

GUEST OF THE AMAZON CANNIBALS

IN Which the Last White Man Tells of a Jungle Solomon, a Poisoned Stream, a Primitive "Wireless" and Other Wonders of the Aborigines.

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HOW I came to be living in a maloca, or tribal hut of the Mangeromas Indians, in the heart of the Amazon jungle, has been told in my previous stories. Briefly, after Jerome, the last of my companions, had perished with the fever, I had dragged myself on all fours through the all-but impenetrable underbrush, until, when I verily believe I could not have advanced a dozen feet further, I had been picked up and carried to a hut not whitened and cared for during five days of delirium and fever.

When consciousness finally returned to me I did not fully realize where I was. When waking I would lie for hours in a sort of bewilderment, wondering whether the dim recollections of the awful experiences I had been through were realities or merely fever dreams.

Then one morning I awoke with a clear mind and a full realization of my plight. There must have been some trace of the fever left, for my first impulse was a strange, unmanageable curiosity as to how many persons were in the great, semicircular hut in which I found myself. I immediately began to count them and reached 223, though I may have counted some of them twice.

The maloca is an institution much resembling the Long House of the famous Five Nations of New York Colonial days. Many families inhabited it, each family retaining a small space for its own use. This I gathered from the way in which groups of men and women were huddled about a dozen or more fires, the women cooking and the men lying in hammocks and eating.

I did not know in what manner I would be treated by the savages, so for a time I lay there with my eyes half closed, trying to get my bearings. Just behind me I heard what seemed to be a discussion. Two men, I judged, were conversing in low, guttural syllables, and in some way I felt that I was the subject of their talk. Suddenly, with no sound of motion, a hand was laid on my shoulder. I turned over startled and saw the face of Jabe, the Indian with the blow gun whom I had seen in the forest before misfortune had overtaken us.

My heart beat wildly and I scarcely dared breathe. I was in the hands of the Mangeromas. Their reputation was, to say the least, not savory, and it was a question in my mind why they had saved my life. Although they live by themselves and seldom invade another's territory, they are more dreaded by the peoples of the Amazon than is the fatal cobra. I sickened at the thought that they were cannibals.

Behind Jabe stood a sleek, well-fed man whom, from his bearing and from the gaudy, splendid feathers which were inserted in the cartilage of his nose, I took to be the chief. He regarded me coldly, with a stolid, unblinking expression which I could not read. I suppose this tableau lasted for about twenty seconds, but to me it seemed that it had no end. I wanted to spring at his throat, then to run, then to lapse again into the fever where at least the horrors were not real. Then, quietly, without the flicker of a change in his expression, the chief made a conventional sign with his left hand which means "Welcome."

In the ecstasy of relief which seized me I sprang from the hammock to greet him, but my limbs were weakened by the fever and I tottered into Jabe's arms. I think without an effort he picked me up and placed me in the hammock. Then the chief, with a look which approached a smile as nearly as anything I ever saw on the face of a Mangeroma, pointed to the hammock in which I lay, to the walls of the maloca, and to the food which the women were preparing, at the same time uttering a sound which resembled "Heh-heh-heh." By this I took it that I was welcome to stay as long as I desired.

The hospitality of my friends proved unbounded. The chief appointed two women to care for me, and though they were not startling in any point of beauty, they were as kind as any one could have been to me, watching me when I tried to walk and supporting me when I became too weak. There was a certain soup they cooked, which was served in a half bread-fruit gourd and was delicious. Many of the other dishes they prepared were delicious, but there were others which were nauseating and which I had to force myself to eat. I soon learned that it was impolitic to refuse any dish, no matter how repugnant. One day the chief, who had by means of signs and words I could speak fluently with him, had prepared a very special delicacy of which he invited me to partake. None of the others was permitted to eat it. At the first mouthful I nearly choked. Not only did the meat which was one of the ingredients taste and smell as though it had been kept for weeks, but the herbs which were used were so bitter and gave out such a pungent odor that my mouth puckered and the muscles of my throat refused to swallow. The chief was enraged.

Forcing His Guest to Eat.

"Do you not like my dish?" he asked in the dialect. "I am afraid it sickens me," I replied as politely as I might.

"It is the dish of my fathers, and their fathers, and their grandfathers," he said. "You shall eat it, or I will turn you into the forest for the plaything of the bel-bel and the Evil One."

I had no desire in my weakened condition to be turned again into the forest, but to do what the chief demanded seemed physically impossible. Jabe, who was behind the chief, motioned me that I had better eat it or the chief would certainly turn me out, if, indeed, I did not suffer some harm at his hands. Such is the vindictive, unreasoning nature of these forest men. Easily insulted, they are, when angered well nigh implacable. I ate the concoction which was set before me, and, strange to say, before I had done with it I really began to like it. This incident shows upon what a slender thread my safety hung. The friends of one moment might become the vindictive foes of the next.

The word of the chief was law and none dared appeal from his decisions. In fact, there would have been nothing to appeal to, for the natives believe him to be vested in some mysterious power which makes him the ruler of men. I once had occasion to see him sit in judgment, and although the matter in dispute might be called trivial, it showed the absoluteness of the leader's power.

I had accompanied two of the Indians on a hunting party in search of wild hogs. They carried bows and

arrows and I my automatic revolver, although I had no great intention of using it. What little ammunition was left I desired to keep for emergency and, besides, I reasoned that I might at some future time be able to use the power and noise of the weapon to good advantage if I kept the Indians ignorant of it for the present.

We had scarcely gone a mile from the maloca when

more brilliant than I had ever seen him wear and wearing a colored girdle or waist cloth, which was his court robe, sat cross-legged near the fire in the centre of the maloca. In the reddish light of the fire, dimmed by the smoke, very little of which ever escaped through the hole which served as a chimney, the scene was weirdly fantastic. On the opposite side of the fire from where the chief sat lay the body of the hog, and each side of it stood the two hunters, straight as saplings, and gazing stolidly ahead. In a semicircle, facing the chief and surrounding the hunters, sat the tribe, squatting on the ground. The chief motioned to me to take a place beside him. The men told their stories, each begging the chief in picturesque language to remember that he had been faithful to the tribe, and assuring him that the

I hesitated a second in pleasant anticipation, my lips pursed to welcome the life-giving draught. At that second I was, literally speaking, two inches from a terrible death. Before the first drop had touched my lips there was a cry behind me. I turned slightly and then a rough hand gripped my shoulder and I was flung backward full length on the ground.

Angered, I sprang to my feet and drew the pistol which I always carried. There stood one of my friends with a grin on his face which must have met the back of his head.

"Ungh," he grunted. "Tolson?"

"Are you crazy?" I demanded. "Isn't that the stream we drank of up above?"

Then he explained to me and as he talked my knees wobbled and I turned faint. I had barely missed one

Now I had no desire to part company with the instrument, as it had been too good a friend before, and if I were again thrown on my own resources I might need it sadly, so thinking to defer him from asking for it I explained that it was inhabited by a sort of spirit who would obey none but me.

Fear of the Evil Spirit.

The chief shot me an angry glance and demanded why I brought evil spirits to hurt his people. Explain as I would, I could not make him understand that the spirit was harmless and could not act without my command. At last, in desperation to appease him, I offered to give him the glass, but he grunted in terror and told me that if I should use it again he would have me strangled. It was two days before I was established again in the good graces of the chief.

It was no easy position I occupied in the family of this despot. Kind as he was, the least thing insulted him, and my life was not worth a snap when he was angered. Besides this, I was entirely well of the fever and anxious to return to my home and to civilization. One night I explained as tactfully as I could to the chief that I was strong enough to march and that I was desirous of going home to my own chief in order to tell him how kind had been my treatment at the hands of the Mangeromas. A little to my surprise, the chief took my suggestion in good part and seemed rather pleased than otherwise. He never, I think, quite forgave me for the episode of the magnifying glass.

He was very kindly, however, and told me that if I would wait until the next full moon he would take me to a friendly tribe further up the river, who, in turn, would see me well on my way. This meant a delay of several weeks, but in addition to not wanting to leave my benefactor, I was more than glad of the help he promised. I had no desire to repeat my former experiences in the forests.

At last the moon was full and the expedition was organized. I was not absolutely sure of how I would be treated by the neighboring Indians, and am almost ashamed to say that despite the faithful, unswerving friendship which the Mangeromas had shown me I had in my mind that they might attempt to do me some harm, so black was the name which popular conception had given them.

I had until this time never used my gun, but before we started on our journey I decided to give them an example of its power, hoping to awe them. Inviting the chief and all the tribe to an exhibition, I explained that with the little weapon I could make great thunder and could bore holes in a tree. The chief examined the pistol gingerly. He had heard of such weapons, he said, but supposed them to be much larger and heavier. This one, he thought, must be a baby and he was inclined to doubt its power.

Selecting an assai palm of about nine inches diameter across the brook, I took steady aim and fired three times. Two of the bullets went through the same hole and the other pierced the trunk of the palm about two inches higher. The chief himself hurried across the stream and examined the holes. He and some of his men discussed them for about an hour. The empty shells which had been ejected were picked up by two young girls, who fastened them in their ears with coarse wicker fibres, whereupon a dozen other women crowded about me, beseeching me to give them more shells. I discharged more than a dozen of my precious cartridges to please these children of the forest, who were as completely slaves of fashion as are their sisters of more civilized lands.

Early the next morning we started up the river. In one canoe the chief and I sat on jaguar skins, while two savages paddled. In another were four men armed with bows and arrows and blow guns, and a fifth who acted as a "wireless operator." The system of signalling which he employed was by far the most ingenious device I saw while among the savages, and considering their resources and the state of their civilization it was really remarkable.

Before the canoes were launched one of the men fastened two upright forked sticks at each side of the canoe about the middle. About three and a half feet astern of these a crosspiece was laid on the bottom of the craft. To this were fastened two short sticks, forked. Between each pair of upright forked sticks was placed a crosspiece, thus forming two horizontal bars, parallel to each other, one a few inches from the bottom of the boat and the other about a foot and a half above the gunwales.

Next four slabs of hard wood, of different thicknesses, about three feet long and eight inches wide, are suspended from these horizontal bars, so as to hang edgewise of the canoe and inclined at an angle of forty-five degrees. Each pair of slabs, though supported by a longitudinal slit, are joined by end pieces which are finely carved and painted.

The operator or the signal man strikes these slabs with a heavy wooden mallet or hammer, the head of which is wrapped with a inch layer of cat's paw and then with wicker skin. Each section of the wooden slabs gives forth a different tone when struck, and as I remember them they were the first four notes in the scale. By means of all the combinations of these four notes, and by what corresponds to a dot and dash system, the operator is able to send any message to any person who understands his code.

We had not proceeded far up the river when the canoes came to a stop and our operator began to beat upon his instrument. He repeated his message several times, but, receiving no answer, we proceeded for another mile. Then we stopped and signalled again. Very faintly came a reply. I learned afterward that we were at least five miles from the answering station. Our man was asking if we were welcome. The chief told me. It was a moment of suspense for me. Perhaps we would be repulsed, in which case I would be in a worse plight than before. Quivering on the air came the answer.

Dot, dash, dot, dash.

Welcomed by "Wireless."

"We are welcome," said the chief, and my heart pounded with joyousness as the canoes responded to the slugsy backs of the paddlers.

Another mile up the river and we stopped again. The man in our other canoe was asking how many of our friends were waiting for us.

"Two hundred," was the answer.

"Are any strangers with you?" asked the man up the river, and the chief read me the question.

We replied that there was a white man in our party.

"Is he welcome?" asked our chief.

"Again I was in a perspiration of suspense, and the answer was slow in coming.

"He is welcome if you will touch for him," was the decision.

The chief replied that I was a great and powerful friend of his, that I had lost my people and that I was seeking help in finding them. After that there were no delays, though the operators kept signalling incessantly.

"Are you armed?" we were asked.

"Does the cobra travel without his fangs?" was the reply of our chief.

"You must come no further unless you will leave your arms in the canoes," came to us.

"We will do so if you will leave yours in the maloca," replied our man.

This was agreed upon, and although I was scared about parting from my pistol, the chief insisted that I should not break faith with his friends, and I was obliged to acquiesce, not without some misgivings.

Long before we reached a turn in the creek and came suddenly in sight of two malocas and a crowd of men, women, children and dogs, the clear, xylophone tones of the answering signals seemed to come from the water directly beneath us.

After the two chiefs had welcomed each other, I was presented to my new friend.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Mister," I said, knowing that he could not pronounce my real name. He was very much pleased with this and repeated it again and again.

"Have you no people?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "but they are far away and I cannot reach them."

The chief expressed sympathy for me and promised to help me. This he did handsomely, sending six of his men to start me on my journey. They escorted me to within six hours' walk of a rubber camp. It took me but a few weeks more to reach the coast by way of the Branco River, where I took a steamer from Iquitos, Peru, to New York.

As I have related in another story, my three comrades who had gone by the other trail came through alive, and it is one of the most sincere wishes of my life that I may one day meet them again.



"We Had Not Proceeded Far Up the River When the Canoes Came to a Stop and Our Operator Began to Beat Upon His Instrument."

we discovered on the opposite side of a creek, some hundred yards distant, a wild hog rooting for food. We were on a slight elevation ourselves and under cover of the brush, the hog being exposed to view on the next knoll. Almost simultaneously my two companions fitted arrows to their bowstrings. Instead of shooting in the usual manner they placed the great and second toes of the left foot on the cord, and with their left arms gave the proper inclination to the bows, which were at the least seven feet long. With a whirl the poisoned arrows left the weapons, and while the cords still twanged saluted gracefully about, describing a hyperbola, dropped with a speed which made them almost invisible, and plunged into the animal at each side of his neck a little distance back of the base of the skull.

The hog dropped in his tracks, and I doubt if he could have lived even though the arrows had not been poisoned. Tying his feet together with vegetable fibers, we slung the body over a heavy branch and carried it to the maloca. All the way the Indians disputed as to who was the owner of the carcass. From time to time they put their burden on the ground to gesticulate and argue. I thought they would come to blows, and when they appealed to me I declared that the arrows had descended so rapidly that I had been unable to follow them with my eye and could not tell which had found the mark first. A few yards from the hut my two friends fell to arguing again, and a crowd collected about them, cheering first one, then the other. My suggestion that the game be divided was scoffed at. Such a thing would have been considered in a way mythical. Finally the dispute grew to such proportions, the relatives of each hunter joining in the debate, that the chief sent a messenger to learn what was the trouble.

Immediately the crowd dispersed and the combatants quieted. The messenger returned from the chief, saying that he would judge the case. With difficulty the hog was dragged through the door, if such the four foot high opening to the hut could be called, and the inhabitants crowded in afterward. The chief, decked out in a new set of nose feathers, larger and

Good One would reward him if he gave a decision favorable to the speaker.

When they had finished the chief turned to me.

"What would you do, white man?" he asked.

"I would give half to each," I replied.

"Ungh," grunted the chief, and there was no doubt that he held poor opinion of my logic.

The Chief's Decision.

In a very dignified manner he arose, examined the game very minutely, then scrutinized each of the disputants.

"The hog is mine," he said. "Go."

The matter was ended. There seemed to be no disposition to grumble or to appeal again to the chief's sagacity. The tribe applauded by grunting. At any rate the chief had shown no partisanship.

My life among the Mangeromas was for the greater part free from adventure, and yet I was more than once within an ace of meeting my end. In fact, I think I looked more squarely into the eyes of death in that peaceful little community than ever I did in the wilds of the jungles or in my most perilous adventures.

The little creek which ran near the maloca supplied the Indians with water for all purposes. What washing was done—and that was very little—was done at a distance down the stream, so as not to unfit the water for drinking, and whenever I was thirsty I was in the habit of stooping to the stream or scooping the fluid up in my curved hands. One morning I had been cramping through the jungle with a party of natives who were in search of foodstuffs. We were tired and hot, and my throat was parched almost beyond endurance when we came upon a stream which I took to be the same which ran by the maloca. My friends were at a little distance from me, beating through the brush. As I reached the water's edge I stooped to quench my thirst. Just before my lips touched the water the hunkchief which was about my neck became loosened and the end dangled in the brook directly in front of my mouth. I straightened partly and stuffed the wet end back into the neckband of my shirt. Then I stooped again. The cool water looked to me like the very elixir of life.

of the most terrible deaths a man can die. It seems that the Mangeromas often poison the streams below their drinking places in order to get rid of their enemies. In the present case it had been rumored at the maloca that a party of Peruvians might be coming up the river and this is always a signal for alarm among the Indians. Although you cannot induce a native of Brazil to go into the Indian country the Peruvians are more than willing to go there because of the girls. A band of Peruvians, or even two or three alone, will sneak close to the maloca, as a rule, force the door, which is always bolted against the force of shots into the hut. The Indians sleep, with their blow guns and bows suspended from the rafters and before they have collected their sleepy senses and procured their weapons the Peruvians in the confusion have carried away three or four of their girls. On this account the Mangeromas hate the Peruvians and will go to any extreme to compass their death.

The poisoning of the rivers is the favorite method, but this often results in injury to the innocent and even to their own people, though so delicate is their sense of smell that they can usually detect the odor of the poison if it is strong enough to kill.

Two mouthfuls of the water which I had attempted to drink, I was told, would have resulted in a death of agony before I could have risen from the stream.

It seems strange to me that during all my stay among the Mangeromas, who were heathens and cannibals, I saw no signs of idolatry. They believed implicitly in a good and an evil spirit. The good spirit seemed merely to exist and was not very active. He took no especial interest in protecting man or in trying to guide him to a good life. He was purely passive.

The Evil One, on the other hand, was extremely energetic, and could be heard at nighttime shrieking and howling in his pursuit of those wandering alone in the forest. So thoroughly afraid is the Mangeroma of the Evil One that at night he bolts the only door to the maloca so closely that a mosquito could not crawl in. This keeps the evil spirit out, but it very nearly stifles one who is not accustomed to sleeping in such quarters. The men all sleep in hammocks, while the women have to content themselves with the bare ground. It is this fear that makes the Indians so easy a prey to the Peruvians, for not one of them remains outside the hut after dark, and they have thus no sentries.

Thinking to amuse some of my friends, I one day kindled a flame by means of my magnifying glass and a few dry twigs. A group of ten or twelve Indians had gathered, squatting in a circle about me, to see the wonder I was to show them, but at the first sign of the tiny flames they ran howling to the maloca. I stood nonplussed, the glass in my hand, until the chief emerged from the hut.

He asked me to show him what I had done. Two or three of his people crawled part way out of the maloca, but he ordered them back and watched my proceedings with the greatest intenceness. At last the little flames broke out in a pile of twigs. The chief was delighted and asked me to make him a present of the glass.