like with him."

"Oh no you don't, not while I'm here," asserted Gimlet. "You heard what he said. He's British. So am I. I don't know what you are, but you certainly aren't British. Moreover, even if you were, I wouldn't stand for you using that whip."

The Indians were moving away furtively. The tall man began backing towards the house.

"Stay where you are," ordered Gimlet, with iron in his voice. Then, to the stocky man: "Untie that fellow and we'll hear what he has to say. If he's done wrong, I'll report it to the proper quarter, when he will, no doubt, be punished."

"Who are you to give me orders?"

"My name is King," answered Gimlet. "I happen to be a British Government official. If there's anything more you'd like to know about me, I'm willing to provide the information. Who are you?"

"That's not your business."

"On the contrary, it's very much my business," came back Gimlet coldly. "But we'll return to this presently. Will you release that man or shall I?"

No one moved. But now the negro himself stepped into the argument. "Dis man whip me, boss, 'cos he say I let go your friend."

Gimlet raised his voice. When he spoke his words had an edge on them. "Copper, cut that man free."

"Aye, aye, sir."

As Copper stepped forward to obey the order, one of the Indians made a run at him. Copper side-stepped. The big fist that had won for him the Metropolitan Police Heavyweight title swung up. It met the Indian's face with a noise that sounded like a sledgehammer falling on a ripe melon. The brown body made a short flight, landed on its back and remained still. "What's the idea?" growled Copper. He glanced round. "Any more for any more? All right," he went on, "don't try any more of that stuff on me." A stroke or two of his Commando knife and the black was able to shake off his bonds. Copper sheathed his knife. "Man free, sir," he reported, and stepped back smartly to his original position.

Gimlet addressed the negro. "What's your name?" he inquired.

"I object to this," burst out the man with the whip, as if he could no longer contain his anger.

"Will you please try, for a moment, to behave like a white man," requested Gimlet. "I want to hear what this man has to say." He repeated his question to the negro.

"George. Dat's my name, boss," was the answer.

"How did you get here?"

"I came looking for orchids for Massa Banford."

This was something Gimlet was not expecting. "Oh! So that was it."

"He's a liar," snapped the man with the whip.

"I'll form my own opinion of that," said Gimlet quietly.

"Dese mans kill my friends," went on George.

"Lies! All lies!"

"Go on George," requested Gimlet. "Have you done anything wrong?"

"No, suh. Dese mans bring yo' fren' here, Massa Cub. Dey say I let him go."

"Ah!" murmured Gimlet softly. "Now we're getting somewhere. Where is Mr. Cub now?"

"He gone back to de ribber, suh."

"Thank you, George," returned Gimlet. There was not a shadow of doubt in his mind about the truth of what he had just heard. How could George know of Cub's existence if he hadn't seen him? "You'd better come with us," he told the negro. "I imagine you don't want to stay here."

"No, boss. But do you mean you go back to de ribber?"

"That's right."

"Don't you do that, boss," warned George earnestly.

"Why not?"

"De Major here he send de Indians to de ribber to kill ebberyone in de camp. I hear him tell. If dose Indians see you, dey kill you quick."

This was another shock for Gimlet. But he realised now why he was allowed to ask questions without being attacked. The force normally used for the defence of the camp had been sent to liquidate the base at the junction of the rivers. Cub was on his way there. That was enough to go on with. He could continue questioning George later on, when there was more time. Plainly, the thing now was to get to the river as quickly as possible before the Indians could carry out their orders. "You'll have to come back with me to Belize," he told the negro. "I shall need you for a witness."

At this juncture, the tense situation, which had lasted only for about five minutes, was brought to an abrupt conclusion by the action of one of the Indians standing in the shadow of the bungalow. A movement there caught Gimlet's eye and he saw the native fitting an arrow to his bow. Trapper, apparently, noticed this too, for he rapped out a brittle "Watch out, skipper!"

Gimlet jumped aside, firing his rifle from the waist. An arrow swished. Trapper's gun crashed. The Indian pitched forward.

This sudden flare-up seemed to break a spell. The atmosphere had been stiff. Now it snapped into action. The two white men made a rush for the house. The Indians bolted, followed by two shots from Copper to send them to a safe distance. Gimlet sought cover, shouting to the others to do the same. Only George, whose mind seemed to work slowly, stood still, apparently in doubt as to what he should do. Gimlet called to him to get back, but before the man could obey, a gun blazed from the window of the bungalow and he went down on his knees. Gimlet fired at the window. A

vague figure there disappeared. The light went out. Gimlet continued to fire an occasional shot, shouting to Copper to get George clear. Then, ordering Copper to keep the door and window covered, he ran forward and snatched up the lantern that had been dropped and knocked over in the confusion. His object in this, as he explained later, was to take it for their own use in the forest, in case the battery in the small pocket torch he carried should run out. Anyway, he was too late to save the lantern, for the oil was leaking and it had caught fire. A bullet kicked up the dirt at his feet, so he retaliated by snatching up the lantern by the handle and hurling it through the window. "Share that between you," he invited. Taking no more chances he backed away to where Copper was standing with George, now on his feet again. Knowing that the black had been hit he inquired sharply: "How is he?"

"Not bad," answered Copper. "Got it in the arm."

"All right. Bring him along. Let's get out of this. Trapper, cover the rear."

"What's the hurry, skipper?" demanded Copper in a disappointed voice. "This scum wants a lesson. We might as well mop the place up while we're at it."

"Not now," returned Gimlet. "They may bring up reinforcements. I don't mind lead, but poisoned arrows are nasty things. Besides, we've got to get back to Cub. If the Indians who have gone down the track overtake him, he won't have a hope. There's a chance that the Indians won't attack the village until dawn, in which case we may be in time to save the situation. It's a pity this rough-house had to start, but it couldn't be avoided without sacrificing George. I want him. Apart from anything else, he's a living witness to the attack on Banford's men."

They hurried on.

Reaching the entrance to the track Gimlet examined George's wound, and was relieved to find that it was not serious. The negro made light of it as Gimlet, with Trapper still guarding the rear, put a service dressing on it.

"What about the grub we parked in the pyramid?" questioned Copper.

"We'll leave it there," decided Gimlet. "It may come in handy later on. I haven't finished with these rascals yet."

"You mean—you're coming back here?" Copper seemed surprised.

"That's my intention now."

"Why not tell the Government what we know and leave them to do the mopping up?"

"That might cause political repercussions. We'll handle the thing ourselves if we can, and leave the Government out of it. Afterwards they can deny all knowledge of it if they like. But we'll talk more about that later. The thing is to get back to Cub, or he's going to be in a mess."

"Too true," agreed Copper seriously.

The march home began.

"Watch out for de spirits, boss," pleaded George.

Copper guffawed. "Why, they're pals of mine," he asserted.

Presently he was able to show the black what they really were.

When, after about an hour, they halted for a rest, Gimlet took the opportunity to find out all that George knew about Cub, and other matters concerning the camp. Thus, he learned how Cub had been brought into the camp delirious with fever. He worked out, too, why they had not met Cub on his way back to the river. He learned that it was George, on his way to the river to warn them of the Indians, who had collided with the man carrying the mask, when that man had bolted from Copper's home-made spook. It was easy to fill in the gaps of the story. It was as a result of this man returning to camp that the Major had sent the Indians down the track. They, too, had bolted. But the Major had sent them back with a white man to deal with any strange spirits that might be encountered. This time they had not come back. The upshot of it was, and this was what really mattered, Gimlet knew that somewhere in front of them, with orders to wipe out the camp, there was a force of about a dozen Indians under the command of a white man.

While no one actually said so, it must have been clear to all that unless they arrived at the base in time to help Cub, the stores and the canoe were doomed; and if they were lost they were all doomed. The only way home was by the river. All that could be expected from the forest was slow starvation. And if they all lost their lives the authorities would never learn of the concrete menace taking shape in the jungle.

The march was resumed, and continued on, it seemed, endlessly. All were foot-sore, weary from want of undisturbed sleep, and suffering from the usual torments of the damp heat and insect pests. The light from Gimlet's torch became more and more feeble, and he had to rest it sometimes for fear it became completely exhausted. This made progress slow.

"It must be getting near morning," said Copper at last.

"Not much farther to go," replied Gimlet cheerfully.

CHAPTER X

PREPARING FOR TROUBLE

By the time Cub staggered into the camp, which was about four in the morning, he was pretty well all in. That the fever would have sapped his strength he fully expected, and in this he was not mistaken. He had been well bitten by insects and scratched by thorns. The rags on his feet were shapeless balls of mud and slime, so that when he learnt from Jose in the village that Gimlet was not there he felt it was the last straw. It seemed that his effort had been in vain after all. How and where he had missed Gimlet and the others he could not imagine.

Jose, when he had got over the shock of seeing him in such a condition, bustled about and soon produced tea and hot canned soup. Cub took them mechanically, but the food did in fact put new life into him, although he was too worried to think much about it. What he wanted more than anything was sleep. He wanted to throw himself down and forget about everything. But this was a luxury in which he dared not indulge. There was too much to do, although where to start he did not know. So he had a bath, dressed his bites with lotion to take the smart out of them, got into his spare clothes and dug out an old pair of tennis shoes to put on his blistered feet. Then, pouring out another cup of tea, he sat on a box in the tent and considered what he should do next.

There could be no question of going back to look for Gimlet. It would have been a physical impossibility even if he had been sure that it was the right thing to do. In any case, he had no idea of where to look. Gimlet had not been on the track or he must have seen him. He could not think that he had been in the enemy camp while he himself was there. Where, then, was he? Was it possible that in looking for him, Cub, in the forest, he had lost his way? He decided miserably that it was quite possible. All he could hope, and he felt it was not an unreasonable hope, was that Gimlet would sooner or later make his way to the enemy camp, and there encounter George, who would tell him what had happened. The threat of Indians about to attack their base would surely bring him back at top speed.

Another matter that exercised his mind was whether or not to tell Jose that hostile Indians were on their way to the river, with the almost certain object of wiping out the camp. He was afraid that if he gave Jose this alarming news, the porters, knowing what to expect, would bolt; and they

could hardly be blamed for that. It would be bad enough if they just went off; but if they took the canoe, as seemed highly probable, the result would be fatal for anyone left behind.

In the end he decided that he would have to tell Jose and risk the consequences. In the first place, it was only fair to the blacks. Again, he would have to put the place in some state to receive the impending attack. The negroes would ask the reason, and he did not feel inclined to deceive them by telling them only half-truths. They would learn the whole truth eventually, anyhow.

It was time he started to prepare his defence, he thought. What could he do? At first glance this seemed little enough. To try to hold out in a canvas tent would be merely futile. The Indians would simply shoot their arrows through it from a safe distance. Yet if he moved the camp to a new place altogether, how would Gimlet know where he had gone? Suppose Gimlet returned without seeing George? He would walk into a deathtrap. The first information he would have about the Indians would be a shower of poisoned arrows. If that happened, someone would certainly be hit; and to be hit anywhere with a poisoned arrow would be as fatal as a bullet through the head—and more painful.

Cub sat for some time worrying over his dilemma, aware that time was passing and if he intended doing anything it would have to be soon, or it would be too late. Slowly he evolved a plan. It was not brilliant, he told himself dismally, but it was better than doing nothing. However, there were points about it. Satisfied that he was not likely to think of anything better, he called Jose to him and broke the news about the approach of the Indians.

Jose's reaction was swift and natural. He was all for getting into the canoe and starting off down the river forthwith. It was clear that no other thought occurred to him.

Cub reminded him that there were other people to consider. How, he asked, was the chief to get home without a canoe?

Jose admitted frankly that he did not know.

Cub said that he was staying where he was and that the canoe was staying with him.

Jose argued that this was certain death for all of them.

Cub was forced to admit that it seemed highly probable.

Jose went off and consulted with his black companions. In due course he returned to say that they had decided to go down the river in the canoe. His arguments in support of this were simple and logical. If they stayed they

would be killed. What was the use of that? It wouldn't help the chief to get home. He still wouldn't have a canoe.

Cub agreed to all this, but pointed out that it was not the custom of his people to leave friends to perish. He then stated, quite calmly, that as the canoe was the property of the chief, he would shoot the first man who tried to take it without his permission. They could go if they liked. He wouldn't stop them. He intended to stay. When he got back to Belize he would tell everyone how his porters ran away from a few dirty Indians.

Jose pleaded. It was madness, he said, to try to defend the camp against spears and arrows.

Cub conceded the point. He had, he said, no intention of trying to defend the camp where it now stood. He was going to move it, and everything in it, to the island. He pointed to the rocky islet just below the confluence of the two rivers. "We'll hide among the rocks where we can't be seen," he went on. "We'll cover the canoe with rubbish so that it won't be seen, either. The Indians will think we have gone away, and perhaps return home. Even if the Indians do locate us, without a canoe they will find it difficult to make an attack. If they try to swim to the island we will shoot them one by one." Actually, Cub did not think they would try anything so suicidal.

Jose went back to his friends, and presently returned to say that they had agreed to the plan.

The truth was, Cub suspected, they knew they had little chance of getting home on their own without the white men, without a canoe or stores. However, he did not mention this. And in fairness to the blacks it must be admitted that having arrived at a decision they never tried to go back on it.

Without further loss of time they set to work to put the plan into effect, taking down the tent and carrying everything to the water's edge. It took several trips to transport everything to the island. Cub, worn out, sat on a rock and supervised the operation, praying that all this strain would not bring on a recurrence of fever.

There was still one unpleasant thought in his mind, a snag for which he could think of no solution. Suppose the Indians came, and did not go back when they found the place apparently abandoned? Suppose they stayed? Suppose George did not see Gimlet to warn him? Gimlet would probably be killed before he knew that hostile Indians were in the village. The canoe would not be there to give him a chance to escape, even if he survived the first onset. Then again, thought Cub desperately, even if the Indians did go back up the track, they were quite likely—almost certain, in fact—to meet Gimlet on his way to the river. That might be even worse than an encounter

in the village, because the Indians, experts at jungle warfare, would be at home in the forest. He could not ask Jose to go up the track to warn Gimlet. In any case it would be sending the negro to almost certain death.

Cub called Jose over and put the problem before him; but Jose had no advice to offer.

Said Cub: "I can only think of one possible way out of the difficulty. Will you, instead of coming to the island, stay here to warn the chief when he arrives?"

Jose pointed out that if the Indians arrived first they would kill him.

Cub said he would stay himself, but he was so worn out that he was afraid he might go to sleep. He was having difficulty in keeping his eyes open. He argued that the Indians wouldn't kill Jose if they didn't see him. Obviously, he would have to hide. The best place, he suggested, was up a tree near the track, just inside the forest. It was very unlikely that the Indians would see him there. He could intercept Gimlet when he came, before he actually went into the village.

Still Jose seemed doubtful. It was clear that he did not think very much of this arrangement, and Cub, in his heart, could well understand why. He put forward his final argument. "If you stay in a tree when the Indians come, you will have a better chance of living than any of us. We shall probably be killed. The Indians, knowing nothing about you, will then go away. In that case you might get in touch with that friendly Indian you saw when we first came here—Tagum, or whatever his name was. He would take care of you until the next white men came here, and you could go home with them. No doubt Mr. Banford will come back here again when he gets better."

By the time he had finished Cub had almost persuaded himself that he was offering Jose the best job. "By the way, what happened to that fellow, Tagum?" he inquired. "I don't see him about."

Jose said he had gone back to his tribe to tell them about Gimlet's offer of presents. He hadn't seen him since.

"Did I understand you to say that his tribe is usually at war with the Indians of the Uaxatikel district?" questioned Cub.

Jose said they killed each other at every opportunity.

"Then that's another snag," said Cub in a melancholy voice. "If this fellow Tagum does come back, the only present he's likely to get is an arrow in his neck. You'd better keep an eye open for him, too. If you see him, tell him to clear out. But we mustn't stay here talking any longer. You push off and find a good tree. Better take something to eat with you. I'm going over to the island."

Jose, looking anything but happy, walked off towards the forest, in the direction of the track.

Cub had a last look round. Of the camp nothing remained but ashes where the cooking fire had been. The site looked as if it had been hurriedly vacated—as in fact it had. He walked on to the canoe, which was waiting for him, and was paddled over to the island, a matter of perhaps forty yards.

The island was quite a small affair, about thirty yards long by ten wide at the widest part. It consisted of a heap of stones and rocks piled up by the river over a period of time. On top of these, the river, when in flood, had thrown branches, dead grass and other debris. From the silt that had lodged between the stones there sprang the usual rank tropical weeds. There was one stunted tree which by some miracle had managed to get a firm foothold. Altogether it was an untidy-looking mess, but even before he reached it, Cub saw there was plenty of cover to hide them provided the restless negroes could be persuaded to keep their heads down.

There was a tiny shingle beach on the far side. Cub landed on it and saw that the porters had fixed things up better than he had expected. This was made possible by the fact that the largest rocks had been deposited in such a way as to leave a hollow in the middle. It had not been practicable to erect the tent. Nor would that in any case have been advisable. But the negroes had got over the difficulty of providing a shelter by the simple expedient of arranging some dead branches from one side of the hollow to the other, using the largest rocks for support. Over this they had spread the canvas of the tent, and on this again, leaves and other rubbish. In the cavity thus made had been piled the perishable stores, to keep them out of the direct rays of the sun, which would have done them no good. There was, Cub was glad to see, just room for him to creep in as well. He did not want to sit in the sun all day, either. The blacks, being accustomed to it, did not mind. They had scraped themselves a cramped hiding place among the stones at the end of the little beach. The canoe was pulled high and dry and wedged between two rocks. On it, too, a quantity of rubbish was thrown, so that very sharp eyes would be needed to detect it from the bank. Considering how hurriedly all this was done Cub was well pleased with the result.

It was by this time just beginning to get light. There was no sign of the Indians, so telling the porters to keep watch, he decided to snatch a little sleep, of which he was badly in need. Crawling under the canvas he stretched his weary limbs and closed his eyes, satisfied there was nothing more he could do.

CHAPTER XI

TROUBLE IN PLENTY

CUB seemed no sooner to have closed his eyes than he was awakened with a violent start by a noise like the end of the world. Forgetting where he was he sprang up in a panic, or tried to spring up, but his head came into sharp contact with one of the branches supporting the canvas and he feel back again, dazed with shock, but striving desperately to think. He moved again, this time more carefully, and rubbing his eyes saw that it was light. At that moment there was a blinding flash and another tremendous roll of thunder told him the simple truth. A thunderstorm was upon them.

Once he realised what was happening, seeing no cause for alarm, he sat back, angry that he should have been disturbed. He had seen thunderstorms before, and some bad ones; but as the minutes passed, and the cannonade continued with increasing violence, he told himself that he had never seen or heard anything like this one. The noise was unbelievable. Even so, he was not perturbed, seeing no danger in what he took to be a common and perfectly natural phenomenon. But when he crawled out of the bivouac and looked around, he was not a little shaken by what he saw.

Dawn had broken—and broken seemed to be the right word. It looked as if the heavens were being torn apart by such lightning as he could not have imagined. From an ugly indigo sky it forked down continuously in a dozen places at once; and while the quivering lances of blue light bombarded the earth the thunder rolled and crackled with such a volume of sound that he was appalled. So apparently were the porters, although they must have seen the like of it before. They sat huddled together against a rock with their eyes shut and their hands over their ears. It was not until one of them opened his eyes, and saw him there, that Cub learned that the Indians had just arrived in the village.

Cub hastened to take a peep between two rocks. The man was right. Standing near the river bank, gazing at the site of the abandoned camp, was a white man and a group of Indians. Cub was still watching them, not without apprehension, when, with a roar, the rain came. It arrived in a great sheet of water as if all the reservoirs of heaven had burst at once. It blotted out the scene, reducing visibility to a matter of a few yards. After the heat the water felt icy cold. Cub gasped as it poured over him, and he scrambled back into the shelter with some haste. Not that the shelter served as a

protection for very long. From every sagging fold in the canvas the water dripped. The drips became a steady trickle, and finally the water poured through. Everything seemed to be turning to water and Cub soon gave up any idea of trying to keep anything dry. There was nothing he could do about it so he just sat still in the most acute discomfort hoping that the storm would soon pass. He was afraid that any food not in a tin would be ruined. Things were difficult enough without this, he ruminated bitterly. The Indians, he supposed, had found shelter in one of the village huts.

How long the deluge went on before it started to relent he did not know. He was too fed up to keep an account of time. It may have been half an hour. And all the time the thunder boomed and the sky was lacerated with incessant lightning. For a little while a wind raged, and the crash of falling trees added to the uproar. But at last the storm began to recede, and the rain settled down to an aftermath of drizzle. Cub took another look at the village, which he found he could just see; but of the Indians there was no sign. Still, he did not indulge in any false hopes that they had departed. He supposed they were taking cover, of which plenty was available in the abandoned huts. He retired to his own shelter.

It struck him suddenly that the river seemed to have changed its note. Its murmur had become a growl. Even while he considered the matter, wondering if it was his imagination, the growl became a low roar. A horrible thought struck him, and sent him scrambling out to look. One glance was enough. His fears were realised. The water, black with mould from the floor of the forest and carrying wreaths of foam, was tearing past, bearing with it not only leaves and branches and other flotsam, but whole trees.

The full import of this did not strike him at once. He was merely glad that he was not on the water, or in it. Then the thought occurred to him that the flood was going to make the business of getting back to the bank, when the time came, a hazardous operation. The canoe, if launched, would certainly be swept a great way down the river before it would make a landfall. The river seemed to have got very wide, too. Hard on this observation came another, one that gave him a shock. Confirmation of it came from one of the porters, who called to him: “De ribber done raise himself up, Massa Cub.”

Cub’s eyes went to the little beach—or the place where it had been. It was no longer there. The water was lapping the rocks. What the porter had said was true. The river was certainly raising itself up, and doing so fast. It had already risen more than two feet, and Cub found, with growing alarm, that he could actually watch it rising. The highest point of the island was not more than seven or eight feet above the level of the river. Could the river

rise as much as that? Cub looked at the island. The answer was plain to see. It could. Dry grass and sticks caught up in the lower branches of the little tree showed that the island was sometimes submerged. He stared at it aghast. This was a possibility he had not taken into account. It was too late to do anything about it now. He realised that if the river continued to grow at its present rate for an hour, the island would be inundated, and everything on it washed off by the weight of water.

"Dem old clouds fairly bust open on us, Massa Cub," said a negro.

"Yes," answered Cub, thinking fast. Not that there was much to think about. One thing was certain. Quite aside from the Indians it would be sheer suicide to try to get off the island. It was likely to come to the same thing if they stayed on it. Cub sat down and rested his chin in his hand. It was just one of those things, he told himself morosely.

The island shrank in size as the water continued to rise.

The rain stopped, but still the river rose. How long it would continue to grow, Cub realised, depended not on the quantity of rain that had fallen there, but on the amount that had fallen on the hills at the headwaters.

Surprisingly quickly the clouds cleared and the sun shone through on a dripping world. Cub turned his attention to the bank, and seeing that the Indians had reappeared, warned his followers to keep well out of sight. He himself took up a position in which, by lying flat and looking between two rocks, he could see most of the village. He had a good look at the white man, presumably the one George had called Max, and was doubtful if he was entirely white. He was either very dark-skinned or a half-caste. Not that it mattered in the least. The fellow was an enemy and that was all that concerned him.

There appeared to be a discussion going on, which lent colour to Cub's view that the leader was a half-caste, otherwise it seemed unlikely that he would be able to speak the Indian language as well as he appeared to. After a while, one of the Indians climbed on a hut and lay on the roof. Cub watched with interest to ascertain the object of this move; but when the man settled down with his eyes on the edge of the forest, it became clear that he was merely acting as a sentry. By taking up an elevated position he commanded a wider view. His eyes, Cub noticed, returned constantly to the place where the track ended at the clearing. It was, of course, the most likely spot, practically the only spot, for anyone to appear. The rest of the party moved to the river bank, where, sitting down, they began to eat some food they had brought with them—the half-caste sitting a little apart from the rest.

The sun was now well up. Cub wondered how Jose was getting on in his tree. He couldn't see him of course. It was impossible to hear anything on account of the noise made by the raging river. Turning to look at the canoe, Cub saw that the water was now lapping the lower end of it. Nearby, the water had climbed so far between the rocks that the hollow was merely a puddle, forcing the negroes to move.

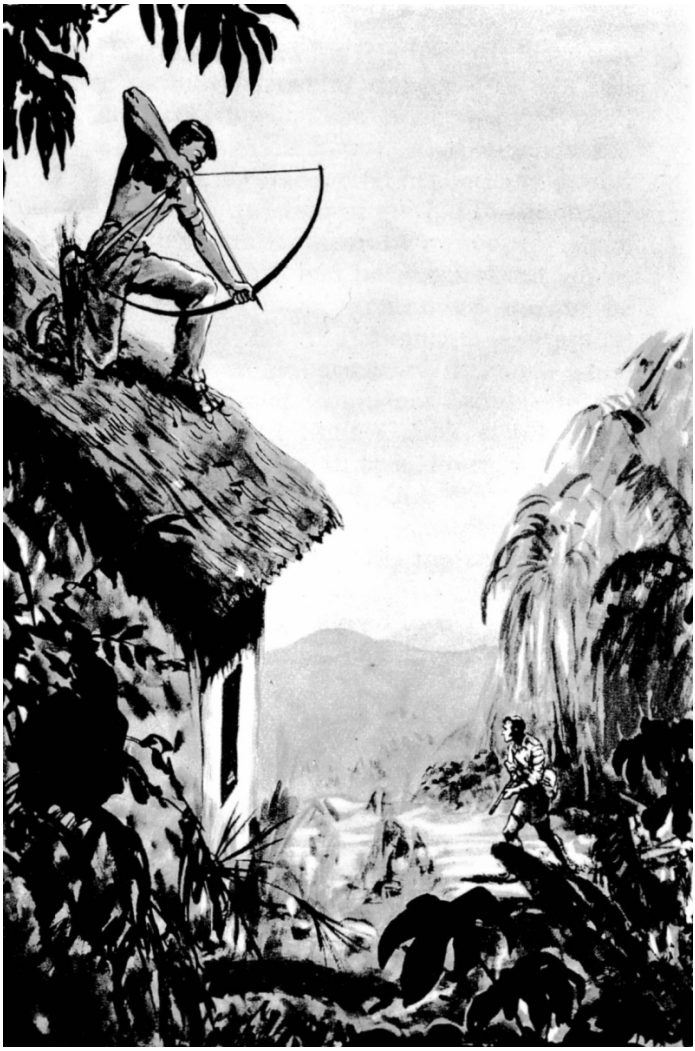
Some minutes passed with no change in the situation. The river continued to grow, Cub was horrified to note, although not quite to fast as at first. If it came up another foot, the canoe would float off unless something was done to prevent it. The trouble was, it was not possible for anyone to handle the canoe without exposing himself to the Indians on the bank. Their sharp eyes would soon detect any movement, thought Cub hopelessly.

There was a repulsive diversion when a large snake that was being carried down by the flood tried to make a landing on the island. For a little while confusion reigned. One of the porters tried to push it back into the water with a long stick; but apparently the reptile had had enough of the water and was determined to come ashore. It showed its resentment at being frustrated by flicking its tongue in and out menacingly. Another porter made a slash at it with his machete, missed it, and escaped death by inches when the snake struck at him. Another negro snatched up a cudgel and aimed a mighty blow; but in the confined space, in his back swing he struck the man behind him, whereupon the man struck let out a yell that brought Cub's heart into his mouth, as the saying is, feeling sure that the noise must have betrayed them. But either the river smothered the sound or else the men on the bank supposed it to be a monkey howling. Anyway, they took no notice. Finally, the snake had its way. It slithered between two rocks and disappeared from sight. Whether it had gone on into the river on the far side or had remained on the island, could not be ascertained. Cub thought it best to leave the beast alone although its residence on the island did nothing to make the place more comfortable.

The affair over, he turned back to see if the Indian on the roof was still there. He was. But he was moving. With his bow held in his left hand he was raising himself very slowly to a kneeling position. His eyes were fixed on the fringe of the forest. Automatically Cub looked in the same direction to discover the object of the Indian's interest. This he did instantly, with a shock that set his nerves tingling. Standing behind a low bush on the very edge of the forest, surveying the scene, was Trapper. That he had not seen the Indian on the roof was obvious, otherwise he would not have remained in such an exposed position. He was looking in the direction of the river, apparently towards the island. He could not, Cub realised, see the other

Indians, either, for they were in a depression below his field of view. Cub nearly shouted a warning, but checked himself in time.

The Indian on the roof was now fitting an arrow to his bow. His eyes were still on Trapper and his intention was all too plain. Cub did not hesitate. There was only one way to prevent a tragedy and he took it. He reached for his rifle and slipped a bullet into the breach. Lying flat, he pushed the rifle between the rocks through which he was watching, and took aim. His trigger finger tightened. The weapon cracked. The Indian sprang to his feet, dropped his bow, fell, and rolled over and over down the roof to the ground. He did not move again. Trapper vanished. Cub lay still, motionless, watching.



The Indian's eyes were still on Trapper and his intention was all too plain

Those who had been sitting on the bank sprang to their feet at the sound of the shot, looking wildly in all directions. It was clear that they did not know where the sound had come from, as often happens when a shot is fired at close range. But proof that there had been a shot was there, in the body of the Indian, which they soon discovered. No time was wasted looking at it. There was a rush for the nearest hut, in which the whole party took cover. The white man remained at the door, peering about. Cub was tempted to shoot him, too, which he could easily have done; for then, he thought, the Indians might go away. But the idea of shooting the fellow in cold blood was

repugnant to him and he allowed the opportunity to pass. With the Indian it had been different. Had he not been killed he would have killed Trapper.

There was another long interval. Cub watched the hut, and the fringe of the forest. He saw no more of Trapper. Trapper was, he supposed trying to make contact with him, for had Jose done his job as arranged he would have told him that he, Cub, was there, on the island.

Water lapping around his feet brought his attention back to that particular danger. It was still rising, but very slowly. The peril was not past, but there seemed reason to hope that it would not develop. One thing was settled beyond any doubt, there could be no question of getting to the mainland, either by swimming or by canoe, for some time yet. The Indians had not worked out where the shot had come from, so nothing was to be feared from them for the moment. Naturally, Cub hoped they would go away, because while they were there Gimlet would not be able to get into the village. And until Gimlet could reach it, there was no way of getting in touch with him, even by signalling. In short, Cub saw that there was nothing he could do, so he settled down to await developments. Acting on the active service policy of “Eat when you can,” he smeared some jam on a biscuit, and telling the porters to help themselves, he had his breakfast, or lunch—he wasn’t sure which.

CHAPTER XII

COMMANDO METHODS

THE nearer Gimlet and his party drew to the river the more meticulous were the precautions taken, with, of course, a consequent loss of time. This could not be avoided. It was obviously of vital importance that they should locate the Indians before they themselves were seen.

The method of advance was as usual, Trapper as the expert scout going ahead. Gimlet followed, and Copper, who was by this time having to help George, brought up the rear. Slowly the darkness gave way to the dawn of another day. By this time they judged that they were getting near the river, and some comfort was derived from the fact that no sounds of conflict could be heard. This did not necessarily mean that the Indians were not in the camp. No one remarked on it, but it could mean that they had arrived too late.

Then a queer thing happened. The light, instead of improving as was to be expected, began to fail. Trapper halted and spoke to Gimlet about it. Gimlet shrugged. He suggested that it might be mist, coming off the river, obscuring the face of the rising sun. None of them was to know that a broad belt of thunder cloud was rolling across the sky for the simple reason that all that could be seen overhead was an impenetrable canopy of green foliage. They went on, and very soon a flash of lightning explained the mystery.

A halt was called when the low murmur of the river became audible. In the brief intervals of crashing thunder Trapper suggested that he should go on alone and spy out the land. Gimlet agreed. At that moment the heavens opened and the rain lashed the tree-tops like machine-gun fire. For a few minutes the green roof offered protection, but then the rain came through, as Copper put it, like a load for ramrods. In a couple of minutes they were wet to the skin. What with the noise of the thunder and the splash of dripping water there seemed little need for silence. A wind arose, and trees began to fall; and there was clearly such a danger from these that Gimlet decided to push on in the hope of finding shelter in the village.

By the time the fringe of the forest was nearly reached, a new noise, growing in volume, had become audible. At first there was some doubt as to what it was, but George soon realised the truth. He told them it was the river, rising because of the rain.

Gimlet thought instantly of the canoe which, naturally, he supposed to be moored at its usual place against the bank. He looked at the others with anxious eyes. “If the river comes down in a big spate, it’ll take the canoe, and then we’ve had it,” he remarked. “Even if it means taking risks, we’d better push on to see what’s happening. Not that we’re likely to see much in this infernal rain.”

They had only moved forward a short distance when a large black object came sliding down a liana just in front of them. It was Jose, coming down from his tree. As a matter of detail he nearly lost his life, for Copper’s finger was on the trigger of his rifle when he saw who it was.

“What d’you think you’re doing?” demanded Gimlet startled.

“I’se been whistling you, chief, but de storm make so much noise you don’t hear me. So I come down.”

“What are you doing?”

“Massa Cub send me up a tree to wait for you, chief.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s on de island. De Indians is in de camp.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Jose explained the situation, which was simple enough. Cub, knowing the Indians were coming, had moved everything to the island. The Indians, with a white man, were somewhere in the camp—he didn’t know exactly where. He had been able to watch them until the rain started and blotted out the view. He did not think the Indians had found Cub. There had been no shooting. He was afraid that if the river raised itself up the island would be covered.

Gimlet gave the matter some thought. The difficulties now confronting him were plain to see. “Everything depends on the state of the river,” he told the others. “Apart from the Indians, if the river is in spate Cub won’t be able to get to us even if he sees us; and we couldn’t get to him.”

“Neither will the Indians be able to get to him, even if they spot him,” observed Copper.

“That’s all right as long as the river doesn’t submerge the island,” answered Gimlet. “If it does, Cub and everything else will be swept away. I don’t see what we can do about it. The rain isn’t quite as bad as it was. Trapper, I think you might go forward and try to get a glimpse of the river. That’s the crux of the situation. We’ll park ourselves here out of sight of the track until you come back.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Trapper went forward. The others waited. Twenty minutes passed. The storm was now abating. The sun broke through, and the forest steamed like a Turkish bath, although water still trickled down from the dripping tree-tops. The parrots screamed their relief. The noise of the river had become a sullen roar.

"I'd like to know what's going on," muttered Copper, his forehead knitted in an anxious frown. "Poor old Cub must be having an awful time."

As if in answer there came the crack of a rifleshot. Everyone stiffened expectantly, weapons ready for use. But there were no more shots, only the clamour of startled birds wheeling far overhead.

A minute or two later Trapper returned. He looked shaken.

"What was that shot?" asked Gimlet.

"Cub shot an Indian. It couldn't have been anyone else. The Indian was on top of a hut. I didn't see him, but he must have seen me. The first I knew about it was the shot; then I saw the Indian rolling off the roof."

"Was that the only Indian you saw?"

"Yes. But I reckon the others must be about."

"What does the river look like?"

"Ugly. The island is only a quarter of the size it was."

"You didn't see Cub?"

"No."

"From what you tell me he must have been on the watch, perhaps watching the Indian on the roof. He must have seen you, too, and guessed what was likely to happen, or he wouldn't have risked giving his position away by firing that shot," reasoned Gimlet.

"*Tiens!* There's one thing certain, no one can get to the island," asserted Trapper. "And even if the water goes down fast it'll be some time before Cub dares put the canoe on the water."

"Did you see the canoe?"

"No. But then, I wouldn't reckon to. Cub would hide it so that the Indians wouldn't see it."

"That's true," agreed Gimlet. He thought for a moment. "It's hard to know what to do for the best," he went on, "Apparently we couldn't get to Cub even if the Indians weren't here. He can't get to us. I don't feel inclined to start a war with the Indians at this juncture. They know we're about, of course. No doubt that's why they had a fellow on the roof, watching for us. Another detail is, we've got to eat. Cub will have taken all the food to the island. It's going to be a dreary business sitting here doing nothing, with

nothing to eat, for hours, waiting for the river to drop. If I were sure that Cub wouldn't be swept off the island, I'd go back to the pyramid. We have at least got some food there. And I'd like to have another look at the enemy camp in daylight. With the Indians here, there wouldn't be much risk in that."

"I'll go and have another look at the river," offered Trapper.

"You won't be able to see it without showing yourself," objected Gimlet. "Things are bad enough as it is, without having a casualty on our hands."

"They won't see me this time," declared Trapper. Putting down his equipment at the foot of the nearest tree he started to climb pulling himself up by the lianas.

"Look at Tarzan," murmured Copper.

Trapper went on up until he could no longer be seen from the ground. It was only a few minutes before he returned. Back to the others he gave his news. "Cub and the others are okay," he reported. "I was looking down on them. Two Indians are doing sentry. The rest of them, and their white boss, are sitting on the river bank. They can't have worked out that Cub's on the island, but from the way they keep looking round, that shot out of the blue has got their nerves on the jump. The water is no higher. As it is some time since it stopped raining it soon ought to start going down."

"In that case, as I see no point in sitting here without food or shelter, we'll go back to the pyramid," decided Gimlet. "Jose can stay here and look after George." Gimlet turned to Jose. "Will you be all right here until tomorrow?" he asked.

Jose said he would.

"All you have to do is to keep out of sight."

"I'll do that, chief," promised Jose, emphatically.

"If you should happen to get a chance to speak to Mr. Cub, tell him where we've gone. My orders are that he's to stay here until we get back."

"Yes, suh."

Gimlet beckoned to Copper and Trapper. "Let's start," he said. "The sooner we're there the sooner we shall get something to eat."

Copper tightened his belt. "I thought there wasn't going to be any route-marching on this jaunt," he sighed.

Gimlet took no notice. He set off up the track.

The weary march back to the pyramid was accomplished without mishap. By that time it was late afternoon. Everyone was ravenous for food, not having had any that day, so a bee-line, as far as the jungle permitted, was

made for the little chamber in the mound. The kitbag was just as it had been left. Copper kicked out a tarantula that was sitting beside it, opened it and distributed the contents. The only sound for the next quarter of an hour was the crunching of hard biscuits.

"What are we going to do now we're here?" asked Copper.

"I've been thinking about that," replied Gimlet. "For a start we'll have a look at things. We didn't learn very much last night. There is this about it; the people here will hardly be expecting us back. They, of course, are hoping that the Indians at the river will liquidate us. Be sure they'll do anything to prevent us from getting back to report what we've seen. But for that porter of Banford's getting back to the river, it's unlikely that anyone would ever have known anything about it. In sending his Indians to the river this fellow who calls himself a Major has left himself wide open—that is, unless he can produce some more men from somewhere. I think it would be a good idea if we had a look at things from the top of the mound. We shall have to take turns watching the path, to check if the Indians at the river come back here. I hope they do come back, otherwise we may meet them on the path when we go back ourselves."

In the crimson glow of the setting sun, they made their way to the top of the pyramid. Trapper was the first to look at the objective. Dropping flat, he wormed his way forward until his eyes could take in the scene. With a sharp intake of breath he dropped back.

"What is it?" asked Gimlet.

"There's a plane there."

"The deuce there is!" Gimlet crawled forward and looked. He held his binoculars to his eyes for two or three minutes before he, too, dropped back into cover. "It's a big machine—a four-engined job," he announced. "I don't know the type. It's a foreigner, anyway. It has no right to be here, any more than these men who are stationed here. It's part of the set-up. That plane brings the food and equipment to keep the work going. It's no use trying to guess where it starts from: but if you ask me I'd say it glides quietly across the coast during the hours of darkness. It probably came in early this morning. If that argument is correct the chances are that it will leave at sundown. It would be dark by the time it got to the coast. By Jove! I wonder . . ."

Gimlet pulled himself up again to the summit of the mound and looked over. "That's it," he muttered. "There are some men moving towards the machine now. I'll wager it won't be here in the morning."

"Are we going to let it go?" inquired Copper.

“That’s what I was wondering,” returned Gimlet softly. “If we could keep that plane on the ground—I mean, put it out of action—it would about knock this show on the head. The gang working here would be stuck here. At all events, the only way they could get home would be by the river, in which case they could be picked up by the police as they came down. They’d hardly be likely to try to get home through the jungle.”

“Well, that’s dandy,” said Copper dispassionately. “Let’s roll our sleeves up and do a spot of sabotaging. I’ll shoot some holes in the engines. It’ll mean getting a bit closer.”

“It’s not an easy matter to shoot holes in an aero engine,” observed Gimlet. “Holes through the tyres of the undercarriage wheels would be easier, and just as effective. No machine could get off that rough ground with flat tyres, and tyres of that size couldn’t be replaced outside a service depot. Never mind how we do it, but if we can keep that machine grounded, we’ve got this bunch buttoned up. Come on! We’ll try something.” Gimlet started scrambling down the slope.

The project, as everyone soon realised, was not going to be easy, particularly as time was important. Obviously, they could not run out over the open ground, for if they did they would certainly be seen by men moving about the building. Two, standing near the machine, would be in a position to intercept them. It was clear that the only chance of getting to the aircraft unobserved was by following the fringe of the forest until they could put the big fuselage between them and anyone who happened to be about. This meant a long detour. Still, it was the only way, and Gimlet set as fast a pace as was possible through the weeds, bushes and trailing vines, that formed a hem, as it were, round the forest proper. The fact that they had already covered a good many miles that day made the task all the more exhausting.

The first objective reached, Gimlet paused for breath. The big machine, about a hundred yards away, was now directly between them and the buildings, in front of which several men were standing. The two men who had been near the aircraft, presumably members of the crew, could not be seen. Whether they were standing by the fuselage, or had boarded the machine, was not known.

“This is the scheme,” panted Gimlet. “I’ll shoot up the tyres. You keep close behind me and take care of anyone who tries to interfere. Ready? Go!”

They had covered about half the distance before they were discovered. The two men, who it now turned out were standing behind the fuselage, with shouts of warning ran towards the nose, from where they no doubt expected to get a better view of what was happening. Gimlet ignored them,

whereupon they started to walk forward, possibly wondering what was going on. Anyway, it was obvious from their manner that they did not suspect what was really afoot. But when Gimlet raised his rifle and fired point blank into the nearest enormous tyre, rather taller than himself, they knew. But the damage had by then been done.

It seems likely that the two men were unarmed; or perhaps they had left any weapons they possessed in the machine. Be that as it may, finding themselves confronted by three wild-looking men armed with rifles, which clearly they were prepared to use, they did the sensible thing. They turned and bolted.

Gimlet proceeded to pump holes into the tyres until a bullet fired by someone whistled unpleasantly close. By that time the machine was settling down quietly, so he gave the order to retire. Bullets followed them as they sprinted back to the forest, but the shooting was as ineffective as might have been expected considering the poor light. It was, in fact, rapidly getting dark.

"That's a good job done," muttered Gimlet, wiping his face.

"All nice and easy," replied Copper, making a swipe at a cloud of mosquitoes.

"Let's get back to the pyramid," ordered Gimlet. "Keep your eyes skinned, but I don't think there's much danger now. I fancy these people will think twice before they come near the forest, not knowing where we are."

They took their time on their return to the pyramid. They neither saw nor heard anything in the way of opposition.

"That's given 'em something to think about, any old how," remarked Copper, with deep satisfaction. "Teach 'em to start sticking up rockets on our ground."

Back in the chamber they threw themselves down to recover from their exertions.

But Gimlet did not rest for very long. "I'll take first watch," he said. "We've got to know if those Indians come back. You fellows get some sleep."

"About time," murmured Copper. "This is tougher going than a war."

Gimlet cocked an eye at him. "There's probably worse to come," he said casually.

Copper did not argue, and the bivouac settled down for what turned out to be a quiet night.

In Gimlet's view, as he told the others over a meagre breakfast when day broke, it had been too quiet. The Indians had not returned from the river. That meant they were still at the village. Even worse than the prospect of trying to drive them out, as they would have to before they could rejoin Cub, was the possibility of meeting them on the track.

"We've got to face it," concluded Gimlet. "We can't leave Cub there alone any longer. There's nothing more we can do here, anyway. You might slip up to the top of the hill, Trapper, for a last look round; then we'll move off."

Trapper went off, and was soon back. He had nothing to report except that the aircraft was still there. Some men were standing by it, from their actions having a heated argument.

"We've given 'em something to talk about, anyway," remarked Copper as he picked up his gear. "I hope this is the last time we shall have to hoof it through this sweltering hot-house."

"You don't hope it more than I do," asserted Gimlet dryly.

They set off in the usual order.

They saw nothing, or heard nothing unusual, until they were within earshot of the village, when, faintly at first, there came from the distance the sound of voices raised in a medley of yells, howls and other uncouth noises.

Gimlet pulled up dead.

"Monkeys," said Copper.

"Indians," said Trapper.

"Come on," said Gimlet, and broke into a run.

The din became louder as they neared the river. Gimlet steadied the pace. He looked at Trapper. "What d'you make of it?"

"Sounds like Indians doing a war dance," said Trapper.

"There's no shooting," declared Copper significantly. "I reckon that if Cub was on his feet there would be."

They all ran on towards the bright sunlight that marked the limit of the forest. The village came into view, and the clearing on which it stood. One of the huts was on fire. Near the river a band of Indians were dancing in a circle, making an indescribable noise.

"Look's as if Cub's had it," muttered Copper grimly, jerking a bullet into the breach of his rifle. "Let's give 'em something to yell about."

CHAPTER XIII

A TIGHT CORNER

AFTER seeing Trapper for that brief moment, Cub passed a miserable, anxious day. He hardly moved. Not that there was much room to move. He spent most of the time lying behind his rocks staring at the place where Trapper had so suddenly appeared, and as quickly vanished. Assailed by a sense of loneliness he hoped to see him again, yet he was at the same time afraid of what might happen if he—or Gimlet or Copper for that matter—collided with the Indians.

He had plenty to think about, although as his thoughts were mostly surmise and speculation he derived little profit from such mental exercise. Were Gimlet and Copper there with Trapper, he wondered? It seemed probable, because it was Gimlet's practice to send Trapper ahead to do the scouting. If they were there, did they know where he was or had Jose failed in his duty to wait for them and tell them? This question was of course unanswerable, but, naturally, he pondered on it. Of one thing he was sure. If Gimlet or the others had seen neither Jose nor George, they must suppose him to be dead. Had Trapper seen the Indian fall off the roof? Again he did not know. He would of course have heard the shot; but if he had not seen the Indian fall it would tell him no more than that the camp was occupied. The shot could have been fired by anyone. Trapper might even suppose that someone had fired at him. And so Cub went on, wrestling with his problems, doubts and fears. The only thing he knew for certain was, the Indians were still there, and even worse, they showed no signs of going away. They had heard the shot too, and must be wondering who had fired it, he reflected. From the way they watched the forest they seemed to think that it had come from that direction. They would not expect it to come from a river in roaring spate.

Cub found one scrap of comfort in a gloomy outlook. The river was now going down. Unless another storm blew up there was no longer any risk of being washed off. Still, it was all an anxious, tedious business.

The black porters still sat huddled together, looking scared, as they had every reason to be, although they must have suffered less than Cub from the heat and the clouds of insects that the rain appeared to have hatched.

In these conditions one of the longest days that Cub could remember came to an end. If Gimlet was in the vicinity, he did not reveal himself. The

Indians stayed on. The sun went down, whereupon the Indians lit a fire, much to Cub's disgust, for it could only mean that they intended spending the night in the village. Sick with boredom and discomfort there was nothing Cub could do about it. For a little while he toyed with the idea of opening fire on the Indians in the hope of driving them out of the village. But it was obvious that he could not do that without giving away his position, so such a course, in the end, would probably do more harm than good. He decided that the only sensible thing to do was wait, and let the first move come from the other side.

The short twilight passed. Night fell. Fireflies began their ghostly dance. Mosquitoes hummed. Occasionally an alligator croaked. One tried to come ashore on the island. One of the porters heaved a rock at it and with a grunt of surprise it changed its mind.

Cub ordered his porters to keep quiet and on no account show a light. Then, knowing that the state of the river prevented anything in the nature of a surprise attack, he lay down, and utterly worn out was soon asleep.

He did not have a good night. He spent most of it in that condition which might be called half-asleep and half-awake. His short spells of sleep were troubled by dreams from which he awoke with a start to find that it was still dark. Asleep or awake he was always conscious of the mosquitoes. No wonder the natives called them the plague, he thought. Insect-repellent helped a little, but to be effective it had constantly to be renewed, and he did not always feel inclined to move.

As so often happens on such uneasy nights he must have fallen into his deepest sleep just before dawn; for when he was awakened by one of the porters shaking his arm it took him a second or two to work out where he was. He observed with relief that it was just getting light. The porter was making urgent signs, jabbing a finger towards the village, so realising that something was happening, he pulled himself together and got up to ascertain what it was.

To his great satisfaction he saw that the Indians were at last going away. Or so he judged from the way they were getting their things together while Max, their white master, stood waiting, his rifle in the crook of his arm. Apparently they were tired of waiting or bored with doing nothing. That suited Cub. It would, he thought, be something if he could get up and move about and stretch his legs. When the Indians formed up in a rough line and moved off towards the forest he could have cheered with relief. Their departure would put a different complexion on the situation.

His joy was short-lived. In the space of a minute it was turned to mortification, anger and dismay.

What happened was this. The Indians had nearly reached the forest, and had paused for a last survey of the scene, when with a great twittering down the river came a flock of brightly-coloured parakeets. They must have decided that they liked the look of the island and started to settle on it. Scores pitched on the one little tree the island boasted, clinging to the branches from all angles. Others hung on to bushes, rushes, or anything that offered a foothold. Then, it seemed, they discovered that the island was already occupied, whereupon they rose again in a cloud making an incredible amount of noise. Had they been content to move on all might yet have been well. But they were not. They started mobbing the intruders as blackbirds or starlings will mob a fox or a cat.

At first Cub was not particularly concerned. Indeed, he admired the birds and was slightly amused by their behaviour. But when he saw the Indians stare, and then huddle round their leader, pointing significantly, the unpleasant truth dawned on him. The Indians, naturally, would know the meaning of the clamour. At least they would know that there was something on the island. Not necessarily human beings. It might have been a panther, or an animal of some sort, that had taken refuge on the island during the spate. To the Indians an animal meant meat. Anyway, that was how Cub worked it out when he saw them coming back. Wishing the birds anywhere but there, he still hoped that they might escape detection. He told his companions to lie quite flat, and he did the same. But these precautions proved unavailing. One of the Indians threw down his kit and went like a monkey up a lone tree that stood on the river bank. From the top, of course, he could see what the birds could see. To make the disaster even more infuriating to Cub, the birds, almost as if they realised that they had achieved their object, went on down the river.

The Indian in the tree let out a yell and hastened to rejoin his companions on the ground. There was a quick conference, and from the way the Indians sought cover, Cub knew definitely that in spite of all his precautions the worst had happened. By sheer bad luck they had been discovered. In a voice heavy with disappointment he passed on this unwelcome information to the porters. They showed no surprise, from which he judged that they had feared the birds would betray their hiding-place.

Cub pulled up his rifle ready for use, prepared to use it should the Indians try to interfere with them. He looked at the river. It was still running at a dangerous speed, but it had so far dropped that he would have risked the canoe on it in an attempt to escape had this been possible. He did not think it

was—at any rate not without casualties. In order to put the canoe on the water they would have to stand in full view of the men on the bank. He raised himself a little higher to look. Instantly the twang of a bow-string and the swish of an arrow warned him that he could not afford to take such chances.

This left no doubt about what the Indians would do if they could. Actually, Cub did not think the Indians could see them from ground level. They would have to get higher; on the roofs of the huts, or up trees. But that, Cub perceived, would cut both ways. If they got where they could see him, he would be able to see them. If his marksmanship was good he might be able to hold them off after all.

What he feared was soon put into effect. The Indian who had discovered them, this time taking his bow with him, went back up the tree with the obvious intention of using it.

Cub was not prepared to allow this to happen. Nor did he. If Max had decided on war, then war it would have to be. Without any qualms, therefore, and without any difficulty, he shot the Indian off his perch just as he was drawing his bow. The man crashed down, and the speed of his fate discouraged any of the others from employing this particular method of attack. At all events, there was no more tree-climbing. The Indians retired out of sight; but the respite did not last long. When the attack was resumed the technique used was more disconcerting than the first.

They began firing arrows into the air so that they dropped vertically on the island. At least, that was the intention, although in practice, being largely guess-work, it did not work out very well. Moreover, it was extravagant with ammunition, because most of the arrows fell in the river. But the danger was there, and Cub realised that it could only be a question of time before an arrow found its mark. He found himself instinctively looking up to watch the flight of the arrows as they came sailing over. In some strange way they reminded him of something. Then it came to him. The Battle of Hastings. This was the trick employed by the Conqueror to dislodge Harold's men from behind their stockades. Now he understood exactly how Harold had been struck in the eye. He, too, must have been looking up. Perceiving that he was inviting the same fate, Cub kept his face down, although it was not easy. He found there was a terrible fascination in watching a missile that might hit him. The porters, who could do nothing to help, well aware of the danger, were now covering themselves with such articles as they could find for protection—rocks, branches, paddles, and even boxes of stores.

Cub's trouble was he could not retaliate. There was no target for him to shoot at. The wily Indians had no need to show themselves in order to

maintain their barrage. One would pop his head up occasionally for a second to get the line of the island, and then, apparently lying on his back, send an arrow into the air. Cub fired a few shots, but it was only snap-shooting, and as far as he could judge, unsuccessful. The difficulty of scoring a hit was largely due to the fact that no Indian showed himself twice in the same place. When one did pop up he was down again before Cub could bring his sights to bear. However, by an occasional shot he did at least make them keep out of sight, and this made their shooting mostly guess-work.

Nevertheless, several arrows fell on the island, one within a foot of Cub's shoulder. He reached for it, pulled it out of the ground, and looked at the barbed point. A dark substance smeared on it told him that it was poisoned. A minute later he had the satisfaction of knocking over the Indian who had fired it, when the man unwisely showed himself for longer than usual when changing his position.

Cub began to wonder how long this was going on. How long could it go on? Where was Gimlet? What on earth was he doing all this time? If he couldn't hear the shooting then he must be a long way away. If he could hear the shooting why didn't he take a hand? And what about Jose? Was he still squatting in his tree? Cub could only hope so, for there was nothing the man could do if he came down.

A fresh development now arose to worry Cub. The river was falling fast. As a serious obstacle to the enemy it no longer existed. He saw that there was nothing to prevent the Indians, if their present efforts failed, from making a raft higher up the river and floating down to them. There was plenty of timber available. They could erect a barricade on it and shoot from behind it as they approached. Cub felt sure that his enemies, who had probably spent most of their lives in tribal warfare, would think of a solution so obvious.

The thought reminded him that so far Max had taken no part in the fighting. Where was he? What was he doing? Was he up to some devilment? Seeing no Indian taking aim, Cub raised himself an inch or two in the hope of spotting the white man's position. A bullet, smashing against a rock uncomfortably close, sent him down again without having achieved his object. So that was it, thought Cub. Unable to do what his men were doing, Max was lying in cover waiting for him to show himself. After that he kept his head down.

Shortly after this a curious thing happened. An Indian immediately opposite Cub suddenly stood upright. Cub's rifle jerked round to cover him. His finger hardened on the trigger, but something in the man's behaviour made him hold his fire. Was the man mad? He was walking forward, slowly,

with head bent down, although he must have known that he was in full view of the island. Puzzled, but ready for a trick, Cub watched. He was still more puzzled when, still in the open, the man sat down, dropped his bow and buried his face in his hands. There he sat for about a minute. Then, with an awful deliberation, he fell slowly on his side, rolled a few yards and lay still.

Cub stared, fascinated. He couldn't understand it at all. If this was a trick, he told himself, he'd soon expose it. Taking deliberate aim at the body he fired. It did not move. Yet he knew he must have hit it. There was something so uncanny about the whole thing that he felt creep over him a curious sensation akin to fear.

While he was still dwelling on the mystery another Indian sprang up with a wild yell. The behaviour of this one was different, but just as inexplicable. He flung himself about on the ground as if in the throes of an epileptic fit. His struggles became less violent, and at the finish he, too, rolled over and lay still. Cub stared. Were his enemies shooting each other? He certainly had not fired at the man.

There were more strange events before the truth was revealed.

Now followed an uneasy period of quiet. No more arrows came over. All Cub could do was watch, wondering what was happening. He saw an Indian rise up and race like a madman down the river bank towards the forest. For no reason at all that Cub could see, he suddenly fell down, screaming. But hard on this came more yells. Indians appeared in several places, all running. Max appeared, also running. He dived into one of the abandoned huts. Some Indians followed him in. Two minutes later the thatch of the hut burst into flames. There were more yells as the men in the hut ran out, scattering. Cub heard the twang of bow-strings and some of the men fell. Max turned and began firing rapidly at something Cub could not see. He stopped suddenly. Then, to Cub's horror, the man deliberately drew his pistol, put it to his head and shot himself.

Cub, toughened though he was by war, found himself trembling. He could not imagine what was happening. His best plan, he decided, was to stay where he was, and keeping under cover let the mystery solve itself. Looking round he saw the porters staring at him with questioning, frightened eyes. But he could tell them nothing. Still, he was well content that the arrows had stopped coming over. After a considerable amount of noise in the region of the huts, silence fell. Cub watched.

The next thing to shake him was the appearance of Jose, walking calmly towards the river. Cub, thinking he must be out of his mind, or at least under some misapprehension as to what was happening, yelled to him to go back;

but Jose, grinning from ear to ear, continued to walk forward. To Cub's agitation some Indians appeared near him, Jose, ignoring them, came on to the edge of the water.

"Okay, Massa Cub. You done come back here now," he bawled.

"What about the Indians?" Cub shouted back.

"Dey all dead, tank de Lord," cried Jose piously. "My friend Tagum come along with his friends and finish dem bad mans fo' true."

Then Cub understood. Tagum! Jose's Indian friend! So he had come back. Apparently in some way Jose had made contact with him, with the result that he must have gone off and fetched the warriors of his tribe. After all, it was their village; and, Cub recalled, they were always at war with the Indians of Uaxatikel.

Actually, it turned out later that Tagum and some of his friends were the advance-guard of a party coming to collect the food and presents that Gimlet had promised.

As far as Cub was concerned the extraordinary behaviour of Max and his Indians was now explained. They had been struck by the deadly poisoned arrows such as they themselves were using; wherefore Cub could find little sympathy for them. Max himself must have been struck, or seeing his escape cut off preferred a quick death by his own hand.

Cub was almost past surprise, but he stared when he saw George in the background. He didn't trouble to wonder how he had got there. He shouted that he was coming over. As a matter of detail, the porters, who had grasped the situation and who needed no inducement to vacate their cramped quarters, were already getting the canoe on the water.

The triumphant Indians were now doing a war dance in the village. Cub paid little attention to them. If that was their way of celebrating a victory, they were welcome to it.

Happening to glance towards the forest his heart leapt when he saw Copper. Then he frowned, for judging from Copper's manner he was looking for someone to shoot. Then, realising suddenly that he was liable to open fire on the friendly Indians, he let out a desperate yell.

"Hi! Don't shoot!"

Fortunately Copper heard him. He stopped. Gimlet and Trapper appeared behind him. Cub waved. He got into the canoe. The porters dipped their paddles and in a few minutes he was on the mainland.

Copper came striding up. "What d'you think you've been a-doing of?" he demanded belligerently.

“What have *I* been doing!” cried Cub indignantly. “I like that! Where have you been all this time?”

Copper jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Don’t ask me, mate. Where ain’t we been? Here comes the skipper. Ask him. Where’s all the grub?”

“On the island.”

“Strike old Riley! All right, let’s get it over, chum. We’ve been on short rations and I’m as empty as a perishing football.”

CHAPTER XIV

HOW IT ALL ENDED

On his way to meet Gimlet, who was standing talking to Jose, Cub noticed that the Indians had disappeared. Not one was in sight, dead or alive. Wondering what had happened he went on. Gimlet greeted him with a smile. "Jose tells me you've been having quite a lot of fun here."

Cub grinned lugubriously. "Some people might call it that," he answered. "Personally, I shall never see anything funny in poisoned arrows." He looked at Jose. "What's happened to the Indians?"

"Deys gone," replied Jose.

"Gone where?"

"Back to de forest."

"Why?"

"Dey see the chief here arrive. Dey kill a white man. Dat means trouble, so dey run away."

"Where is the body of this white man?" Cub wanted to know.

"Dey take it with them. Take all bodies. Den dey say dey no kill any mans," explained Jose.

"That may save everyone trouble," put in Gimlet.

Copper came up to say that the tent and stores had been transported back to the mainland.

"Good!" returned Gimlet. "I want a surgical dressing to dress George's wound."

"I suppose you brought him with you?" queried Cub.

"Yes. He gave us your message. He got a bullet through his arm for his pains. He's sitting over there in the shade. I'll tell you all about it presently."

There was an hour of activity and explanations, at the end of which time Jose, who had resumed his duties as cook, announced that dinner was ready.

"Let's eat and get mobile," said Gimlet.

Copper looked surprised. "Does that mean we're pulling out?"

"It does."

"What's the hurry?"

"Only that I'm going to move while the going's good. We know the answer to the question that brought us here. Everything is nice and quiet at the moment. It's a mistake to try and do too much. George ought to be seen by a doctor, anyway. Finally, this isn't my idea of a health resort. That's why we're going."

"Aye, aye, sir," agreed Copper. "I'm beginning to pine myself for a sniff of the Old Kent Road."

The first good meal for some time was enjoyed, and at the end of it the canoe was loaded ready for departure. All trade goods and surplus stores were left in a heap for the Indians who had taken a hand in the affair at such an opportune moment. Jose said he had told Tagum that the spirits that had caused the evacuation of the village were only a white man's trick: when the information was passed on to the tribe, they would probably come back to their homes. If they did, he pointed out, the white men at Uaxatikel wouldn't be able to get out that way. If they tried they would find the Indians waiting for them.

Half an hour later the canoe started on its return journey down the river.

The level of the water was still above normal, so rapid progress was made. But the fact that the work was lighter for the paddlers did not mean that the dangers had been lessened, and there were many anxious moments as the canoe raced through cataracts and rapids. But Jose, with his strength and watercraft, brought them through, and ten days later the canoe was moored at Belize. There the crew was paid off, each man also receiving a handsome present for his loyal service.

That night, the tired travellers, after hot baths, a change of clothes and a civilised meal, slept between sheets at the International Hotel.

The next morning Gimlet went alone to make his report to the Governor of the Colony. He was away most of the day. When he returned it was to say that the story had been radioed to London in code. As a result, their orders were to return home on the next available boat to report in person.

This they did, and as far as Gimlet and his comrades were concerned, it was the end of the story. The last word reached Gimlet's ears months later, and he passed on the news. It was simply this.

The concrete works at Uaxatikel, having been discovered were no longer any use to the people who had sent out the expedition to build them. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, a demolition squad of Royal Engineers had gone out to destroy everything. Jose and George, incidentally, went with the party to act as guides.

They found Uaxatikel abandoned and already overgrown. In one of the buildings, with a revolver lying beside it, was a skeleton. A hole in the skull told its own grim story. From the evidence available it was thought to be the remains of the man who called himself the Major. Apparently, he had chosen suicide rather than go home to report failure. The metal parts of the aeroplane, already overgrown with weeds, remained. There was little else. What the Indians had not removed had been eaten by ants.

What became of the crew of the aircraft, and any others who were at Uaxatikel at the time of Gimlet's visit, was never known. There was not a clue to indicate their fate. The Indians at the junction of the rivers professed complete ignorance. But then, as Gimlet remarked, if they did have a hand in the mopping up, they wouldn't be likely to admit it.

"Too true," said Copper. "Well," he added reflectively "as far as I'm concerned, you can have the whole works—snakes, bugs, mosquitoes and all. What say you. Trapper, old pal? Am I right?"

"Every time, chum," agreed Trapper.

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 *Gimlet Off the Map* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]