

The LAND of
MYSTERY



EDWARD
S. ELLIS

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THE LAND OF MYSTERY

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The Land of Mystery

BY

EDWARD S. ELLIS

AUTHOR OF

"ON THE TRAIL OF GERONIMO," "THE WHITE MUSTANG,"
"GOLDEN ROCK," ETC.



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THE LAND OF MYSTERY.

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hardly be mistaken. Had there been any misapprehension on the part of the visitors, there was none after several scores launched their arrows at the boat, as it glided away from the shore and up stream. The aim was wild and no one was struck; but when Professor Ernest Grimcke, the sturdy, blue-eyed scientist of the party, picked up one of the missiles and carefully examined it, he made the disturbing announcement that it was tipped with one of the deadliest of known poisons.

The other members of this exploring party were Fred Ashman, a bright, intelligent American, four-and-twenty years of age; Jared Long, an attenuated, muscular New Englander in middle life, and Aaron Johnston, a grim, reserved but powerful sailor from New Bedford, who had spent most of his life on whaling voyages. Professor Grimcke and Ashman were joint partners in the exploring enterprise, Long and Johnston being their assistants.

In addition, there were three native servants, or helpers, known as Bippo, Pedros and Quincal. They had been engaged at Macapa, near the mouth of the Amazon. They were rather small of size, the first-named being the most intelligent, and in that warm, tropical climate wore no clothing except

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a strip of native cloth around the loins. Ashman had striven to teach them the use of firearms, but they could never overcome the terror caused by the jet of fire and the thunderous explosion when the things were discharged. They, therefore, clung to their spears, which, having honest points, cannot be said to have been very formidable weapons in their hands, even though each native was able to throw them with remarkable deftness and accuracy.

The sail that had served the explorers so well, where the Xingu was broader and with a slower current, became useless, or at least proved unequal to the task of overcoming the force of the stream. Consequently they had recourse to the broad-bladed oars, with which they drove the canoe swiftly against the resisting river, cheered by the oft-repeated declaration of the Professor, whose spirits never flagged, that the harder it proved going up stream, the easier must it be in descending, and that the arrangement was much better than if the condition of affairs were reversed.

The most tiresome work came when they reached some place, where the falls or rapids compelled them to land, and, lifting the boat and its contents

from the ground, carry it round the obstruction to the more favorable current above. These portages varied in length from a few rods to a fourth of a mile, and the further the party advanced, the more frequent did they become.

"We have gone far enough for to-night," said the Professor, as the prow of the boat was turned toward the left bank; "we will go into camp and make ready for to-morrow."

A few minutes later, the bow of the canoe gently touched the dark sand of the shore. Bippo, Pedros and Quincal understood their duty so well that, without suggestion from the others, they leaped into the shallow waters, ran a few steps, and, grasping the front of the craft, drew it so far upon the land that the others stepped out without so much as wetting the soles of their shoes.

This task was no more than finished, when the natives scattered in the forest, which came almost to the edge of the water, in quest of fuel. This of course was so abundant that the work was slight, but since Professor Grimcke and Fred Ashman paid them well for their services, they were left to attend to that duty unassisted.

As the surroundings of the party were entirely

new and strange, Grimcke proposed that while the evening meal was being prepared, they should find out, if it could be done, whether any unwelcome neighbors were likely to disturb them before morning. After a brief consultation, it was decided that the Professor and Jared Long should make their way up the river, keeping close to shore, with the purpose of learning the extent of the rapids, while Ashman and the sailor, Johnston, should follow the clearly marked trail which led directly away from the stream and into the forest. It was more than probable that one of the couples would come upon something worth knowing, and it was not unlikely that both would return with important information.

Twilight is of short duration in the low latitudes, and the wish of the four white men was to be back in camp at the end of an hour, by which time night would be fairly upon them. But the moon was at its full and would serve them better than the twilight itself.

The German and New Englander, therefore, moved away from camp, following the course of the Xingu, while their two friends quickly vanished in the forest. Each carried his repeating Winchester and his Smith & Wesson.

Ashman felt some misgiving because of the trail leading into the woods from a point so near the camp. It seemed likely to have been worn by the inhabitants of some village near at hand, though it was possible that the innumerable feet of wild animals on their way to and from the river may have been the cause. The upper waters of the Xingu are remarkably clear and pure, a fact which rendered the first theory most probable.

The explorers had landed in a dangerous region, as they were destined to learn very soon, and the experience of the couples who took routes at right angles to each other was of the most thrilling character.

It has been stated that the progress of the canoe had been checked, as was often the case before, by the rapids of the Xingu, which could be passed only by carrying the canoe and luggage to the smoother waters above. It was apparent that the river frequently overflowed its banks, for immense quantities of driftwood lined both shores, while the vegetation had been swept away to that extent that a space of a dozen feet from the margin of the stream was comparatively free from it. Thus both parties found the travelling easy.

The rapids were a hundred yards wide, more or less, and with such a steep incline, that the foamy waves dashed hither and thither and against each other with the utmost fury, sending the spray high in air and sweeping forward with such impetuosity that it seemed impossible for the strongest craft under the most skilful guidance to shoot them. The explorers studied them with great interest as they ascended the left bank.

It was inevitable that in a country with such excessive vegetable growth, every part of the Xingu should show much floating timber. The logs which plunged through the rapids played all manner of antics. Sometimes they leaped high out of the waters, like immense sea monsters, the outspreading limbs showing a startling resemblance to the arms of a drowning person mutely appealing for help. Then a heavy trunk would strike a rock just below the surface, and the branches, dripping with spray, swept over in a huge semi-circle. The roar and swirl suggested the whirlpool below the falls of Niagara, one of the most appalling sights in all nature.



CHAPTER II.

A TRIO OF ENEMIES.

At last, when the full moon was shining, the two men stood at the head of the rapids and surveyed their surroundings before setting out on their return to camp.

Both sides of the Xingu were lined by the dense forest, in which the vegetation is so luxuriant that it must be a source of never ending wonder to those who look upon it for the first time. The river above made a sharp bend, shutting off the view so fully that from their position, it was impossible to tell how far they would be able to use the canoe without making another portage.

"We haven't seen a person on our way here," remarked the Professor, calmly surveying the river and shores; "and I hope Ashman will bring back a similar report, for we all need a full night's rest."

"How is *that*?"

Long touched the arm of his companion, as he asked the question, and pointed down stream in the direction of camp.

To the amazement of the Professor, three natives were seen standing on the very spot where they themselves had stood a brief while before, evidently scrutinizing the white strangers with profound wonder and curiosity.

They were dressed similarly to Bippo, Pedros and Quincal—that is, with only a piece of cloth around the loins—but they displayed a marked contrast in other respects. They were taller, more athletic, with immense bushy heads of hair, enormous rings in their ears, while the hue of their skins was almost as dark as that of the native African.

One carried a long-bow and a bundle of arrows strapped behind his shoulders, while the others were armed simply with javelins or spears.

“Those fellows mean fight,” added Long.

“No doubt of it,” replied the Professor.

“But a Winchester will reach further than their arrows and spears, even if they are tipped with poison.”

“Possibly they may be friendly, if they can be convinced that we intend them no harm, and you

know what an advantage it will be to us if able to trust all the natives on our return."

Long could not share the confidence of his companion and favored a direct advance down the bank toward the savages. If the latter preserved their armed neutrality, all would be well enough, but at the first sign of hostility he advocated opening fire on them.

Perhaps he was right in the declaration that anything like timidity in dealing with savages is the worst possible course. While the rights of every barbarian should be respected, it is all important that he should know that such concession is made not through fear, but because the superior party wishes to be just and merciful.

The natives stood as motionless as statues for several minutes, during which the white men scrutinized them with an interest that may be imagined.

The first and most natural thought of our friends was that an encounter could be avoided by entering the forest on the right and passing round the savages, who, it was quite apparent, intended to dispute their return; but if such was really their purpose, they would have little trouble in heading

off the whites in the dense wood, beside which, for the weighty reasons already named, it would have been exceedingly unwise to act as though afraid of the dusky natives.

Despite Long's protest, the Professor decided to make a friendly advance, being vigilantly on his guard at the same time for the first offensive move of the savages. He carried his Winchester in one hand, while he rested the other on his revolver. He was determined, while hoping for comity, to be prepared for hostility or treachery.

Long was so dissatisfied with the looks of things, that he followed his friend a few paces, then halting with his Winchester ready for any emergency, and certain in his own mind that a sharp fight was inevitable.

The approach of the white man was evidently a surprise to the savages. The middle one, who held the long-bow and arrows, fell back several paces, as if about to break into flight or dart among the trees so invitingly near, but something must have been said by his companions to check him, for he stopped abruptly, and not only came back to his first position, but advanced a couple of paces beyond. The noise from the rapids prevented the

Professor hearing their voices, though the unusually clear moonlight told him that some utterance had passed between them.

The first ominous act on the part of the natives was by this archer, who deliberately drew an arrow from over his shoulder and fitted it against the string of his bow. The fact that the missile was undoubtedly coated at the end with a virus more deadly than that of the rattlesnake or cobra was enough to render the would-be friend uncomfortable and to increase his alertness.

At the same time that the archer went through this significant preliminary, his companions shifted their grasp upon their javelins in a manner that was equally suggestive.

While carrying these primitive weapons, the fingers closed around the centre of gravity, that naturally being more convenient, but when about to hurl them, the hand was shoved further toward the head. Both natives thus shifted their right hands, though they still held them horizontal at their thighs, from which position they could be brought aloft in the twinkling of an eye.

The white man walked slowly. The left hand, which supported his rifle, remained motionless,

but removing the right from his revolver, he continued making signs, whose friendly meaning was so obvious that it was impossible for the natives to mistake it.

While approaching in this guarded manner, he studied them with the closest scrutiny. Interesting under any circumstances, they were vastly more so at this time. What struck him in addition to the characteristics already named, were their frowsy eyebrows and glittering coal-black eyes. These were unusually large and protruding. The noses, instead of being broad and flat, like those of the native Africans, were Roman in shape. The mouths were wide, and, when they spoke, he observed that the teeth which were displayed were black, showing that a fashion prevailed among this unknown tribe similar to that in vogue among many of the natives in the East Indies.

Now, Professor Grimcke was too experienced an explorer to walk directly into danger, where there was no prospect of avoiding a desperate encounter. While eager to make friends with all the people whom he met, he did not intend to assume any unnecessary risks. The demeanor of the natives rendered it certain they were hostile. They made

no responsive signs to those of the white man, and the latter would have checked himself half way, but for his suspicion that they were mystified by his conduct and were undecided as to the precise thing to do.

He not only heard their peculiar rumbling voices, but saw from the movements of their lips and their glances in each other's faces, that they were consulting as to what they should do. The white man was already so close that he could easily be reached by the bowman, and there was little doubt that either of the others could hurl his poisoned javelin the intervening distance.

The only way of defeating such a movement was for the white man to secure "the drop" on them, but, in one sense that was impossible. Unable to understand the words spoken, they were equally unacquainted with the weapons of the pale face, and would doubtless pay no heed to the most threatening demonstration on his part.

"Take my advice and come back," called Jared Long; "keep your face toward them and blaze away, and I'll do my part!"

Instead of adopting the suggestion of his friend, the Professor slowed his pace, still making his

gestures of good will. However, when fifty steps away, he came to a dead halt.

He had advanced three-fourths the distance, and, if the others were willing to accept his offers, they should signify it by coming forward and meeting him where he had stopped.

While moving forward in this guarded manner, Grimcke was prudent enough to edge over toward the woods, which were now so close to his right side as to be instantly available. When he came to a stop also it was near the trunk of a large tree, no more than a yard distant.

"The Professor is cunning," reflected Jared Long, watching every movement; "he'll whisk behind the tree the instant one of them makes a move. Helloa! what's up now?"

To the astonishment of both white men the native with the bow shifted it at this moment to his right hand, holding the arrow in place against the string with the same hand, while the weapon was at his side. Then he moved a step or two, as if to meet the stranger.

"Look out!" called the vigilant New Englander, "that chap is up to some deviltry."

He did not refer to him with the bow and arrow,

but to one of the others, who stealthily turned aside and vanished among the trees. Being in the Professor's line of vision the latter observed the suspicious movement, and it cannot be said that it added to his comfort.

Meanwhile the archer advanced, but with such tardy step that it was evident he was timing his pace to that of his comrade who had so stealthily entered the wood. Convinced that his real peril lay among those trees, Grimcke began a backward movement with such caution that he hoped it would not be noticed by the native who was approaching with a sluggish pace.

The forest, like all those in South America, was so dense that great care was necessary for one to pick his way through it. The Professor's theory was that the savage with the spear would regulate his movements on the theory that the white man would not stir from the place where he had first halted. He would thus aim to secure a position from which he could hurl his javelin at him without detection. Grimcke conceived this was certain to take place, and, if he remained where he was, nothing could save him from the treacherous assault. It was a matter, therefore, of self pre-

ervation that dictated the brief retreat with the hope of thus disconcerting the savage.

The task which Grimcke had given himself was difficult indeed. The ground was unfavorable for the peculiar twitching movement which he hoped would carry him out of danger. He had gone barely a couple of yards when the bowman evidently suspected something of the kind, for he stopped short and stared inquiringly at the white man.

The latter extended his right hand as if to shake that of the savage, who stood motionless, making no sign of pleasure or displeasure. Indeed, he remained so fixed in his position that Grimcke was convinced he was listening for the sound of the other miscreant stealing through the wood. He plainly saw the black eyes cast a single inquiring glance in that direction.

"This is getting a little too threatening," reflected the Professor, satisfied that the three natives were as venomous as so many serpents; "at the first move war is declared."

His situation was so critical that he did not dare turn his head to look behind him, but never was there a more welcome sound to him than that

made by the footsteps of the lank New Englander.

“Keep moving back!” called Long, “but don’t try to hide what you’re doing.”

The Professor saw the sense of this advice and he followed it, lifting his feet so high that the action was plainly seen, but doing so with a certain dignity that was not lacking in impressiveness. His aim was to give the act the appearance of a strategic movement, as it may be called. It was not that he was afraid of the natives, but he was seeking a better place from which to open hostilities against them.

This was the impression which he sought to give the fierce savages, and whether he succeeded or not was certain to become apparent within the following five minutes. He himself believed the chances were against the success of his plan.





CHAPTER III.

LIVELY WORK.

Now took place an unprecedented incident.

The air of comity, or at least neutrality, which brooded over the two parties had given way to that of silent but intense hostility. The prowling movement of the native with the spear as he slipped into the wood, the sudden advance of Jared Long, whose face became like a thunder-cloud, when every hope of a friendly termination vanished, and the abrupt halt of the bowman, showed that all parties had thrown off the cloak of good will and become deadly enemies.

The third savage kept his place farther down the stream, his black eyes fixed on the archer in front, while he doubtless was waiting for some action on the part of his comrade who had stolen into the wood. As has been stated, he was nigh

enough to hurl his javelin, so that both the white men were too wise to eliminate him from the curiously involved problem that confronted them.

The bowman having halted, stood a moment with his piercing black eyes fixed on the nearest white man, as if seeking to read in his face the meaning of his action or rather abrupt cessation of action.

"Professor," called Jared, "I'll attend to the one in front of you; but look out for the scamp among the trees."

Grimcke was relieved to hear this, and had there been only the two natives to confront, he would have been disturbed by no misgiving, but there were signs that the third one down the stream was preparing to do his part in the treacherous business. He too began advancing, but instead of doing so with the quick, angry stride of the New Englander, he stepped slowly and softly, as if seeking to conceal his movement.

Grimcke would have been glad to turn the archer over to the care of Long, but he was so frightfully close, that he did not dare do so. A moment's delay on the part of his friend would be fatal. At the same time, it was not to be forgotten

that the most stealthy foe of all was prowling among the trees on the right.

The Professor's hope, as has been explained, was that his own retrogression had disconcerted the plans of this special miscreant for whom, however, he kept a keen watch.

The archer still held his bow, with the arrow in place grasped by his right hand, the long weapon resting against his hip. Provided he was right-handed, the bow would have to be shifted to his left hand, the arrow drawn back with the right and the missile then launched at his foe. This, it would seem, involved enough action to give both Grimcke and Long abundance of time in which to anticipate him.

But there remained the possibility that the savage was left-handed, in which event, the necessary action on his part would be much less, though sufficiently complicated to afford the white men abundance of time to anticipate him.

The native *was* left-handed, with a quickness, that surpassed all expectation, the bow was suddenly raised, the end of the arrow drawn back and the missile driven directly at the breast of Grimcke.

At precisely the same instant, the latter's strained

ear caught the crackling of a twig, above the din of the rapids (which was much less there than below), and something was discerned moving among the trees on his right. His frightened glance in that direction gave him a glimpse of a dusky figure in the act of hurling his javelin.

Thus it was that the spearman and archer let fly at precisely the same instant, and Jared Long, who was so anxious to help his friend, saw only the deft movements of the archer. Grimcke could not fire at both in time to save himself, but he instinctively did the very best and indeed the only thing that could be done. Without moving his feet, he dropped to a sitting posture, instantly popping up again like a jack-in-the-box.

The movement took place at precisely the right instant, and both the javelin and arrow whizzed over his head, without grazing him, but the arrow shot by Long's temple so close that he blinked and for an instant believed he had been hit.

But, like the hunter when bitten by a rattlesnake, he determined to crush his assailant and to attend to his hurt afterwards.

The sharp crack of the Winchester, the shriek of the smitten savage and his frenzied leap in the

air, followed in such instant succession that they seemed simultaneous. When the wretch went back on the ground he was as dead as Julius Cæsar.

A man can fire with amazing rapidity, when using a Winchester repeater, but some persons are like cats in their own movements. The New Englander leveled his weapon as quickly as he could bring it to his shoulder, but the native along the side of the Xingu had vanished as though he never existed.

Whether he knew anything about fire-arms or not, he was quick to understand that some kind of weapon in the hands of the white men had knocked the Bowman out of time, and he bounded among the trees at his side, as though he, too, was discharged from the bow. He was just quick enough to escape the bullet that would have been after him an instant later.

The moment Grimcke knew that he was safe from the javelin which sped over his head, he straightened up, and, still maintaining his removable posture, discharged his gun at the point whence came the well-nigh fatal missile.

But the shot was a blind one, for he did not see

the native at the instant of firing. Nothing could have surpassed the alertness of these strange savages. The one with the javelin disappeared with the same suddenness as did his brother down the bank, and, had the archer but comprehended his danger he, too, would have escaped.

The affray roused the wrath of both Long and Grimcke. They had offered the hand of friendship, only to be answered with an attempt upon their lives. One of their assailants had eluded them, and the other would have been an assailant had the opportunity been given.

“Let’s shoot him too!”

He alluded to the man who hurled the javelin and who, so far as they could see, was left without any weapon with which to defend himself. In their natural excitement over their victory, the friends forgot themselves for the moment. Heedless of consequences, they dashed among the trees, in pursuit of the savage who had flung his spear with well-nigh fatal effect.

The undergrowth was frightfully tangled, and, as the first plunge, the Professor went forward on his hands and knees. The wonder was how Long kept his feet; but it will be remembered that he

was much more attenuated than his companion, and seemed to have picked up a skill elsewhere which now stood him well.

The moon was shining and despite the dense vegetation around him, enough rays found their way to the ground to give him a partial view for a few paces in front. He had not gone far when he caught a glimpse of the dusky figure slipping through the undergrowth ahead, and at no great distance.

Strange as it may seem, the impetuosity of the American caused him to gain upon the terrified native, who, having flung his poisoned weapon, was without the means of defending himself. It was not in the nature of things, however, that Long should overtake the fugitive, who was more accustomed to making his way through such obstructions. The first burst of pursuit caused the white man to believe he would win in the strange race, but the next minute he saw he was losing ground.

Determined that the wretch should not escape, he checked his pursuit for an instant, and, bringing his Winchester to his shoulder, let fly.

But brief as was his halt, it give the savage time

to make one terrific bound which shut him almost from sight, and rendered the hasty aim of Long so faulty that his intended victim was not so much as scratched.

Had the savage dashed deeper into the forest, he would have passed beyond all peril at this moment, but he was seeking to do that which Long did not discover until after discharging his gun. He headed toward the river, where he was first seen. It must have been that he was actuated by a desire to go to the help of his comrade, or more likely he was anxious to recover his javelin, in which he placed unbounded faith, and believed he could do it without undue risk.

Whatever his purpose, he quickly burst from the forest, while Long, who was pushing furiously after him, discovered from the increasing light in front, that he was close to the Xingu again.

Suspecting his purpose, the white man tore forward at the most reckless speed, and, before the native could recover his weapon and dart back to cover, he himself had dashed into the moonlight.

"Now, we've got him!" he shouted; "there's no getting away *this* time!"

This exultant exclamation was uttered to a form

which appeared on his right, and who he was certain was the Professor; but to his consternation, as he turned his head, he saw that it was the other native, javelin in hand!





CHAPTER IV.

HOW IT ENDED.

IT will be recalled that the Professor started in pursuit of the flying native with as much ardor as his friend, but, less skilful than he, he had taken but a step or two, when an obstruction flung him to the ground with discouraging emphasis.

Concluding that he had undertaken a futile task, he hastily climbed to his feet to await the return of Long who, he was satisfied, would attempt only a brief pursuit.

Remembering the javelin which had whizzed so near his crown, he cast about for a moment and picked it up from the earth where it lay but a few feet distant. As he balanced it in his hand, he observed that it was about six feet in length, was made entirely of wood, which was heavy and as hard and smooth as polished ebony.

The light of the moon was like that of the day

itself. It would have been easy to read ordinary print by it. He had no trouble, therefore, in closely examining the novel implement of war. As he suspected, the point was made of stone or flint, ground almost to needle-like sharpness and securely fastened in place by a fine tendon wound around the portion of the stick that held the harder part. This was covered with a gummy substance extending to the end.

This he was satisfied was among the most virulent of substances known to toxicology. A puncture of the skin was sure to be fatal unless some remedy, of whose existence he held no suspicion, was instantly obtainable.

He had set down his rifle while examining the weapon, but quickly caught it up again, still retaining the javelin in his right hand. He had been startled by the sound of the terrific threshing among the trees on his right.

He supposed that his friend was coming back, but, glancing toward the point where he expected him to appear, he was amazed to see the third native, who whisked off before Long could draw a bead on him, step from the wood not twenty paces away. His back was toward the Professor, and,

strangely enough, he did not observe the white man—an oversight that never could have occurred, but for the tumult in the undergrowth which held his attention.

Grimecke had hardly caught sight of him, when the other native came flying to view, so astonishing his waiting comrade that he stood a moment irresolute after the white pursuer burst into sight.

Brief as was this pause, it gave the Professor time for some exceedingly fine work. He uttered a shout which caused the native to turn his affrighted gaze behind him, just in time to observe the white man with javelin raised and apparently in the very act of launching it at him.

The savage knew what a prick from *that* frightful thing meant, and with a howling shriek he ducked his head as though he had caught its whizz through the air, and shot among the trees with as much celerity as his companion had shown in coming from them.

Neither of the explorers wished to slay the natives, no matter how savage, unless compelled to do so in actual self-defence. Long had recovered from his first burst of fury, and, though the Professor could have sunk the javelin in the naked

body, he withheld it, not unwilling that his assailant, now that he had started to flee, should escape.

The one who had so foolishly come back to the river side was left in the worst possible situation, for both his enemies stood between him and the sheltering forest and he was defenceless. He was at their mercy, and such people as those natives neither gave nor expected quarter, when engaged in their savage warfare.

The fellow acted like a bewildered animal. The white strangers were standing a few paces apart, so as to form the two angles of a triangle, while he made the third. The nearest point to the forest was midway between Grimcke and Long, as was apparent to the savage, who was fairly cornered.

Had the Xingu behind him been as placid as farther above or below the rapids, he would not have hesitated to plunge into its waters, trusting to his skill in swimming; but, to dive into the raging current would have been as certain destruction as for a man to undertake to swim unaided through the whirlpool below Niagara.

Grimcke and Long were not unwilling to torment the fellow, because of his cowardly attempt a few

minutes before, though, as has been stated, neither intended to do him any special harm.

The affrighted native crouched down, as though seeking to draw himself into such a narrow compass that the terrible javelin could not reach him. Despite the proof he had seen of the power of the civilized weapons, he held his own in greater dread.

Grimcke raised the spear, as if poisoning it aloft to hurl at the savage. The latter uttered a howl of terror, and, with his head still low, attempted to dart between the strangers. Naturally he shied as far away as possible from the Professor, and thereby brought himself almost close enough to touch Jared.

"That's what I want," muttered the latter, hurriedly concentrating his strength in his good right leg, and delivering the most powerful kick at his command.

It was well aimed and most effectively landed. The Professor was sure he heard the "dull thud," and always insisted that the recipient was lifted clear of the ground and propelled among the trees with an impetus sufficient to break his neck.

"There!" exclaimed the New Englander, looking around, "I guess I'm through!"

"I am sure that last fellow hopes so," said the Professor with a laugh, "for it's safe to conclude he was never handled with such vigor before."

The levity which both felt over their triumphant routing of their assailants was checked by the sight of the stark, lifeless form on the ground, only a few paces distant.

They had the best plea in the world for shooting the fierce savage, but the consciousness that the necessity existed and that the deed had been done, rendered them serious and thoughtful.

There was reason for believing the other natives would watch them from the forest, and the one who retained his javelin was likely to seek the chance to use it again. He certainly had strong temptation to do so, with the prospect of little risk to himself.

Besides, as the explorers followed the rapids, their uproar increased to that extent that the savages could move freely without danger of any noise being overheard.

The most prudent thing to do seemed for the friends to walk so briskly as to disconcert any plan their enemies might have formed. This was quite easy, because of the open space, already mentioned, as lining both banks of the Xingu.

Fortunately the distance to camp was not far, and, with the hurried pace adopted by the Professor and Long, it ought not to occupy more than a few minutes, provided no interruption occurred. Strange emotions tortured both, as they kept their eyes fixed on the dark wood at their side, from which they expected the sweep of the fearful javelin, whose touch was death.

The keenest hearing could not detect the faint whizz, while the roar of the rapids was in their ears, and they had to depend, therefore, on their eyes, which promised to be of little more service.

But the entire distance was almost passed, and the hearts of the two were beating high with increasing hope, when Long, with a gasp of terror, grasped the arm of the Professor with incredible force, and jerking him backward, pointed with his extended finger to the camp in front of them.





CHAPTER V.

THE NATIVE VILLAGE.

MEANWHILE, Fred Ashman and Aaron Johnston the sailor, found themselves involved in a most stirring experience.

After studying the path or trail which led directly from the camp into the vast forest, stretching to an unknown distance from the Xingu, the young man decided to follow the route which he believed had been formed by persons instead of the wild animals of the wilderness.

Johnston was disposed to complain, but he was deeply attached to the manly partner in the exploring enterprise, and there was no reasonable peril which he would not willingly face in his defence.

The forest wore an unusually gloomy and dismal appearance, now that the sun had set and night was closing in.

The roar of the rapids, which at first sounded

so loud, grew duller and fainter as they penetrated the wood until it became like the moaning of the distant ocean. The men spoke in guarded undertones and were able to hear each other plainly, while eyes and ears were on the alert, for the first sight or sound of danger.

Being within the forest, they were favored with but little of the moonlight, which proved such a help to their friends in their ascent of the bank of the Xingu to the head of the rapids. But here and there a few of the rays penetrated the vegetation overhead and illuminated the trail sufficiently to prevent their wandering from it.

Ashman was less than a rod in advance of the sailor and led until they had traversed perhaps a fifth of a mile, during which they met no living creature, though the noises from the wood left no doubt that wild animals were on every hand.

Fred began to think he had gone far enough, though his wish to obtain a glimpse of the village, which he believed was not far off, prevented his coming to a full stop. Johnston noticing his hesitation put in another vigorous protest, but he was easily persuaded to venture further under the pledge that if they discovered nothing within the

next ten minutes, they would withdraw and return to camp.

Knowing that his companion would insist on the fulfillment of this agreement, Fred pushed on faster than before; the sailor, however, easily maintaining his place almost on his heels. It was only at intervals they spoke, for there was no call to do so, and it was not wise to allow any cause to interfere with their watchfulness for the peril which was liable to come with the suddenness of the thunderbolt.

By stepping carefully they were able to proceed without noise, and, at the same time, hoped to catch the sound of any other footsteps, since there was not supposed to be any call on the part of the natives for the caution which they might have displayed under different circumstances.

The young man's heart gave a quicker throb than usual when he caught the sound of something like a shout, and observed a faint light in the path in front. It was apparent that the latter made an abrupt turn, and the cause of the noise was but a brief distance beyond.

Fred reached back his hand and touched his companion, as a warning for the most extreme care

on his part, but the admonition was not needed. Johnston understood the situation too well.

Sure enough, less than a couple of rods further, and the path turned almost at right angles. Passing guardedly around this, the explorers came upon a striking scene.

There was an open space with an area of perhaps three or four acres; it was as clear of trees as a stretch of western prairie. It was triangular in shape, the boundary being so regular that there could be no doubt it was artificially made.

Around three sides of this space were erected huts or cabins, the excellence and similarity of their structure suggesting that the natives were the superior in intelligence of any that had yet been encountered during the ascent of the Xingu.

The huts were a dozen feet square, half as high, and each had a broad open entrance in the middle of the front. They seemed to be built of logs or heavy limbs, the roofs being flat and composed of the branches of trees, overlaid with leaves and earth.

In the middle of the open square was a tall pole, like an immense flag-staff. The light which had been noticed sometime before by the whites was the full flood of the moon's rays, there being no

other kind of illumination, so far as they could ascertain, in the native village.

The huge pole was without any limbs or appurtenances, but around the space were gathered a score of figures in rapid motion, the meaning of whose actions was a puzzle to the white spectators, until they studied them.

Then it was seen they were struggling together, and the conclusion was that they were engaged in some kind of a rough sport, for all the rest of the savages were seated in front of their huts watching the singular spectacle.

Naturally they ought to have come closer, and the fact that they did not, suggested that they kept back to give the actors plenty of room for their performances.

Not the least impressive feature of the scene was the profound silence which marked it. The shout that first arrested the attention of Ashman and his companion, must have been some kind of a signal, probably announcing the opening of the proceedings.

It was evident that the villagers in the square were struggling hard, for their forms were interlocked and they were divided into two lines, which

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swayed back and forth as one gained or yielded ground.

"It is a wrestling bout," whispered Ashman to his companion, and then, reflecting that their situation was dangerous, the two stopped from the path among the trees, where they would not be noticed by any passing near.

Suddenly something like a groan was heard from the body of contesting men. Almost at the same instant, a command was shouted from the further end of the square, where part of the spectators were gathered. The two lines fell apart, and ran silently and swiftly to opposite points a hundred feet distant, where they abruptly halted as if in obedience to some signal and faced each other.

This was stirring enough, but that which riveted the eyes of the white men was the sight of three figures lying prone on the ground, at the foot of the pole.

They were as motionless as so many stones. There could be no mistaking the significance of the sight: they were dead.

It may have been some species of sport in which the actors were engaged for the entertainment of the spectators, but, if so, there was an awful earnest-

ness about it, for the stake for which they strove was human life.

The two lines faced each other but a moment, when another shout rang out, and they rushed together once more with the fury of two cyclones.

By this time, our friends had discovered that no member of the parties was furnished with any weapon other than those provided by nature.

Fearful then must have been the struggle, which had already terminated in the death of three of the contestants.

But they were at it again with the fierceness of so many cougars fighting in defence of their young.

The result was terrifying. The contest had lasted but a few minutes, and already a couple were on the earth, when one of the combatants, with a cry of pain dashed in almost a direct line toward the spot where our friends were hiding.

Had he not been overtaken and dragged back, he would have been upon them before they could get out of the way, and it is not difficult to conjecture what would have followed.

The miserable wretch, however, was seized on the very edge of the wood by four others and carried writhing and resisting back to the space. There

he was flung down, and, being unable to rise, the others leaped upon him and in a few minutes all was over. He was added to the list that were already *hors du combat*.

Ashman and Johnston had received a shock which drove away all interest in the fearful spectacle. Their escape was exceedingly narrow and they could scarcely hope for such good fortune again.

Fred touched his friend and whispered to him. Immediately, they began stealing from the dangerous spot.

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CHAPTER VI.

ALONG THE FOREST PATH.

IF any further proof were needed of the delicacy and danger of the situation of the white men, it came the next minute, when, as they were in the act of stepping back into the trail, the sailor caught the arm of his friend and checked him.

No need of speaking, for Ashman had detected the peril at the same instant.

Two natives were stealing like phantoms along the path, from the direction of the river and going toward the village.

Had they been ten seconds later, the foremost would have collided with the young explorer.

The latter held his breath, and placed his hand on his revolver, believing a fight was inevitable.

So it would have been, had not the attention of the savages been absorbed by the scene in the square, of which they caught sight a pace or two before coming opposite the watchers.

They strode directly onward, and swung across the open space, swerving enough to one side to avoid the struggling lines, and moving on until they reached the fringe of spectators beyond. There they could no longer be identified, and probably took their places among those who were enjoying the cruel spectacle.

Ashman waited a brief while beside the path, fearful that other natives might be coming; but, when the minutes passed without their appearance, he resumed picking his way back, and quickly stood erect in the narrow opening, which he felt had been followed too far from the Xingu.

There was no reason to suspect that any of the natives knew of the presence of the mysterious strangers so near them, but since they seemed to have a remarkable disposition to be on the move, our friends felt it would not be safe to relax their caution for a single instant.

While they did not apprehend a direct pursuit, there was a probability that some parties might be moving along the trail behind them, while they had seen enough to convince them of the danger from the front. Ashman, therefore, whispered to his companion to keep special guard against an ap-

proach from the rear, while he would be equally alert in guarding the front.

The two kept so near that they could have reached each other by simply extending the hand.

They had no more than fairly started on their withdrawal from the spot, when Johnston touched the arm of his friend, who instantly halted to learn the cause.

"I believe some of 'em are following us," said Johnston.

Fred listened, but his straining ear could detect nothing to warrant such an alarming conclusion, and he so stated.

The sailor became convinced that possibly he was mistaken. There is no law governing noises at night, and it might be that he had misjudged the rustling of a branch or possibly the stealthy footsteps of some wild animal.

Not entirely convinced, however, that his companion was mistaken, Fred once more resumed the advance, trying to perform the difficult task of giving as much attention to the rear as the front.

If the savages suspected the presence of others, they would be likely to tread so lightly that their

footfalls could not be heard; but inasmuch as neither of the whites could believe they had even the most shadowy knowledge of them, they relied more on hearing than sight.

Suddenly Fred started and almost uttered an exclamation. In his nervous, apprehensive state, he was sure that one of their dusky foes had leaped from the side of the path and was crouching in front.

He drew his pistol and waited for the assault, which he was confident would come the next moment; but the seconds passed and all remained profoundly still.

With his weapon ready for instant use, he advanced a pace or two, touching the sailor as a command for him to remain motionless; but the chivalrous fellow would not obey, and was close behind him, when he stooped down and placed his hand on a piece of decayed limb that had fallen into the path.

"What a mistake," muttered Fred, with a sigh, as he shoved it aside with his foot, explaining its nature to the wondering Johnston.

But it was only simple prudence to maintain unceasing vigilance, and he did not permit the

error to lessen his watchfulness. It was rather the reverse.

But the explorers were threading their way through a labyrinth of peril, the like of which they had never encountered before.

Fred had not gone a hundred yards further, when his companion once more caught his arm, and he turned about as before to learn the cause.

"What have you heard?" he asked, with his mouth almost against the ear of the other.

"There are some of 'em behind us, certain sure!"

"How do you know there are more than one?"

"By the sound—*there!*"

The amazement of the two may be understood, when they not only detected the sound of footfalls, but discovered that instead of being at the rear as both thought, they were in front!

A party of natives were approaching from the Xingu, and the keener hearing of Johnston first discovered them.

The whites had stopped near a spot where a few rays of moonlight fell upon the trail, giving them a faint but needed view of the direction from which the danger threatened.

Neither spoke again, but with the utmost care and noiselessness, they stepped aside from the path and crouched among the undergrowth.

They had barely time to ensconce themselves in their new position, when the footfalls sounded more distinctly than before, and something in the nature of an exclamation was heard from one of the approaching savages.

It sounded more like the grunt of a pig than anything the listeners could call to mind, and Ashman feared it was notice of one warrior to his companions that he had discovered something amiss.

But if such were the fact, the natives would have stopped, while the cat-like steps were more audible than before, though the wonder to the watchers was that the parties continued invisible.

The eyes of both remained fixed on the faintly illuminated space, where they expected to catch sight of them, but the straining gaze failed to detect the most shadowy form.

Ashman was just beginning to suspect some strange mistake had been made, when he suddenly saw the form of a tall savage with bushy head and a javelin in his hand, glide like a shadow into the darkness in front. A moment after, a second

followed, then a third, fourth and fifth, the last carrying a long-bow, and all plainly seen by the whites at the side of the trail.

A few minutes later, Fred once more took the advance, reflecting that they were as likely to meet more of the natives as to have them overtake them.

The mystery was where they had come from in the first place. They could not have entered the trail at the camp where Ashman and Johnston had started on their little exploring enterprise. It looked as though they were hiding among the trees at the time the canoe approached the land, and may have followed the explorers soon after they started along the path with the purpose of cutting off their retreat. If such should prove to be the case, Fred felt that not only he and his companion were in danger, but all the rest were liable to be attacked by these natives, who, as has been stated, were the most athletic that had been encountered since leaving the Amazon.

"Fred," whispered the sailor a little later, "they've turned back and are following us again."

"Are you sure of it?"

"There's no mistake about it."

Fred was debating whether they should not turn again from the path, but he reflected that the natives having discovered the trick played on them, would be likely to defeat such a piece of strategy.

Before he could decide upon the best course, Johnston whispered:

“Run ! it's the only chance we've got !”





CHAPTER VII.

DESPERATE WORK.

It seemed to be the only course left. Whether it was or not, it was too late to try anything else. That the natives had discovered the explorers was proven by several low, tremulous whistles which at that instant sounded on the night.

It was risky running along the dark trail, even though illuminated here and there by the rays of the moon: but, feeling that the situation was desperate, Ashman broke into a swift lope, with Johnston at his heels, urging him to make haste.

"If they come too close," thought the younger man, "we can dodge among the trees again and pick our way back to the river as best we can—helloa! what's that?"

Well might he ask himself the question, for the whizz of something close to his ear left no doubt

that one of their pursuers had hurled a poisoned javelin at them.

An instant after he heard a faint but peculiar noise which he could not describe nor identify. Johnston at the same instant uttered a suppressed exclamation, not intended for his ears, and he called out in a recklessly loud voice,

“Into the woods, quick!”

Ashman did not hesitate, but darted to his right, halting after a couple of steps, through fear of betraying himself.

“Where are you?” asked Johnston, speaking more guardedly.

His groping hand touched Ashman, who seized it and silently drew him forward, neither speaking again.

Even in that trying moment, the younger was impressed by the singularity of his friend's actions, though there was no opportunity to ask an explanation.

The savages could be plainly heard, as they hurried past, evidently believing they would overtake the fugitives the next minute and certain of locating them, wherever they might be.

Sure enough, they had not gone fifty feet, when

they detected the trick and turned about to catch the whites before they could steal any distance from the trail.

"We must leave," said Ashman; "we are too close to the path, and they are sure to find us."

Johnston made no answer, and, instead of following him, sank heavily to the ground, with a groan.

"Great heaven! what is the matter, Aaron?" gasped his friend.

"I'm done for," was the feeble reply; "never mind me: look—out—for—for—good-bye!"

Struck almost dumb by an awful fear, Fred forgot the natives for the time and stooped over his friend. It was as he suspected: the poor fellow had been struck full in the back by one of the poisoned javelins. The exclamation which he uttered at the moment of receiving the wound was that which puzzled Ashman. The sailor had withdrawn the weapon, and the wound bled but little. The young man, however, identified it on the instant.

"Aaron, rouse up!" he called, shaking his shoulder; "fight off your drowsiness!"

He suddenly ceased, for at that moment, he

realized that his companion was dead. Thus fearfully did the virus do its work.

Before Ashman could do more than rally from his shock, a muttered exclamation at his elbow announced that the savages had located him.

"Curse you!" he exclaimed, whipping out his revolver and letting fly in the dark at the point where he knew several of his foes were standing, waiting for a chance to hurl their missiles at him.

A screech announced that the bullet had found its mark, and he followed it with a couple more shots, which inflicted wounds, even if they caused no mortal ones.

The effect of this volley was to throw the natives into consternation and panic. There is nothing so appalling as an unknown peril, and the flashes of fire lighting up the gloom sent them flying toward their village.

The path was open for the young man's escape, but could he leave the body of his friend behind?

Alas! it was that all he could do, and unless that were done within the next few minutes, it would be too late.

Stooping over, he grasped the shoulders of the body and drew it further from the path, in the

hope that it would remain unnoticed. Then he loosed the Winchester from the death grip, removed the revolver, and stepping back into the trail, started on his sorrowful return to his friends.

"I wish they would follow me," he muttered, glaring into the gloom behind him; "the man they have killed is worth more than the whole tribe of miscreants."

He was in a savage mood, and, despite the fearful danger from the poisoned arrows and spears, he yearned for another chance at the wretches who fought so unfairly.

He held a couple of loaded and repeating Winchesters, with which he could pour the most destructive of volleys among the savages, and he longed for the opportunity; but the profound silence which followed the fierce encounter was so striking that to Fred it all seemed like some horrid vision of sleep.

But he dare not wait. These wretches had come from the direction of the Xingu, and he was apprehensive of trouble at the camp, where the three native attendants had been left. His services might be needed at that very moment.

He did not run, but advanced with the stealth

of an American Indian stealing upon an enemy. It seemed to him his senses were strung to a higher pitch than ever before, for he had not walked far, when he became aware that some one was ahead of him, in the path and travelling in the same direction.

As yet he could catch no glimpse of the stranger, but there could be no mistake about the stealthy tread. He was sure, too, that sooner or later the broken rays of moonlight would give him the sight for which he was waiting.

"Yonder is a spot where he will betray himself," he added a moment later, as he observed the faint light ahead.

Instead of following on, Fred paused and laying the rifle of his dead friend on the ground he knelt and sighted his own piece as best he could in the darkness. Where the hunter is placed in such a situation he instinctively *feels* how to aim his weapon.

He was not kept long waiting. A dark form became dimly outlined in the faint moonlight and an instant later the infuriated Ashman fired.

The rasping screech which followed was enough to curdle one's blood, but the young man only

uttered an exclamation of disgust. He had driven a ball through the vitals of a South American cougar, instead of through one of the natives, a score of whom he gladly would have wiped out of existence had he possessed the power.

The shot could not have been better aimed, had the sun been shining. The furious beast dropped in the middle of the path, rolled over on his back, clawed the air for a moment or two, and then became motionless. Had not Ashman been on the lookout when he reached the spot, he would have stumbled over the carcass.

"It is only so much ammunition thrown away," he muttered, again glaring into the gloom behind him, in the hope of catching sight or sound of his pursuers; but they were too thoroughly panic-stricken by the frightful experience a few minutes before to trouble the white man for some time to come.

The dull roar of the rapids grew plainer, and, increasing his pace, he had but to walk a short distance when the clear moonlight, unobstructed by cloud or vegetation, was discerned where the path debouched from the forest.

The feeling that something had gone amiss in

the camp during his absence was so strong with Ashman that he slowed his walk and stopped before emerging from the wood. He paused, however, at a point where he had a full view not only of the camp but of the river and dark shore beyond.

The sight which met his gaze was not calculated to soothe his nerves. From some cause Bippo, Pedros and Quincal seemed to have been seized with a panic, hardly less than that produced among their countrymen by the discharge of the firearms of Ashman. They were in the act of shoving the canoe back into the water in such haste that there could be no doubt they intended to flee from some enemy that had driven all thoughts of resistance out of their minds.

“What the mischief are you doing?” shouted the young man, dashing from cover and hurrying down the bank to intercept them before they could get away.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAND OF MYSTERY.

THE peremptory tones of Fred Ashman rang out loud and clear above the roar of the rapids and caused the servants to halt at the moment the canoe was shoved into the water. They looked up with frightened expressions and awaited his approach.

“What do you mean?” he demanded as he drew near.

Bippo, who was by far the brightest of the three, had shown a wonderful readiness in picking up a knowledge of the English tongue. He was so much superior in that respect to his companions, that they invariably left to him the duty of conversing with their masters.

“*Dey're ober dere,*” he replied, pointing to the other shore.

"Who's over there?"

"Perfess'r and Long man; we seed 'em; dey motion for us to hurry ober to 'em."

This was astounding news and Ashman was mystified.

"How did they get over there? And why did they leave camp?"

"Don' know; seed 'em; want us hurry."

Without waiting to reflect upon the strange information, and recalling that more of the natives were likely to issue from the path at any moment, the young man stepped into the canoe, and, catching up one of the paddles, lent his help in propelling the craft across the foamy Xingu.

"Where Johns'n?" asked Bippo, when the middle of the stream was reached, and without ceasing his toil with the paddle.

"The natives killed him with a poisoned spear; you will never see him again."

Bippo made no reply, but communicated the startling tidings to his companions, who muttered their amazement. It was apparent that the news had added to their panic, and they bent to their task with such vigor that the boat rapidly approached the other bank.

Fred was asking himself, that if his friends had managed to get across the river, why it was they were not in sight. He scrutinized the dark forest and the line of moonlit space in the expectation of seeing them come forth to welcome him, but not a soul was in sight.

He did not know what to make of it. There was something so uncanny about the whole business, that a strange distrust and uneasiness took possession of him. It could not be that the natives had deceived him and were anxious to place the Xingu between them and the fierce savages who had handled the whites so roughly. Bippo and his comrades had shown a loyalty from the first which gave their employers the fullest confidence in them.

The canoe was almost against the bank, when something of the bewilderment of Ashman seemed to enter the head of Bippo. He spoke to his companions and the three ceased paddling. Ashman had done so a moment before and was scanning the bank with a searching but vain scrutiny.

"You must have been mistaken," he said in a low voice; "they could not have swam the river and they had no other way of crossing."

"We seed 'em — motion dat way," and the native beckoned with his right arm, just as a person would do when signalling to another to approach.

"I can't understand it," replied Ashman with a shake of his head.

His doubts were confirmed, when he recalled that the Professor and Jared Long had gone up the bank of the river with the purpose of learning the extent of the rapids. It followed, therefore, that if they had made their way to the other shore, it must have been at a point so far above the angry waters that there was no danger of being caught in the furious current.

He was turning over these troublous thoughts, when Bippo, who was facing the bank they had left, uttered an expression of dismay and extended his arm toward the shore behind them.

Ashman turned his head, and there in the moonlight he saw Professor Grimcke and the New Englander standing on the land and motioning to them to return.

"Yes,—dat de way he do,—he move arm like *dat*," said Bippo; "we hurry to go to him, den he ain't here,—but *dere*."

Ashman could not doubt that the servant

believed the extraordinary assertion he had just made, and such being the case, the startling truth was manifest; they had seen two strangers whom they mistook for their own friends, and these strangers had beckoned them to paddle the canoe to the other shore where they were awaiting them.

If such were the fact—and he did not doubt it—a new mystery confronted him.

Who were the white men and strangers? and why had they disappeared when approached by the canoe and its occupants?

Ashman ordered the servants to turn the craft about and return to the shore they had left with all speed. While doing so, and while Grimcke and Long were doubtless wondering what had got into the heads of the others, the young man wrought himself into a most uncomfortable condition of mind.

He questioned Bippo more particularly as to the appearance and actions of the strangers. It was clear that he, as well as the other two, still believed the couple on the opposite bank were Grimcke and Long; though, when reminded that it was impossible that they could have crossed and recrossed the

stream in such a brief time, and without any means except that of swimming, they only shook their heads, signifying that, though they could not explain *that* feature of the strange business, they would not yield their belief.

Ashman asked further, directing his question to each of the natives in turn, whether they saw the parties plainly enough to make sure they were white men. The servants were positive on this point, adding the distracting statement that they were dressed precisely like the two absent members of the little company, and that each carried a rifle as they did.

"Same ones—same ones; don't know how cross riber, but allee same do so," repeated Bippo, with a grin.

By this time the swiftly-moving canoe was well on the way to the camp which it had left so abruptly, and, a minute later, Ashman sprang out and grasped the hand of each of his friends in turn.

In a few words he explained the extraordinary incidents of the last half-hour, receiving in return the story of the experience of the Professor and his companion. The latter were deeply touched by the

loss of Johnston. Danger tends to draw the members of a party closely together, and, despite the peculiar disposition of the sailor, the three felt a deep attachment for him. They would have faced any danger in his behalf, but the time had passed for that, and they could only mourn the loss of such a valuable comrade.

“But what about this story that Bippo tells?”

Before a reply could be made, the native approached, with his peculiar grin.

“How you cross riber?—why you come back 'gin? Why you no stay ober dere when we hurry to go to you?”

“Bippo, you are mistaken,” replied the Professor, with all the earnestness at his command. “We went up this side of the stream, and have not been on the other shore since dark. When we came back and saw that you were not in the camp, we thought you had all been killed.”

The native grinned more than ever, and shook his head.

“De Purfes'r funny man—he make laugh.” And he walked back to his companions with an unshakable belief in the story given to Fred Ashman when he dashed in such excitement from the wood.

"Bippo believes what he has told us," said Long, who had studied the fellow closely; "and it follows that he and the others *did* see a couple of white men."

"I imagined," remarked Grimcke, with something like regret in his tones, "that we were the first of our race to reach this spot; but it is hard in these days to find any place on the globe where some white person has not been before us."

"If there are a couple of them over there," said Ashman, scanning the opposite bank, "they ought to be friends; and, after signaling to our servants to cross, it is inexplicable that they should withdraw from sight as they did."

"We can depend on *one* thing," added the Professor: "we haven't seen the last of them. I would be glad to believe them friends, but their actions are unsatisfactory. I am inclined to think that the cause of their withdrawing was *your* entrance into the canoe. For some reason they wished to have nothing to do with any of us."

"It may be that since we are suspicious of them," said Fred, "they feel the same toward us, and are unwilling to make our acquaintance until after reconnoitering us. Helloa! what's up now?"

This question was caused by the action of Bippo, who, trembling in every limb, and with the appearance of a person overcome with terror, pointed to the forest behind them.





CHAPTER IX.

A NATIVE HERCULES.

THE savages that had shown such pluck in the instances described, now gave another striking proof of their courage.

At the moment the mystified explorers were discussing the strange appearance and actions of the white men, more than twenty of the athletic barbarians issued as stealthily as phantoms from the trail leading from the forest and crouched along the edge of the timber.

Their silence added impressiveness to the singular scene and prevented their movements being observed except by Bippo, who was so terrified that he could only tremble and point at them.

They were partly hidden by the shadow which put out a short distance from the fringe of the wood, but there could be no doubt of their hostile

intentions. They assumed the form of a line, somewhat after the manner of the combatants in the square of the native village. This was to give free play to their arms in flinging their javelins.

The occasion was one in which the fate of the explorers depended upon their promptness and bravery. Anything like timidity or hesitation meant sure destruction, and the whites knew it.

"Into the boat!" commanded Ashman, addressing Bippo and his friends.

The words were like an electric shock to the helpers, who instantly clambered into the canoe and lay flat behind the luggage, where they were safe from the poisoned missiles that would soon be flying through the air.

Those natives, with their crude weapons, were only incumbrances in a crisis like the present.

The whites exchanged but a word or two and then opened the ball.

A savage, evidently the leader, and one who probably now saw the whites for the first time, had the audacity to step forward a couple of paces, and with a yell of defiance, raised his spear over his head.

Before he could launch the missile, Jared Long

sent a bullet through him, and then, shifting the muzzle of his Winchester toward the line of dusky figures, he blazed away as fast as he could sight the weapon and pull the trigger.

At the same instant the Professor and Ashman opened, and the bombardment which followed was enough to strike terror to the hearts of a hundred men.

It was more than the savages could stand, but, great as was their panic, most of them hurled one or two javelins apiece at the white men who stood fearlessly erect and combated them. They had come from their village prepared for a fight, and each warrior was provided with several of the poisoned missiles.

Before the explorers had emptied the magazines of their Winchesters not a live foe was left. The affrighted survivors, shrieking with terror, scrambled hastily back among the trees, some of them dragging the dead bodies, so that the spot was freed of the dusky miscreants with as much suddenness as it had been occupied by them.

There were plenty of shots left, and, after the disappearance of the savages, the whites fired into the woods, where they had vanished, not with the

expectation of accomplishing anything more than adding to the panic.

When it was sure the wretches were gone, our friends made their preparations for leaving the spot, for nothing was clearer than that such was the wisest step to take.

It will be borne in mind that all the trouble had taken place on the left bank of the Xingu, no savages having been observed on the western bank. The daring of the savages could not be questioned. They had faced death repeatedly, and now, that they had the strongest of all motives—revenge—to prompt them, they were sure to use every means possible to bring about the ruin of the whites and their three native companions.

The forest, extending so close to the river was a constant menace, for it afforded the best kind of shelter. Indeed, had the savages been less courageous and kept among the trees, taking a stealthy shot as the chance offered, they would have had a much better chance of doing what they wished and with less risk to themselves.

The javelins flung in blind desperation went wide of their mark, with the exception of one which whizzed over the canoe within a few inches

of Bippo's head. The fellow was peeping furtively above the luggage, and heard the whizz of the missile passing fearfully close. He instantly ducked with such emphasis that he almost broke his nose against the bottom of the craft.

Striking the water beyond, the spear sank as abruptly as if it were a cannon ball.

The belief of our friends was that the troublesome natives were entirely confined to the left bank, though it was not likely they refrained from crossing so narrow a stream as the Xingu at its upper portion.

If the savages had been slow to learn from their first experience with the white men, there could be no doubt that the valuable lesson of the last encounter would not be lost upon them. The space between the edge of the wood and the margin of the river was so slight that it was the easiest thing in the world for one of them to launch his javelin with terrific force across it, and they would do so before morning if the chance were given them.

If the other bank were reached, the savages would be easily detected in the bright moonlight, if they attempted to swim across or used some of their own boats. The only way in which they

could avoid detection would be by crossing above or below this point.

They would hardly ascend the Xingu for this purpose, since the rapids would oblige them to travel a long way, and the place of ferriage, therefore, was likely to be below the camp-fire.

Such were the views of the whites, as they shoved the canoe into the stream, and stepping within, seized the paddles, which the helpers were too frightened to use effectively, while so near the dreaded shore.

Fred Ashman had taken but a few strokes when he handed the implement to Bippo and ordered him to use it. Then, resuming his Winchester, he faced the land, half suspecting they would not be allowed to reach the other side without some demonstration on the part of their fierce antagonists.

Time was of the first importance, and all the paddles in the craft were plied with the utmost possible vigor, each yard passed adding to the hope that hostilities were over for the time.

Probably three-fourths of the distance was accomplished, when a low exclamation from Ashman caused all to cease paddling and gaze at the shore which he was watching with such interest.

The most gigantic savage yet seen had emerged from the forest trail, but instead of advancing to the river's edge, he halted just far enough from the wood to allow the moonlight to enclose him. He was thus in almost as plain sight as if it were mid-day.

He stood in silent contemplation of the strangers that had invaded his dominions and given his people such a dear lesson. Confident that he could accomplish no harm, even if he wished to try it, Ashman refrained from firing, while the company surveyed him with a feeling akin to admiration.

He was over six feet in height and of massive proportions. He would have been an ugly customer in a tussel where the conditions were equal, and Ashman could not forbear the thought that he was one of the contestants in the frightful sport he had witnessed near the village. If so, there was little doubt that he was hailed the champion. It may have been that he had hastened along the forest path, burning with a desire to assail the mysterious beings who had used his countrymen so ill, and he was filled with chagrin and disappointment that he had arrived too late.

But there was no end to the fancies that might be formed concerning him. That there was little imagination about Bippo was shown by his timid request to his masters to shoot the savage. To Bippo the elimination of a single enemy of such formidable mien was a consummation devoutly to be prayed for. But the Professor reminded the native that they only slew in self-defence.

All at once, the herculean savage was seen to make a motion of his arm, and before the act could be understood, the terrified Bippo called out that he was about to throw his javelin. At the same instant, he and his two companions cowered in the bottom of the boat, where they were abundantly protected.

"The poor fellow is disappointed," laughed Ashman, "and he must show his anger, even if it requires the loss of one of his——"

Something like the flitting of a bird's wing whisked so close to the speaker's face that he involuntarily threw back his head. At the same instant, a heavy javelin crashed through the side of the boat, as if it were cardboard, and splashed out of sight in the water beyond.

The missile of the gigantic savage had passed

between Ashman and the Professor, missing both by a few inches.

The young man, like a flash, brought his rifle to his shoulder and sighted at the savage who was still in plain sight, as if defying the whites to do their worst.

But Ashman did not pull the trigger. Lowering his weapon, he said :

“ You have earned your life.”





CHAPTER X.

DOUBLE-GUARDED.

THE native who had made the wonderful throw of the javelin, stood a moment longer, and then, as if satisfied that he could do no more, he turned about and disappeared.

Fortunately the missile had struck the upper part of the canoe, through which it tore a jagged hole several inches wide, and a short distance above the water. The injury could be easily repaired, and at present required no attention.

The paddles were again called into play, and the prow of the craft gently touched shore.

Having reached the right bank, the explorers had something to think of beside the savages whom they hoped were left behind for good. Two white men were known to be in the neighborhood, and there was warrant for believing they were as hostile as the natives from whom our friends had had

such a narrow escape. With their superior intelligence, there was more to be feared from them than from the brave but ignorant savages; but, at the same time, it was to be hoped they might be conciliated, and that if not, they would fight without the use of the fearful implements used by the savages, who held human life in such light esteem.

On the other hand, the explorers were too sensible to believe they had seen the last of the warriors that had proven their daring and ferocity.

It was decided to leave all the luggage in the canoe which was held so lightly against the bank that it could be shoved into the river at an instant's need. No fire was to be kindled, although the entire party left the boat and advanced to the edge of the wood, beneath whose shelter they seated themselves on the ground.

The night which they had hoped would afford them much needed rest, promised to be most exhausting in its requirements.

It had been the custom of the explorers, when camping on their way to the Matto Grosso, to have at all times a couple of their number on guard, the night being divided into two watches. For the first five hundred miles, after leaving the Amazon,

this precaution was mainly to provide against the wild animals, that were always prowling around camp, and often showed a curiosity to make the acquaintance of the sleepers, and especially of their supplies.

The white men held an earnest consultation, while occupied in eating their evening meal or lunch. Had they deemed it prudent to kindle a fire, they would have prepared some fragrant coffee, of which they carried an abundance, though plenty of the little berries were encountered growing wild along the Xingu.

But that much relished refreshment was now dispensed with, and they ate their fruit and a slight quantity of dried meat in darkness. The fish in the river was an unfailing source of supply, but that species of food also required fire in its preparation, and was therefore out of the question for the time.

Their latitude was about fifteen degrees south, the temperature being so mild that the whites could have got along very well with as scanty raiment as their native helpers, though, as has been intimated, they clung to a civilized costume. They wore broad Panama hats, flannel shirts, with

no coats or vests, and strong duck trousers thrust in their bootlegs. Thus attired, they were probably as comfortable as they could be.

A belt around the waist contained a supply of cartridges for their Winchesters and revolvers, besides affording a resting-place for the knives, the indispensable Smith & Wesson being carried in the hip pocket, after the usual fashion.

In view of the unusual peril threatening the party, extra precautions were taken against surprise. It was arranged that Quincal and Jared Long should mount guard until midnight, when they would give way to Pedros and the Professor. This would leave Bippo and Ashman free from any duty, their turn to come the following night.

Ashman, however, insisted on taking a part which was somewhat original in its nature. He was confident that if the savages found it impracticable to cross the Xingu in sight of the explorers, they would pass down stream and endeavor to do so, at a point where they could not be observed by those in camp.

He meant, therefore, to station himself so as to be able to detect such a movement. With his repeating rifle at command, he was sanguine of

defeating the attempt, even though made by a score of their enemies.

But for the peculiar contour of the banks on both sides, the whites could have done much better by simply paddling the canoe a quarter of a mile down the river and then hiding under the overhanging vegetation; but it has been explained that the Xingu, when its volume was swelled by rain, had swept the shores with such violence that they were bare for a dozen feet from the water.

Such a movement, therefore, would have to be made in the full light of the moon, and would, therefore, be plainly perceptible from the opposite bank,—a fact which rendered the precaution of no avail.

All conceded the wisdom of Ashman's plan. The Professor urged him in case he found himself growing drowsy, to return at once to camp and allow one of his friends to take his place. The young man gave his promise, and, bidding them good-bye, he began stealing down the stream, keeping as closely within the wall of shadow as he could, and advancing with as much care as though he saw the fierce savages across the Xingu watching for just such a movement.

The peculiar nature of the ground rendered progress easy, and he paused after going about a furlong, believing he had advanced sufficiently far to accomplish what he wished.

The essential work of Ashman was to cover one half the distance between him and the camp, the further half being under the surveillance of the guards on duty there. Since he could also overlook the stream equally far in the opposite direction, it will be seen that the savages would have to make their crossing nearly a fourth of a mile below the camp to escape observation.

All this was on the theory that the lone sentinel was really able to scan the space with sufficient clearness to detect anything of the nature apprehended, and that the savages themselves had no suspicion of any such extra care on the part of their enemies.

The astonishing brilliancy of the moonlight will be appreciated, when it is stated that Ashman felt not the least doubt of his ability to meet every requirement of his self-assumed duty.

Well aware, from previous experience, of the insidious approach of slumber to the most vigilant sentinel, when unable to keep in motion, he avoided

sitting down, even though he never felt more wakeful. So long as he stood erect, there was no danger of his lapsing into unconsciousness.

Another indispensable requirement was that he should not be tempted into venturing from the shadow where he stood, for such an act was liable to bring about discovery and defeat the very object that had brought him thither.

The moon was so nearly in the zenith that the shade from the edge of the forest did not project half-way across the open space to which we have alluded. It was in this partial gloom that the young man took his station, placing himself as far back as he could without standing among the trees themselves.

He was in the position of one who feels that the lives of his dearest friends are placed in his hands. To him, nothing was more evident than that the revengeful savages would attempt to cross the stream and make another stealthy attack upon the camp. They surely must feel enough dread of the terrible weapons that had wrought such havoc not to defy them again, but would make their next demonstration in the nature of a flank movement.

One fact caused Ashman some surprise ; he had